

## SCHOOL NUTRITION AND MEAL COST STUDY: VOLUME 1 - SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAM OPERATIONS AND SCHOOL NUTRITION ENVIRONMENTS (SUMMARY)

### Background

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service's (FNS) School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study (SNMCS) is the first nationally representative comprehensive assessment of the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP) since major reforms began in School Year (SY) 2012-13. The reforms mainly stemmed from the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (HHFKA, Public Law 111-296). Key reforms included updated meal pattern requirements and nutrition standards to improve the nutritional quality of school meals; updated requirements to local school wellness policies; equitable price setting for full-price meals; and the introduction of nutrition standards for all foods and beverages sold in schools in competition with reimbursable school meals offered during the school day (Smart Snacks standards).

SNMCS is the first national study of school meals to simultaneously examine the cost of producing school meals and the nutritional quality of those meals. The study addresses a broad array of research questions of interest to stakeholders at the national, State, and local levels. Study findings are presented in four report volumes plus a summary report that highlights key findings across the volumes. Report Volume 1 provides updated information about school meal program operations and characteristics of school nutrition environments.

### Study Methods

SNMCS collected data primarily in the spring of SY 2014-15 from nationally representative samples of public School Food Authorities (SFAs) and public, non-charter schools participating in the NSLP. In all, 518 SFAs and as many as 1,257 schools participated in the data collection activities that supported the analyses summarized in this report:

- SFA directors, school nutrition managers (SNMs), and principals completed web-based surveys to address questions about school meal program operations and school nutrition environments. SNMs also completed the A La Carte Checklist to describe items available for a la carte purchase.
- Other staff completed the Competitive Foods Checklist that captured information about foods and beverages for sale to students in locations such as vending machines and school stores.

- Trained field interviewers observed the cafeteria environment during mealtimes using the Cafeteria Observation Guide.

### Study Findings

***A variety of meals are available in public schools.*** Most public, non-charter schools that participated in NSLP in SY 2014-15 (94 percent) also participated in SBP. Twenty-five percent of all public, non-charter schools offered reimbursable afterschool snacks, suppers, or both.

***Universal free meals are offered in many public schools.*** About one in five schools (19 percent) offered free lunch to all students in SY 2014-15, and 29 percent of SBP-participating schools offered free breakfast to all students. Eighty percent of the schools that offered free lunch to all students were operating under the Community Eligibility Provision.

***Student participation in the SBP and NSLP varies by the type of school and by student eligibility status.*** Overall, the rate of student participation in the SBP (30 percent) was about half that of the NSLP (61 percent). Student participation was highest in elementary schools (45 percent – SBP; 65 percent – NSLP) and lowest in high schools (34 percent – SBP; 50 percent – NSLP). NSLP participation rates were highest among students approved for free meals (74 percent). Students approved for reduced-price meals also participated more often than students purchasing full-price meals (70 versus 42 percent).

***In SY 2014-15, on average, SFAs charged \$2.42 for a paid lunch and \$1.43 for a paid breakfast.*** The most common price charged for a lunch and breakfast was \$2.50 and \$1.25, respectively. On average, large schools charged higher prices for paid lunches than small and medium-size schools (\$2.59 versus \$2.37 and \$2.42, respectively). Suburban schools charged somewhat higher prices (\$2.46) than urban or rural schools (\$2.43 and \$2.36, respectively).

***Paid meal participation rates tend to decrease as meal prices increase.*** A 10-cent increase in the price of a paid lunch was associated with a decline of 0.7 percentage points in the paid meal participation rate. For paid breakfasts, no statistically significant association between price and participation was found.

The average lunch period was 30 minutes long and students waited in line an average of 5 minutes. The average breakfast period was 37 minutes long and students waited in line an average of 3 minutes.

**Schools offer breakfasts in a variety of locations.** Twenty-seven percent of elementary schools offered breakfast in the classroom, compared with 15 and 14 percent of middle and high schools, respectively. In contrast, prepackaged “grab-and-go” breakfasts were served in 21 percent of high schools and 15 percent of middle schools compared to only 7 percent of elementary schools.

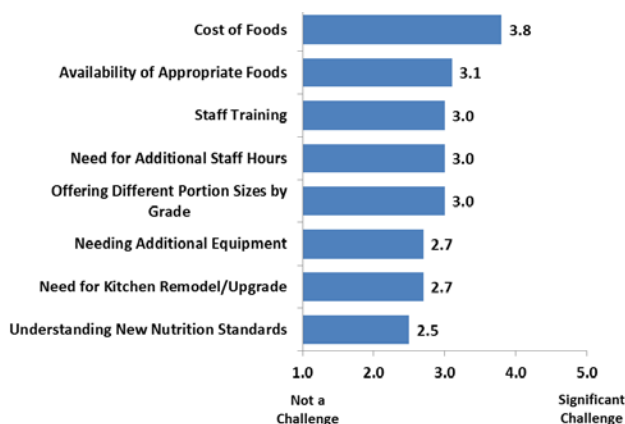
**In SY 2014-15, 20 percent of SFAs used foodservice management companies (FSMCs).** Large SFAs (25 percent) used FSMCs more often than smaller SFAs (19 percent). Rural SFAs seldom used FSMCs (6 percent).

**SFA used a variety of purchasing approaches.** Fifty-one percent of SFAs participated in food purchasing cooperatives, and 41 percent used the USDA Department of Defense Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program.

**In SY 2014-15, virtually all SFA directors (99 percent) reported that their school district had a wellness policy.** The vast majority (83 percent) of these districts had a district wellness coordinator who typically held another position within the district/school. To promote student wellness, more than two-thirds of SFAs held student taste tests or invited families to eat a school meal. Half of the SFAs asked for student input on menu planning.

**While the majority of SFA directors rated the new nutrition standards as helpful in meeting the underlying nutrition goals for children, many reported challenges in implementing or maintaining compliance with the new nutrition standards.** Two years after the standards were introduced, SFA directors rated the cost of foods as the most challenging issue.

Figure 1. Challenges Faced in Fully Implementing or Maintaining Compliance With the New Nutrition Standards (Mean Rating)



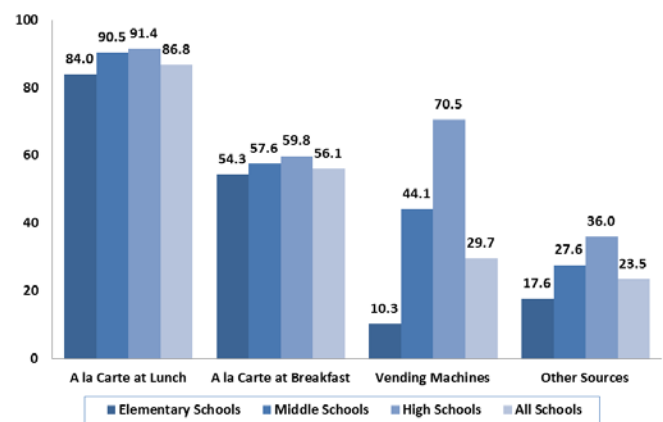
**In spring 2015, about one in five SFA directors (19 percent) with schools offering competitive foods reported that the Smart Snacks standards were not yet fully implemented.** Student acceptance and school faculty and staff reactions were rated as most challenging when implementing the Smart Snacks standards.

Figure 2. Challenges Faced by SFAs That Have Not Yet Fully Implemented the Smart Snacks in Schools Standards for Competitive Foods (Mean Rating)



**The majority of schools had at least one source of competitive foods available to students; foods available for a la carte purchase during meal times were the most common source.** Vending machines were available in 30 percent of all schools, but much more common in high schools. Nearly one-fourth (24 percent) of schools had competitive foods available through alternative sources such as school stores, snack bars, food carts, kiosks, bake sales, or fundraisers.

Figure 3. Competitive Food Sources Available in Schools



### For More Information

U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study: Volume 1 - School Meal Program Operations and School Nutrition Environments, by Sarah Forrestal *et.al.* Project Officer, John Endahl, Alexandria, VA: April 2019. Available online at: [www.fns.usda.gov/research-and-analysis](http://www.fns.usda.gov/research-and-analysis).

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