

Title: Subsidized School Meal Programs: Examining Access, Nutritional Value and Improvement Initiatives in Vermont Schools

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Abstract: The aim of this research is to examine subsidized school meal programs, specifically the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) School Breakfast Program (SBP) as served in participating Vermont schools and alternative childcare institutions. The research focuses on identifying ways in which Vermont schools and childcare institutions choose to administer subsidized school meal programs in order to meet the federal guidelines for school nutrition. The study gains additional purpose due to the autonomy given to states to design and administer school meal programs, with actual food purchasing and meal planning done at the school district level. This breakdown of jurisdiction regarding foods served to American schoolchildren dictates an investigation into how schools differ in what they serve in their respective cafeterias despite being held to the same federal standards. I utilize two forms of quantitative analysis to gather information concerning the operation of school meal programs in Vermont: (1) a survey of school food service directors based on a similar survey used in the National School Dietary Assessment Study-IV published in 2010 and (2) digital photographs taken of lunches in six Vermont schools that participate in NSLP. The study is meant to highlight the use of resources available to schools to improve nutritional value of subsidized school meals in an effort to delineate further areas for continued research in improving the quality and access to school meals. Evaluation of the survey and photographic data shows patterns in food sources, employed menu-planning resources and issues that food service personnel face on the local level resulting from state and federal expectations. Although moving in the right direction, the trends in school meal program administration at state and local levels prove the need for continual improvement and development at the federal level to verify the enduring quality of food served in all schools.