



Parental perceptions of the National School Lunch Program and the factors influencing these perceptions

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Background

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) is a federally assisted meal program that operates in public and nonprofit private schools that provides nutritionally balanced, low cost or no cost lunches to children. Interestingly, not all students participate in the NSLP, even when eligible for free or reduced-price meals.

Little is known about why parents choose to pack their children's lunches or participate in the NSLP. Identifying parental perceptions of the NSLP and factors that influence children's participation in school lunch is important in order to either improve participation in the NSLP, or improve the nutritional value of lunches brought from home.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to determine the parental perceptions of the NSLP and determine the factors that influence these perceptions.

Methods

Parents and primary caregivers of children enrolled in K-4th grade in public, private and charter schools in the US were recruited through social media. Information assessing knowledge and perceptions of the NSLP were collected. The study used a convenience sample of 358 parents or primary caregivers.

Participants completed a 75 question survey via social media to assess their knowledge and perceptions of the NSLP. The participants voluntarily followed the link shared on social media that directed participants to the self-administered questionnaire. Preceding questionnaire, information regarding the purpose of the study and a consent form was presented to the participants. The survey was available from April 6, 2020 to April 23, 2020.

Results

Of the 273 participants, 90.1% were mothers, 1.5% were fathers, and the remaining were either grandparents, aunts, uncles, or step-parents. There were 181 (66%) participants whose child attended a school where the foodservice was operated by the school district, and 50 (18%) where the foodservice was operated by a contract company. Parents reported their child ate lunch provided by the school approximately three days per week ($M=3.04, SD=1.54$). Approximately 1/3 of the parents (35%) said they were satisfied or extremely satisfied with the lunch provided by the school, while 13% stated they were either dissatisfied or extremely dissatisfied with the lunch. In terms of cost, 54% stated they agreed or strongly agreed that the lunch provided by the school was a good value. One-half of the parents felt their child had adequate time to eat lunch.

No significance difference was found between type of food service operations (district operated or contract company) and how parents perceived the healthfulness of lunches or their perception of the value of the lunch.

Although not statistically, parents who perceived the meal provided to be a good value had children that ate school lunch more often, $\chi^2(24, N=273) = 35.95, p = 0.056$. Parents perception of the adequacy of amount of time to eat lunch did not affect school lunch participation rates.

Table 2a. Percent Satisfaction with the NSLP - School District

	Extremely Satisfied n (%)	Satisfied n (%)	Somewhat Satisfied n (%)	Neutral n (%)	Somewhat Dissatisfied n (%)	Dissatisfied n (%)	Extremely Dissatisfied n (%)	TOTAL n (%)
Parent Satisfaction in NSLP	12 (7.6%)	47 (29.7%)	47 (29.7%)	14 (8.9%)	17 (10.8%)	10 (6.3%)	11 (7%)	158 (100%)
Child Satisfaction in NSLP	10 (6.2%)	47 (29%)	53 (32.7%)	10 (6.2%)	20 (12.3%)	16 (9.9%)	6 (3.7%)	162 (100%)

Table 2b. Percent Satisfaction with the NSLP - Contract Company

	Extremely Satisfied n (%)	Satisfied n (%)	Somewhat Satisfied n (%)	Neutral n (%)	Somewhat Dissatisfied n (%)	Dissatisfied n (%)	Extremely Dissatisfied n (%)	TOTAL n (%)
Parent Satisfaction in NSLP	5 (11.6%)	15 (34.9%)	9 (34.9%)	4 (20.9%)	4 (9.3%)	2 (4.7%)	4 (9.3%)	43 (100%)
Child Satisfaction in NSLP	6 (13.3%)	10 (22.2%)	13 (28.9%)	3 (6.7%)	5 (11.1%)	6 (13.3%)	2 (4.4%)	45 (100%)

Table 3a. Percent Agreement with Attitudes Scale Items - School District

	Strongly Agree n (%)	Agree n (%)	Somewhat Agree n (%)	Neutral n (%)	Somewhat Disagree n (%)	Disagree n (%)	Strongly Disagree n (%)	TOTAL n (%)
Value	37 (22.8%)	53 (32.7%)	30 (18.5%)	16 (9.9%)	12 (7.4%)	9 (5.6%)	5 (3.1%)	162 (100%)
Confident in School	37 (22.8%)	65 (40.1%)	27 (16.7%)	4 (2.5%)	17 (10.5%)	7 (4.3%)	5 (3.1%)	162 (100%)
Confident in Self	104 (64.6%)	38 (23.6%)	18 (11.2%)	1 (0.6%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	161 (100%)

Table 3b. Percent Agreement with Attitudes Scale Items - Contract Company

	Strongly Agree n (%)	Agree n (%)	Somewhat Agree n (%)	Neutral n (%)	Somewhat Disagree n (%)	Disagree n (%)	Strongly Disagree n (%)	TOTAL n (%)
Value	7 (15.6%)	19 (42.2%)	7 (14.6%)	6 (13.3%)	4 (8.9%)	1 (2.2%)	1 (2.2%)	45 (100%)
Confident in School	9 (20%)	21 (46.7%)	7 (15.6%)	3 (6.7%)	3 (6.7%)	1 (2.2%)	1 (2.2%)	45 (100%)
Confident in Self	23 (51.1%)	17 (37.8%)	4 (8.9%)	1 (2.2%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	45 (100%)

Key Finding

Time: No significant difference between type of food service operation and the time it takes for children to eat lunch provided by the NSLP. $p = .367$.
School District: 73 Yes and 80 No
Contract Company: 25 Yes and 19 No

Health: No significant difference between type of food service operation and how parents perceive the health of lunches provided by the NSLP.

Value: No significant difference between type of food service operation and how parents perceive the value of lunches provided by the NSLP.

The operators of school foodservice was not found to significantly affect parents' perceptions of the NSLP for time, health, or value for children in kindergarten through fourth grade. There was also no statistical difference in satisfaction with the NSLP when comparing school district operated to contract company operated foodservices. Parents and children who attend schools with foodservice operated by the school district or contract companies were either neutral or somewhat satisfied with the lunches provided by the child's school.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Further research is needed to identify the parental perceptions of the NSLP that affect participation of K-4th grade children. Schools could potentially increase participation by promoting the value and health benefits of school lunch to parents.

In the future, researches could focus more on recruiting parents with children who attend schools other than public school, such as private or charter schools. Researchers could also focus solely on those who are eligible for the free lunch program and why or why not they chose to participate in the NSLP.