

Child Nutrition Program Operations Study II, School Year 2016-2017 (Summary)

Background

The Child Nutrition Program Operations Study II (CN-OPS II) is a multiyear study designed to provide the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) with information on current State Agency (SA) and school food authority (SFA) policies, practices, and needs related to school nutrition service operations, financial management, meal counting, eligibility, nutrition standards, and personnel. Results inform CN program management and policy development.

Key Findings

- School food authority (SFA) participation in the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) At-Risk Afterschool Meals component more than doubled from school year (SY) 2015-16 to SY 2016-17.
- More than 70 percent of SFAs broke even or experienced a financial surplus in SY 2015-16.
- One-third of SFAs reported using electronic applications to determine eligibility for free or reduced price (F/RP) school meals.
- SFA directors hired after the Professional Standards went into effect had higher levels of education than those hired before the standards went into effect.

Methods

The second year of CN-OPS II relies on data collected from October 2017 – January 2018 through web-based surveys of State CN directors and a nationally representative stratified sample of SFA directors from public school districts with at least one school participating in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) or School Breakfast Program (SBP). Information was collected on NSLP, SBP, Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), and CACFP operations. Fifty-three State CN directors and 1,679 SFA directors provided usable data for analysis (a 76.8 percent response rate among SFAs). Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands were not asked to participate in the survey due to hurricanes in their regions at the time of data collection. While survey questions primarily asked about SY 2016-17, the questionnaire asked for financial data from SY 2015-16.

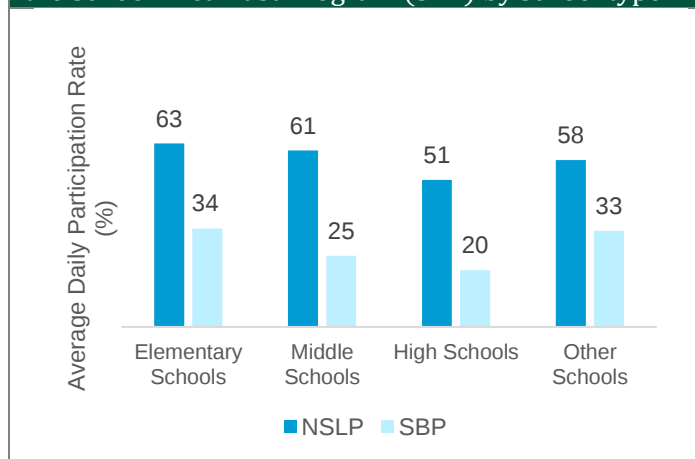
Findings

Program and Student Participation

Student participation in school meal programs was highest in elementary schools and lowest in high schools (Figure 1). Overall, students certified to receive F/RP meals participated at higher rates than the general student body for both lunch (71 percent) and breakfast (37 percent).

SFA participation in the SFSP was significantly higher among very large SFAs (25,000 or more students) than among small (fewer than 1,000 students) and medium-sized (1,000-4,999 students) SFAs. While the majority of summer meal sites were schools, more than one-third were non-school sites (39 percent for the SFSP and 37 percent for the NSLP Seamless Summer Option).

Figure 1: Average daily student participation rates for the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP) by school type.



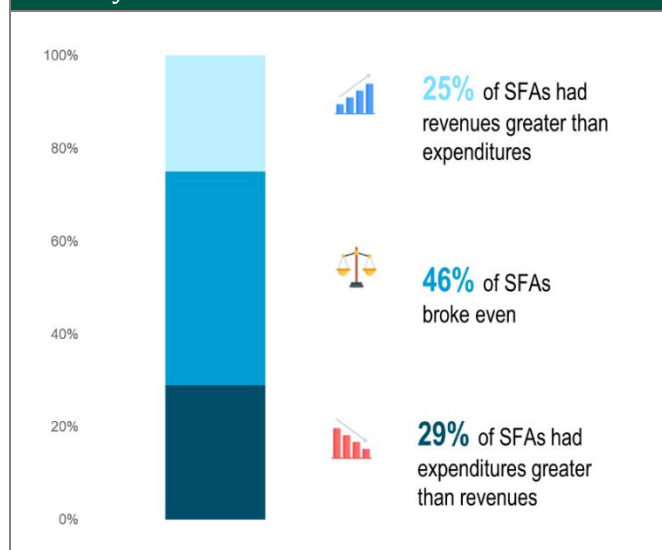
SFA participation in the CACFP At-Risk Afterschool Meals component more than doubled from SY 2015-16 to SY 2016-17. While only 7 percent of SFAs offered the CACFP At-Risk Afterschool Meals component in SY 2015-16, 17

percent offered it in SY 2016-17. SFA participation was also significantly higher among very large SFAs than among small and medium-sized SFAs.

Financial Management and Operations

More than 70 percent of SFAs broke even or experienced a financial surplus in SY 2015-16 (Figure 2). Breaking even was defined as having revenues that were within 5 percentage points (95 to 105 percent) of total expenses. Larger SFAs broke even more often and were more likely to operate the school food service account at a surplus compared to smaller SFAs, which more often operated at a financial deficit.

Figure 2: Distribution of School food authority's (SFA) annual revenues to annual expenditures, school year 2015-16.



SFAs used alternative (non-cafeteria) meal service models more frequently for breakfast than for lunch. About half (49 percent) of SFAs served school meals outside of the cafeteria in SY 2016-17. One-third of SFAs (33 percent) offered pre-packaged, 'grab and go' meals for breakfast, compared to 23 percent for lunch. About one-quarter (23 percent) delivered breakfast to the classroom, compared to 10 percent for lunch.

One-third of SFAs reported using electronic applications to determine eligibility for F/RP meals. Of the SFAs requiring applications to determine student eligibility for F/RP meals (84 percent), one-third reported any use of electronic applications and 12 percent used electronic applications more often than paper. Approximately 16 percent of SFAs operated under district-wide special provisions and did not require F/RP meal applications.

Most SFAs used paper applications that were modeled after the USDA paper prototype application. More than three-quarters of SFAs (78 percent) and 47 State agencies reported that their paper application for F/RP meals was identical to, or closely modeled after, the USDA paper prototype application.

SFA directors hired after the Professional Standards went into effect had higher levels of education than those hired before the standards went into effect. The USDA Professional Standards are regulations establishing minimum hiring standards and annual training requirements for school nutrition directors and staff who operate the NSLP and the SBP at the State and local levels. The standards went into effect on July 1, 2015. SFA directors hired after the standards went into effect were more likely to have a bachelor's degree or higher (53 percent of directors) than those hired before the standards went into effect (43 percent of directors). These results were consistent across SFA size.

Meal Requirements

SFAs reported gaining student acceptance and maintaining student participation as their top challenges in implementing meal requirements. Almost all SFAs reported that implementing the meal requirements presented some level of challenge. Three-quarters of SFAs (76 percent) reported that gaining student acceptance was moderately to extremely challenging. Many SFAs also reported that maintaining student participation (71 percent), containing food costs (68 percent), and containing the budget (64 percent) were moderately to extremely challenging.

SFAs offered fresh fruits and vegetables for lunch more often than canned or frozen options. Nearly all SFAs (89 percent) reported that they often or always offered fresh whole fruit and 70 percent reported that they often or always offered fresh whole vegetables with lunch. Most SFAs also offered canned or frozen produce but they did so less frequently than with fresh items.

SFAs reported challenges with meeting requirements for whole grains. Fifty-six percent of SFAs found that it was moderately to extremely challenging to meet the 100 percent whole grain-rich requirement, with an additional 26 percent reporting that it was a little challenging. Of the SFAs noting some level of challenge meeting the requirement, student acceptance (86 percent), followed by the high cost (65 percent), and low availability of whole grain-rich products (45 percent), were the most commonly cited issues.

For More Information: Beyler, N., Murdoch, J., & Cabili, C. (2021). Child Nutrition Program Operations Study II: SY 2016-17. Prepared by 2M Research. AG-3198-C-15-0008. Alexandria, VA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support, Project Officer: Holly Figueroa. Available online at: www.fns.usda.gov/research-and-analysis.