

SCHOOL MEALS INITIATIVE IMPLEMENTATION STUDY: SECOND YEAR REPORT

Office of Research and Analysis

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Background

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP) are central parts of a national policy designed to safeguard and promote the nutritional well-being of the Nation's children. The programs are administered by the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), operating through State agencies (SAs) that have agreements with the local school systems in their States.

Despite the progress that has been achieved over the years in enhancing the quality of school meals, results of research conducted in the early 1990s indicated that school meals, on balance, were failing to meet certain key nutritional goals. In late 1993, the USDA launched a far-reaching reform of the school meals programs, a reform aimed at upgrading the nutritional content of school meals. The several elements of this reform are collectively referred to as the School Meals Initiative for Healthy Children (SMI). The status of this initiative, together with selected operational issues of these programs, are the principal subjects of this report.

Purpose

In September 1996, FNS contracted with The Gallup Organization, with the support of PROMAR International, to conduct a national study of USDA's school-based child nutrition programs. This is the second in a series of three reports. The first report, The School Meals Initiative Implementation Study: First Year Report, was published in October 2000. This report builds on the findings of the first year report while examining several new topics as well.

Methodology

The findings in this report are based on data collected from a nationally representative sample of school food authorities (SFAs) participating in the NSLP and from the 50 State child nutrition agencies responsible for administration of the program. Data were collected during School Year (SY) 1998/99 through use of self-administered mail surveys, supplemented by telephone interviews where necessary.

The database of public school districts maintained by Quality Education Data (QED) was used in drawing the sample. Two types of school districts represented in the QED database were found to be appropriate for inclusion in the study: (1) regular public school districts and (2) school districts administered by supervisory unions. While regular school districts are coterminous with SFAs, in the case of supervisory unions it was found that more than one district was served by an individual SFA. Given this difference, regular school districts and school districts in supervisory unions were sampled separately. A sample of 2,325 districts (2,225 regular school districts and 100 supervisory union districts) was drawn.

The sample frame for the regular school districts was stratified by two levels of poverty and by the seven FNS administrative regions. The sample of 2,225 regular school districts was allocated to the 14 strata in proportion to the number of school districts in each stratum. The frame for school districts in supervisory unions was stratified by poverty level only; the sample of 100 districts was allocated disproportionately to ensure sufficient representation of high poverty districts. Within each stratum, the sample was drawn with probability proportional to size (PPS), where size was defined as the square root of the number of students enrolled in a district.

Of the 2,325 districts in the overall sample, 2,251 (97%) qualified for inclusion in the study by their participation in the NSLP. During the first year of the study, completed surveys were collected from 2,038 respondents, a response rate of 91%. During the second year, which is the basis of this report, completed surveys were collected from 1,998 respondents, a response rate of 89%. Completed surveys were collected from all 50 State child nutrition agencies (SAs) in both years.

Findings

Key findings of the study are summarized here by the following topics, which correspond to chapters in the report:

- overall status of SMI implementation
- procedures followed in implementing SMI
- impact of the SMI
- selected operational issues
- State child nutrition agency operations

Overall Status of SMI Implementation

The SMI identifies four menu planning options, as well as a fifth option for "any reasonable approach," that schools can use to meet the nutritional standards established by the USDA and the US Department of Health and Human Services in their Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

The four menu planning options are Nutrient Standard Menu Planning (NSMP), Assisted Nutrient Standard Menu Planning (ANSMP), Enhanced Food-Based Menu Planning, and Traditional Food-Based Menu Planning. The purpose of this section is to determine how many school districts are using each of the menu planning systems, how far along they are in putting these systems in place, and their plans for completing the task. Although the SMI began in School Year 1996/97, States were allowed to grant two-year waivers, so the SMI was not fully operational until School year 1998/99, the year of this survey.

Survey findings for SY 1998/99 indicate that a large majority of both school districts (80.1%) and schools (71.1%) were using one of the two food-based systems. Most of the remaining districts and schools were using NSMP, 20.3% and 25.2%, respectively. ANSMP was being used in only 3.4% of all districts and 1.9% of all schools, the same share as the year before.

The distribution of districts among the menu planning systems changed comparatively little between SYs 1997/98 and 1998/99. There was a slight shift away from traditional food-based and toward enhanced food-based.

Of the school districts using one of the two nutrient-based menu planning systems (NSMP and ANSMP) in SY 1998/99, 92.3% were using them in their lunch programs and 70.3% in their breakfast programs. Slightly less than one-third (31.8%) of those districts using these systems for both meals were conducting a combined lunch/breakfast nutrient analysis.

School food directors report significant progress in the implementation of their chosen menu planning system. The share reporting that their chosen method was "fully implemented" rose from 34.8% in SY 1997/98 to 55.4% in SY 1998/99. Furthermore, the findings indicate that most districts are making substantial and rapid progress in moving toward full implementation. More than half of those districts reporting full implementation in SY 1998/99 had reported that they were no more than three-quarters implemented the year before.

Of those school districts using one of the food-based planning systems, 39.1% indicated that they were either working toward implementation of a nutrient-based system (22.3%) or planning to (16.8%). This is down from the 51.3% that had said in SY 1997/98 that they were either moving in this direction or planned to do so.

Operational Procedures

Despite the many advantages of using menu cycles to standardize the process, results of the first year survey indicated that only about 40% of all districts were using them. Findings from

the second year reveal solid growth in the number of districts using menu cycles with over half of all districts (50.1%) reporting their use in SY 1998/99. The increased use of menu cycles was particularly evident among districts using NSMP, ANSMP, and traditional foodbased menu planning systems and among districts of medium size and poverty levels.

Of those districts using a nutrient-based menu planning system in SY 1998/99, 81.2% assigned weights in conducting nutritional analysis, about the same as the year before.

However, the share of districts that exclude a la carte sales (67.6%) was down from the year before, particularly among the smaller school districts (less than 5,000 enrollment). Although the SMI had initially required the use of weights in nutritional analysis for NSMP and ANSMP systems, the Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act of 1998 made these actions discretionary through SY 2002/03. However, the exclusion of a la carte food sales from the analysis is still required.

A significant share (36.9%) of all districts using food-based systems are conducting nutritional analysis, though they are not required to do so. This share is up from 33.1% in SY 1997/98. A large majority (94%) of all food-based systems reported having made changes in the composition of the foods they serve or in how foods are prepared.

Status of ANSMP School Districts

Comparatively few school districts (3.4%) were using ANSMP in SY 1998/99, the same share as the year before while the number of State agencies reporting that they are providing support dropped from 15 to 12. For those districts using ANSMP, State agencies are the principal source of analytic support, providing analysis to 46.4% of the total number.

As was revealed in the first year findings, most districts (78.6%) do not publicize the nutrient content of their menus. Those districts using nutrient-based menu planning systems are almost twice as likely to publicize the nutrient

content as are those districts using food-based systems, though the gap separating them narrowed between SYs 1997/98 and 1998/99.

Impact of the School Meals Initiative

For most of the key tasks associated with implementation of the nutrient-based menu planning systems, a majority or near-majority of the districts view them as a "minor burden." However, some tasks associated with entering and analyzing recipes and menus and obtaining nutrient information and information for weighted analysis continue to be seen as a "major burden" by most school food directors. This is significant since these tasks are critical to the operation of the nutrient-based menu planning systems. Taken as a whole, findings from the second year survey indicate that directors viewed the overall array of tasks as slightly less burdensome in SY 1998/99 than they had the year before, though not consistently so across all tasks.

Findings for SY 1998/99 show that the demands on staff time for planning menus are substantially lower, as more nutrient-based systems become fully operational. It is too early to assess the impact on staff time relative to the requirements pre-SMI. A majority of these districts continue to report that their menus are "somewhat different" than the year before, though an increasing share (around 35%) report "no difference," suggesting that the pace of adjustment is beginning to slow.

A substantial share of all school districts using nutrient-based systems offered a la carte food sales - - 59.8% of elementary schools and 83.7% of middle/secondary schools. While the share of districts of less than 1,000 offering a la carte declined somewhat in SY 1998/99, among the largest districts, those of 25,000 or more, there was an increase for elementary schools. In addition, among those schools offering a la carte sales, the predominant trend appears to be one of increased sales. The highest percent of school districts reporting increased sales of a la carte are those in the more affluent districts.

Overall Impact of SMI on All School Districts

Changes in menu related features continued to move in a constructive direction in SY 1998/99. The share of all districts reporting an increase in the use of menu cycles continued to be about 20%.

Results from the second year survey indicate that school districts continue to make numerous changes in their food procurement practices following implementation of the SMI. This includes increased purchases of fresh fruit and vegetables (68.8%) and low-fat and/or reduced-fat foods (69.4%), greater attention to requiring nutrition information from vendors (71.2%), and increased use of product specifications (48.8%).

While most districts report "no change" in the number of food choices offered in reimbursable meals, significant shares (ranging from 16.1% to 48.7%) report increased choices. Increased choices were most prevalent among fruit, grain/bread, and vegetables. In comparison with responses for SY 1997/98, responses for the most recent year indicate that the pace of change is slowing and that an increasing share of districts are reaching a new equilibrium in terms of the number of food choices they are offering their students.

Changes in portion size are one means that school food directors can adapt their menus to the nutritional objectives of the SMI. Findings from the second year survey indicate that districts continue to make changes consistent with healthier diets, though the pace of change has slowed. This is presumably a result of more districts achieving their desired portion sizes.

The share of all districts not providing a la carte offerings of individual food categories (e.g. entrees, side dishes, desserts, etc.) generally increased slightly between SY 1997/98 and SY 1998/99. However, among those districts offering these foods a la carte, the share reporting an increased number of items rose sharply. The increase was most pronounced for snack and beverage items.

The predominant view of school food directors is that there has been no change in plate waste

since the adoption of the SMI. Of those directors who perceive a change in the amount wasted, roughly twice as many feel that there is less waste now as feel there is more waste.

Survey respondents were asked if they experienced difficulty performing any of ten specified tasks associated with implementation of the SMI. From the standpoint of difficulty, the responses indicate that the tasks fall into two groups. For 6 of the 10 tasks, 70% or more of all respondents reported "no difficulty" in performing them. The tasks that were perceived to be a greater challenge were: documenting last-minute substitutions, substituting nutritionally comparable foods, adhering to standardized recipes, and maintaining food production records.

The attitude of the principal stakeholders in the school food program toward the SMI offers a useful barometer of the initiative's success, having been in operation for two to three years. In three-quarters or more of the districts, all seven stakeholders (administrative staff, financial staff, kitchen managers, cooks, cashiers, students, and parents) are judged by the school food directors to be neutral-to-positive in their attitude toward the SMI and what it is all about. To the extent there has been an observable change between SYs 1997/98 and 1998/99, it suggests a more neutral attitude on the part of some stakeholders.

School food directors remain highly supportive of the SMI. Of their total number, 67.7% say that they are "very positive" or "somewhat positive" and the share in the largest school districts (25,000 or more) and in high poverty districts is even higher.

Selected Operational Issues

The share of all districts contracting with FSMCs continues to grow, increasing from 11.8% in SY 1997/98 to 13.8% in SY 1998/99. Of the school food directors working in these districts, 75.5% reported that they were employed by the FSMC. Most districts that contract with FSMCs (75% to 85%) look to the FSMCs to plan and prepare menus and to select

and buy food. Responsibility for administrative and support tasks, like preparing reimbursement claims or selling lunch tickets is divided among the districts (one-third), the FSMCs (one-third) and a combination of district and FSMC (one-third). Nearly half (49.1%) of all districts under contract to FSMCs determine the amount of their fee on a per-meal basis. Another 29.3% pay a flat administrative fee while the remaining 18.4% use a combination of the two payment systems.

Of the approximately 1,800 school districts that contracted with FSMCs in SY 1998/99, nearly half (48.5%) converted a la carte and snack food sales to a meal equivalent basis in determining the FSMC fee. FSMC performance is most frequently monitored by district business managers (70.5%) and district superintendents (56.6%). Although required by regulation to do so, only 72.4% of districts managed by FSMCs said that they performed an independent check of meal counts.

About two-thirds (67%) of all school food directors have access to the Internet from some location. Most frequently this access is at the office (82.7%), followed by home (44.8%), and the library (25.7%). The majority of those who use the Internet reported using it 1-2 times per week, on average. Overall, fewer than half of those directors with access to the Internet had ever visited any of the major child nutrition web sites maintained or supported by the USDA.

Direct Certification

Nationwide, an estimated 70.8% of all districts use direct certification in establishing student eligibility for free meals with 34.5% of all approved students certified directly. Most of these districts (around 90%) use a State-operated system for this purpose. Of those districts with access to State-operated systems, 50.2% indicate that the State notifies the qualifying households directly.

In SY 1998/99, an estimated 4,400 schools (5.5%) in 810 public NSLP school districts (6.2%) operated under the Provision 1, 2, or 3 alternatives for determining student eligibility

for free meals. These alternatives are used with much greater frequency in the largest districts and in high poverty districts.

Nearly one-third (31.8%) of all public NSLP school districts report that afterschool care programs are held in some of their schools. The incidence of these programs is closely associated with district size. While 15.2% of districts of less than 1,000 held afterschool programs in SY 1998/99, 84.9% of districts of 25,000 or more held them. The vast majority of these programs (92%) are held in elementary schools. Most frequently, the programs are sponsored by the school district. It should be noted that, in SY 1998/99, child participation in afterschool care programs was low. Within the districts that host these programs, participants represented only 1.8% of total enrollment.

Survey results indicate that at least 60% of the programs served some food, mostly in the form of snacks. To the extent food was served and respondents knew who was responsible for its preparation, 50.4% responded that it was program sponsors and 44.7% school food service employees.

Across all public NSLP school districts, 6.3% reported having charter schools within their districts. The incidence was found to vary from 2.5% among districts of less than 1,000 to 42.2% among districts of 25,000 or more. About half (46.8%) of all school districts with charter schools are responsible for food service to these schools. Just over one-quarter (26.5%) report that no food service is provided in their charter schools. Over half (53.9%) of districts with less than 1,000 offer no food service to the students in their charter schools.

Of the several different meal counting systems that are in use (with many districts using more than one system), those in most frequent use are cashier's list (55.9%), coded tickets or tokens (47.0%), and bar codes/magnetic strips (33.5%). Essentially all districts (98.8%) report that someone at the point of service checks each meal to determine that it qualifies as a reimbursable meal. When a child comes to the point of service with food items that do not

qualify as a reimbursable meal, 88.6% indicated that their cashiers instruct the child to return and pick up the missing item. The majority of all districts (93.6%) conduct periodic reviews of their meal counts to help ensure their accuracy.

Views of the State Directors of Child Nutrition Programs

State Directors reported very little change in the number of SFAs using the alternative menu planning systems between SY 1997/98 and SY 1998/99. Over 4 out of 5 SFAs continue to use one of the two food-based systems with slightly more using the enhanced system (45%) compared to the traditional system (38%). To the extent that any change occurred between these years, there was a slight shift away from both the ANSMP and the enhanced food-based approach and toward traditional food-based menu planning. A decline in the number of State agencies (SAs) providing direct ANSMP support from 15 to 12 was also reported.

As the SMI was in its third year of operation at the time of this survey, the levels of training activity were substantially lower than reported in the First Year Report. For example, the median number of training sessions held per SA was 9 in SY 1997/98 compared to 30 during SYs 1995/97. Still, most SAs continue to provide training and technical assistance in support of the SMI with the number of SAs ranging from 40 to 47, depending on the form of support provided.

State agencies are required to conduct periodic evaluations of SFA compliance with the nutrition requirements of SMI. If the evaluation reveals that the nutritional standards are not being met, the SA helps the SFA develop an improvement plan to remedy the deficiency.

Survey results indicate that the pace at which SAs are conducting these reviews is highly variable. While 9 States reported that they had not conducted any reviews in SY 1997/98, 17 States reported that they had conducted reviews for 20% or more of all their SFAs. The total number of school sites reviewed for SMI compliance in SY 1997/98 was 2,201, compared to 2,356 the year before. Of the SFAs reviewed

in SY 1997/98, over half (56%) required improvement plans, down from 68% in SY 1996/97.

To lessen the administrative burden of establishing a child's eligibility for free meals, SFAs or their State agency can directly certify those children in households eligible to receive assistance through certain means-tested programs. This method is called "direct certification."

Of the 50 SAs, 45 reported that they were using direct certification to identify and qualify eligible students for free meals. In most of these States (40 of 45), a State agency other than the Child Nutrition Agency participated in developing and forwarding information to the SFAs.

In 17 of the 40 States, this other agency assumed full responsibility for developing the information. The lists of eligible children are generally developed annually (38 of the 45 States), though a few prepare them more frequently.

Of the 48 States that permitted Food Service Management Companies (FSMCs) to contract with SFAs in their States, 41 reported that FSMCs had contracts with 1,675 school districts (12% of all public NSLP districts) in their States in SY 1998/99. About two-thirds of all SAs reported providing their SFAs with some form of technical assistance relating to FSMCs, most frequently in the form of prototype specifications and contract provisions.

State agencies reported that 521 charter schools were participating in the NSLP in 19 States in SY 1998/99. Most SAs that maintain separate records for charter schools said that it was their policy to grant charter schools within their States separate SFA status. At the time of the survey, 66% of all charter schools taking part in the NSLP had been granted separate SFA status.

Nearly all SAs (46 of 50) were found to be providing SFAs with some form of procurement assistance. This included: technical assistance on request (82%), conducting periodic oversight of

SFA procurement (78%), providing procurement materials describing best procurement practices (74%), and conducting formal training programs (60%). In providing procurement support to SFAs, the topics most frequently addressed included those relating to Federal and State regulations, labeling and product specifications, and the organization and operation of purchasing cooperatives.

Most State agencies report that they were providing their SFAs with financial management assistance in some form in SY 1998/99. Most frequently, this was in the form of guidance on how to price school meals or guidance on establishing and monitoring the performance of financial management systems. In SY 1998/99, SAs conducted organization-wide financial compliance audits of nearly 11,300 SFAs (80%

of all SFAs). A relatively small share of these audits required follow-up attention (less than 1% in 17 States and no more than 10% in another 18 States). Most of the problems requiring follow-up attention are reportedly corrected within 3 months.

Of the 50 SAs, 22 reported having contract employees on their staffs at the time of the survey in SY 1998/99. Most of these contracts are with individuals though some are arranged through employment agencies or other State agencies. Many SAs (39 of 50) contract for a wide variety of services from other organizations. The most frequented contracted services, by far, were computer programming (22 SAs) and nutritional analysis (17 SAs).

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