

Feasibility of Offering Reimbursable Meals to High School Students Through Vending Machines



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National Food Service Management Institute The University of Mississippi

Building the Future Through Child Nutrition

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PURPOSE

The purpose of NFSMI is to improve the operation of Child Nutrition Programs through research, education and training, and information dissemination. The Administrative Offices and Divisions of Technology Transfer and Education and Training are located in Oxford. The Division of Applied Research is located at The University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg.

MISSION

The mission of the NFSMI is to provide information and services that promote the continuous improvement of Child Nutrition Programs.

VISION

The vision of the NFSMI is to be the leader in providing education, research, and resources to promote excellence in Child Nutrition Programs.

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**FEASIBILITY OF OFFERING REIMBURSABLE MEALS
TO HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS THROUGH VENDING MACHINES**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In today's environment, school nutrition professionals face growing pressures to better meet diverse feeding needs through school nutrition programs (SNPs). Due to financial considerations and the demand from students for more variety and food choices, school districts are challenged to offer a wider range of appealing and nutritious meal choices. In most secondary schools, the amount of time to eat a meal is a major factor in the student's choice of meal. To address the issues of time and available food options, some school districts are considering vended reimbursable meals. While non-reimbursable vended food items are served in schools throughout the nation, the concept of a vended reimbursable meal is relatively new.

School districts are seeking information on this topic and related financial concerns, safety considerations, accountability issues, and student acceptance. The purpose of this study was to identify the foodservice system operational requirements for offering reimbursable meals to students through vending machines. In addition, barriers to implementation and criteria for determining success were investigated.

The research design used a case study methodology that included direct observation, systematic interviews, and review of school nutrition program records related to the vended reimbursable lunch. Prior to a site visit, each participant was mailed a questionnaire to collect demographic information about the school district and the vended reimbursable lunch. On-site

data collection occurred during a one-day site visit in each participating school district. Data were organized, tabulated, and cross checked from each individual case study.

Two vending machines in a school in each participating district successfully vended reimbursable lunches to high school students. Three considerations were critical to this outcome; regulations, technology, and support. The ability to integrate point-of-sale software, cashless and vending machine technology, and school district electronic record keeping applications was the key element in implementing electronic compliance with United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) National School Lunch Program (NSLP) regulations. This interface of technology with regulations facilitated identification of legitimate reimbursable lunches; accurate provision of free and reduced price meals to eligible students; correct charges for full-pay meals, second meals and à la carte items, and maintenance of confidentiality of meal eligibility category. The process entailed overcoming barriers and developing solutions to novel obstacles. All involved in the project stressed that it was possible only with the enthusiastic support of SNP and school district administrators, principals, and state agency personnel responsible for overseeing the local SNP.

This qualitative study provided useful information for school nutrition program and school personnel, administrators, district financial personnel, and state agency professionals when considering innovative vending practices. The information in this case study research can be used to assist SNP directors when planning a vended, reimbursable lunch and the results offer guidance in implementing a vended reimbursable lunch that provides an additional menu option and the potential for increasing participation and revenue.