

The Impact of Healthy Menu Choices on School Nutrition Programs

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of healthy menu choices on school nutrition (SN) programs participating in the National School Lunch Program.

METHOD

- Twenty-one SN professionals participated in two expert panel sessions to discuss practices, perceptions, barriers, and training/resources related to providing healthy menu choices in SN programs.
- The qualitative information from both expert panels was used to develop two surveys, one for SN directors and an abbreviated survey for SN managers. A national review panel evaluated the content, scales, readability, clarity, and flow of the instruments.
- Surveys were mailed to a random sample of 700 SN directors and 700 SN managers stratified by USDA regions. Statistical analyses included descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha, and one-way ANOVA with Tukey's post hoc test.

RESULTS

- A total of 267 SN director surveys (38.5%) and 219 SN manager surveys (31.5%) were returned.
- Results from the study indicated there were 10 factors that contribute to providing healthy menu choices among SN directors which included promotional practices, student benefits, wellness policy practices, partnerships and resources, and positive program environment. Barriers identified by SN directors included increases in food, production, and labor costs, recipe development, and students' perception.
- Additionally, results indicated there were four factors that contribute to providing healthy menu choices among SN managers which included student-focused practices, healthy environment, and operational practices. Barriers identified by SN managers included food, production, and labor costs, knowledge and skill of SN staff to prepare healthy menu choices, and SN staff's willingness to change.

APPLICATIONS

SN professionals can use this information to assess their school district's local wellness policy, menus, promotional efforts, and nutrition education with the intention of investigating the possibility of attaining the USDA HealthierUS School Challenge award.



Directors and Managers Agree On Top Five Qualities of Healthy Menu Choices

- Nutritious
- Fresh
- Colorful
- Good Quality
- Tastes Good

Directors and Managers Providing Healthy Menu Choices to Students

- Shared highest level of agreement that incorporating healthy menu choices is the right thing to do for students and offering healthy menu choices teaches students how to make healthier lifestyle decisions
- Shared dedication is an integral part in improving the wellness of students and creating a wellness environment in schools



Alexandra Castillo, MPH
Mary Frances Nettles, PhD, RD
National Food Service Management Institute
Applied Research Division
The University of Southern Mississippi