The School Nutrition Environment in North Carolina's Public Schools

By

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ABSTRACT

HOGGARD, LYNN BENTON. The School Nutrition Environment in North Carolina’s Public Schools. (Under the direction of Dr. R. David Mustian).

The purpose of the research was to explore and describe the current school nutrition environment in North Carolina’s public schools. Current practices to increase the availability of healthful foods and beverages in the school breakfast and lunch programs were analyzed. Barriers that limit the availability of healthful foods and beverages in school meals programs were identified and strategies to overcome the barriers were described. A survey instrument was administered to all Child Nutrition Directors and Supervisors in North Carolina. Of 239 instruments distributed, 211 were returned resulting in an 88.3% response rate.

The research found that Child Nutrition Directors and Supervisors were keenly aware of the serious public health problems posed by the epidemic of childhood overweight and recognized that poor food and beverage choices and inadequate physical activity contribute to weight gain among children and adolescents. While healthful foods and beverages were available to students in the school breakfast and lunch programs, competitive foods, which undermined the nutritional and financial integrity of the school meals programs, were also available in approximately one-fourth of elementary schools, half of middle schools and three-fourths of high schools.

The leading barrier that limited the availability of more healthful foods and beverages in school meals programs was school finances; financial goals for the
programs outweighed nutritional goals for students. Other barriers included lack of support from school administrators and local Boards of Education, principals, teachers and parents. Student taste preferences for foods high in fat, sugar and calories was also a barrier. Other barriers included too little nutrition education in the classroom to influence student’s food choices, conflicting nutrition messages on school campuses, limited time and space for school meals and the perception that school meals were not a valued part of the instructional day. Multiple strategies were recommended to overcome and/or minimize the barriers.