

Practices and Perceptions of School Nutrition Professionals Toward Obtaining the HealthierUS School Challenge Award



PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of obtaining the HealthierUS School Challenge (HUSSC) award on school nutrition (SN) programs. The objectives were to identify practices, perceptions, and barriers to obtaining the award.

METHOD

- Site visits were conducted to observe SN operations and interview SN directors at two school districts that had received HUSSC awards.
- An expert panel meeting was held with six SN directors and state agency staff that had experience successfully applying for a HUSSC award.
 - Discussion topics focused on practices, perceptions, and barriers to obtaining the HUSSC award.
- Information gathered from the expert panel was used to develop an online survey.
- A review panel of SN professionals evaluated the online survey and related documents.
- The national survey was administered to SN directors who had successfully applied for HUSSC awards (N=266).

RESULTS

- One hundred and thirty-nine survey recipients responded to the survey for a response rate of 52%.
- The majority of respondents were certified by the School Nutrition Association (49%), and 53% had worked in SN programs for more than 15 years.
- Respondents were distributed throughout the seven USDA regions, with the largest percentage being from the Southeast (22.8%) and the smallest percentage from the Mid-Atlantic (7.9%).
- One third of respondents were from school districts with 2,800 to 9,999 in student enrollment and 32% were from districts with 2,799 or less in student enrollment.
- Bronze was the most frequently received HUSSC award (56.8%).
- Barriers to obtaining the HUSSC award include increase in cost and application process.

HUSSC AWARD PRACTICES

- SN directors (94%) and SN staff (79%) were the positions most frequently involved in preparing for a HUSSC award.
- Most prevalent roles of SN directors in the HUSSC award process were "coordinating with staff and administration" (94%) and "leading efforts to meet HUSSC criteria" (79%).
- Most school districts developed a team to assist in the HUSSC application process (69.8%).
- Most HUSSC teams included a SN director (92.8%), SN staff (80.4%), a physical education teacher (68.0%), and a principal (55.7%).
- Nutrition education was most often offered to students during core curriculum classes (74.6%) and physical education classes (71.7%).
- The most common responses received by SN programs as a result of achieving HUSSC award status were "pride from principals/administrators" (79.0%) and "validation and recognition of school foodservice" (74.6%).

Top SN Directors' Perceptions Toward Obtaining the HUSSC Award*

- Increases recognition among other SN programs (3.5 ± 0.6)
- Improves the perception of school lunch (3.3 ± 0.7)
- Enhances school pride (3.3 ± 0.7)
- Increases positive feedback from the community (3.3 ± 0.7)
- Improves stakeholder support (3.2 ± 0.7)
- Increases SN staff morale (3.2 ± 0.7)

* The response scale was a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 4 (strongly agreed) to 1 (strongly disagreed)

APPLICATION TO CHILD NUTRITION PROFESSIONALS

Recommendations for SN directors who are considering applying for a HUSSC award include the following:

- Apply for the bronze first, taking small steps towards success.
- Do not try to achieve HUSSC awards for every school in a district at once, instead apply for one or a few schools first.
- Expect the application process to take anywhere from two to seven months and plan accordingly.
- Create a HUSSC team with the SN director, SN staff, the principal, and the physical education teacher as the primary/base members.
- Plan to be the HUSSC team leader.
- When looking for venues to provide nutrition education consider core curriculum classes, physical education classes, and testing activities.
- When looking for ways to promote HUSSC award status, consider banners in the school, local media, board meetings, websites, menus, and district awards ceremonies.



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