School Nutrition Program

Concluded June 2024

Background

The School Nutrition Program (SNP) provides more than 13 million meals to Fulton County Schools' (FCS) students each year. It is a major business enterprise within the district, with almost 800 employees districtwide and a proposed budget of $56 million for 2024-25. The program is led by the SNP Executive Director, along with 32 other district office positions, plus substitute managers and interns. Each school has a full-service kitchen and provides breakfast, lunch, snacks, and other food offerings. The program experienced staffing and other challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, but additional federal reimbursements for meals provided during the pandemic have helped the district recover in several respects. In partnership with Gibson Consulting, the SNP was evaluated to gain additional insight. Current indicators of financial stability are strong as the program resets its resource management in a post-pandemic environment.

Evaluation Questions

1) What is the current participation rate of school breakfast and lunch in the district?
2) Is the SNP financially sound and self-supporting?
3) Are there opportunities to expand the Farm to School Program?
4) What are our strategies around nutrition education?
5) What do students think of food served at FCS cafeterias?
6) Are there opportunities for greater student involvement in the School Nutrition Program?
7) How well is the School Nutrition Program doing at retaining food service workers and managers?
8) What is the awareness and accessibility of meal services offered?
9) What are the benefits of school meals for households?
10) What staffing metrics are best to ensure that appropriate efficiency standards are in place at each school?

Methodology and Data

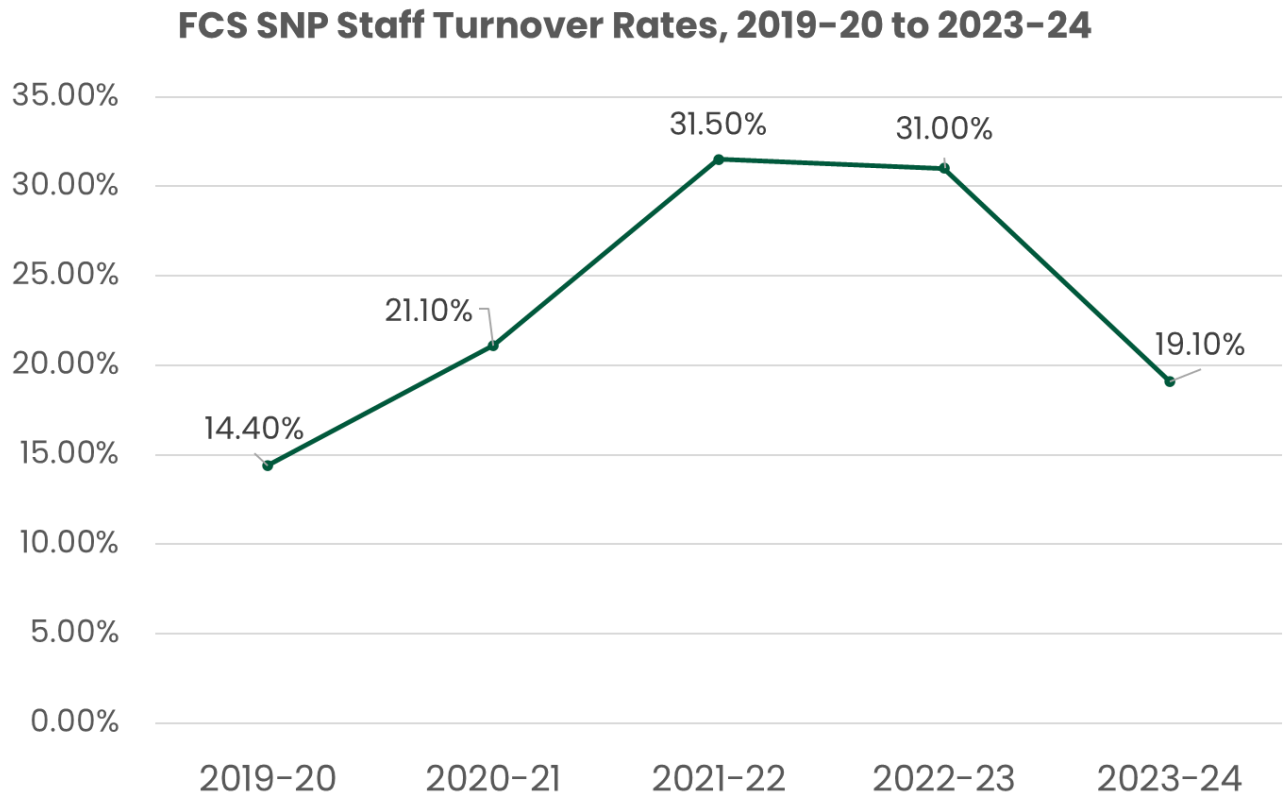
The evaluation aimed to assess the districtwide financial status of the program, student perceptions, and potential service improvements. used both qualitative and quantitative data collection, including student surveys, existing data, and site visits. For data collection and analysis, Gibson collected and analyzed district data and documents, including financial and operating performance information, SNP financial statements, SNP productivity measures, menu prices, and indirect cost allocation rates. The requested information included SNP organizational information such as the department organizational chart, job descriptions, staffing data, and staffing formulas. Financial and operating performance information was collected, which included SNP financial statements, SNP productivity measures, menu prices, and indirect cost allocation rates. FCS provided additional data on nutrition programs, communications, and special services like Farm to School initiatives.

In the Spring of 2024, a student survey was administered to 29,098 students from 47 elementary, middle, and high schools randomly assigned across multiple evaluations to prevent survey fatigue. More than 12,163 responses were received, reflecting a 42% response rate. From March 11 to 14, 2024, Gibson conducted site visits, interviewing and conducting focus groups with SNP administrators and staff, as well as FCS School Nutrition Business Office and the Career Technical and Agricultural Education (CTAE) Program representatives. Seven school sites were visited to observe cafeteria operations and conduct brief staff interviews.

Results

Staffing

Figure 1: FCS SNP Staff Turnover Rates



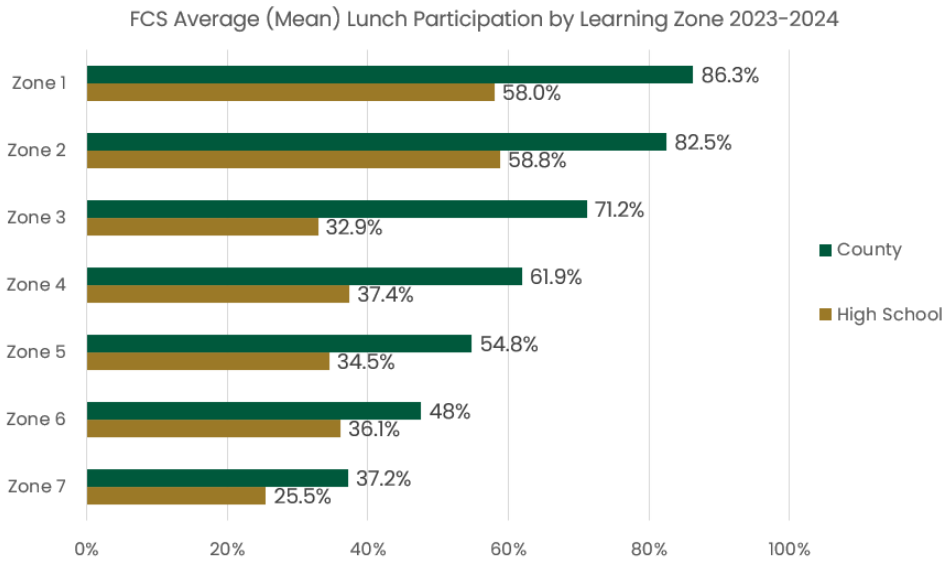
The review of staffing trends begins with an analysis of turnover rates for SNP from the 2019-2020 to the 2023-2024 school year. The data indicates a rise in staff turnover since 2019-2020, with the highest rate recorded at 31.5% during the 2021-2022 school year. However, a significant decrease in turnover has been observed in the subsequent years. Elevated turnover rates can lead to a less experienced workforce and an increased need for training, which may impact operational efficiency.

To address these challenges, FCS has implemented experience-based compensation, offering higher wages compared to neighboring districts. This strategy has proven effective in attracting staff, though it also requires maintaining higher productivity levels, measured by metrics such as Meals Per Labor Hour. Despite these higher demands, staff have consistently met expectations, ensuring the program's operational efficiency.

Student surveys show that students generally give positive feedback about cafeteria staff, especially highlighting their friendliness and efficient service. However, ratings for staff professionalism and pride in their work received slightly lower ratings. This may be influenced by the differences in how students across different grade levels perceive these qualities in a food service setting.

Participation

Figure 2: Student SNP Participation Rates



Overall, 60.73% of students participate in school lunch programs, while 30.05% participate in breakfast programs. Figure 2 illustrates student lunch participation across zones, with the green bars representing average participation for elementary, middle, and high school students. A downward trend in participation is evident across the zones, especially in elementary and middle schools. However, high schools show more variability, with Zones 4 and 6 having slightly higher participation rates than Zones 3 and 5, as indicated by the gold bars. Elementary students have the highest participation rates, as is expected in elementary school, and mirrors the relationship across zones shown in Figure 2.

Additionally, student survey feedback highlights suggestions for increasing cafeteria participation from both current cafeteria users and non-users. Common suggestions from surveyed students include improving meal taste (80.7%), offering fresher (75.5%) and healthier (65%) meals, and providing a wider variety of food options (73%).

Although students have expressed a desire for healthier meal options, it is crucial to emphasize that FCS school cafeterias already meet USDA health standards and offer fresh, nutritious choices through partnerships with local Georgia farms. Menus are carefully developed by Registered Dietitians and certified school nutrition experts to ensure meals are well-balanced and healthy. Furthermore, the department has been seeking to better understand student preferences, exploring factors that influence cafeteria participation and identifying which meals are most appealing to students.

Food Waste & Student Choice

A common theme in student feedback was the desire for more variety in menu options. Survey results show that a large portion of students would be more inclined to eat cafeteria meals if more choices were available. However, findings from interviews and school visits reveal that schools are already offering between five and ten entrée options daily. Middle and high school staff reported that the sheer number of options is overwhelming to prepare and serve, and they raised concerns about food waste, as less popular items frequently go uneaten. Cafeteria staff

have noted that students primarily opt for popular items such as chicken, pizza, and hamburgers, regardless of the other available options.

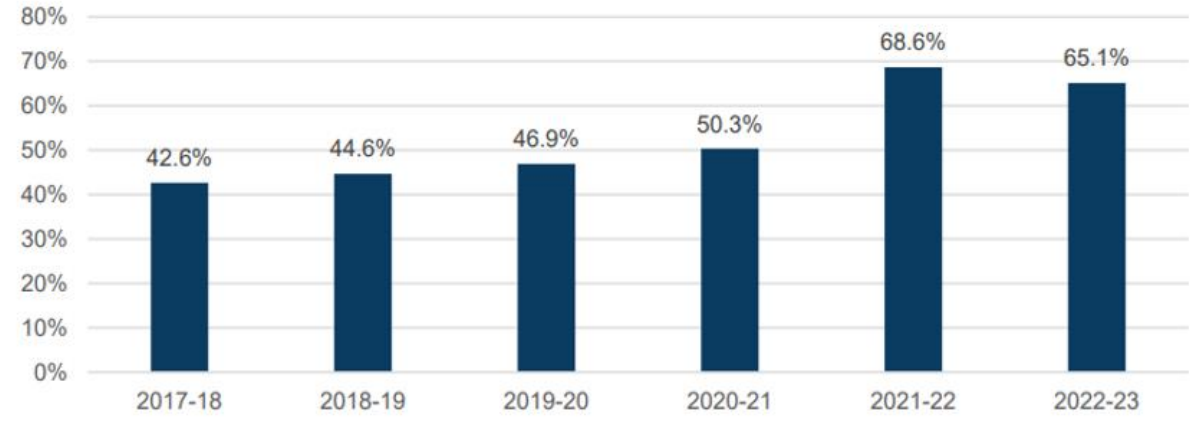
According to the student surveys, 47% of students believe the food in school cafeterias does not taste good, and 50% are dissatisfied with the variety. Preferences vary based on location, cultural dietary needs, and the availability of vegetarian options. In response, SNP is tracking orders, reviewing menu popularity, and conducting taste tests to better align offerings to student preferences.

While federal guidelines require specific meal components to be available throughout meal service, FCS mandates that all menu items remain available from start to finish to maintain student trust. When preferred meals run out, especially for students in later lunch groups, it can discourage participation in the meal program. This approach is more student-focused but could contribute to overproduction and food waste. Gibson recommends the SNP consider aligning with federal regulations, which only require meal components rather than specific menu items, to help reduce waste without compromising meal quality.

Funding

The SNP year-end fund balance, shown in Figure 3 as a percentage of the annual operating expenditures, highlights overall financial stability pre- and post-pandemic. The federal target for fund balance is 25%, with any excess required to be spent down on allowable items or returned. While district-level financials appear stable due to additional COVID-related federal reimbursements during the 2022-23 school year, financial performance at the school level suggests that changes may be needed. During the 22-23 school year at the school level, there was a wide range of financial performance, measured as the percentage of the net surplus or deficit to revenue. Schools with higher percentages of economically disadvantaged students, benefiting from more federal revenue, generally had higher profit margins. Conversely, schools that are operating at a deficit may be able to manage in the short term, but it's unclear how long deficits can be sustained without adjustments. Determining the level of urgency depends on how the new financial "normal" is defined, and uncontrollable factors like federal and state legislation, major events, inflation, and enrollment need to also be taken into consideration.

Figure 3: Ratio of SNP Year-End Fund Balances to Annual Operation Expenditures, 2017-18 to 2022-23



Source. FCS Comprehensive Annual Financial Reports, 2017-18 to 2022-23

Nutrition Education

Observations and interviews indicate that school communities are generally aware of the meal services offered, including students who may not participate. Menus, flyers, and posters are prominently displayed throughout schools, ensuring that students know about the availability of breakfast and lunch. However, interviews and focus groups suggest that parents may not be as informed. While parents understand the importance of good nutrition, they may not be aware of the quality and nutritional value of meals provided by Fulton County Schools. Since parental influence can significantly impact student participation, targeted marketing aimed at educating parents could enhance both adult understanding and student participation in school meal programs.

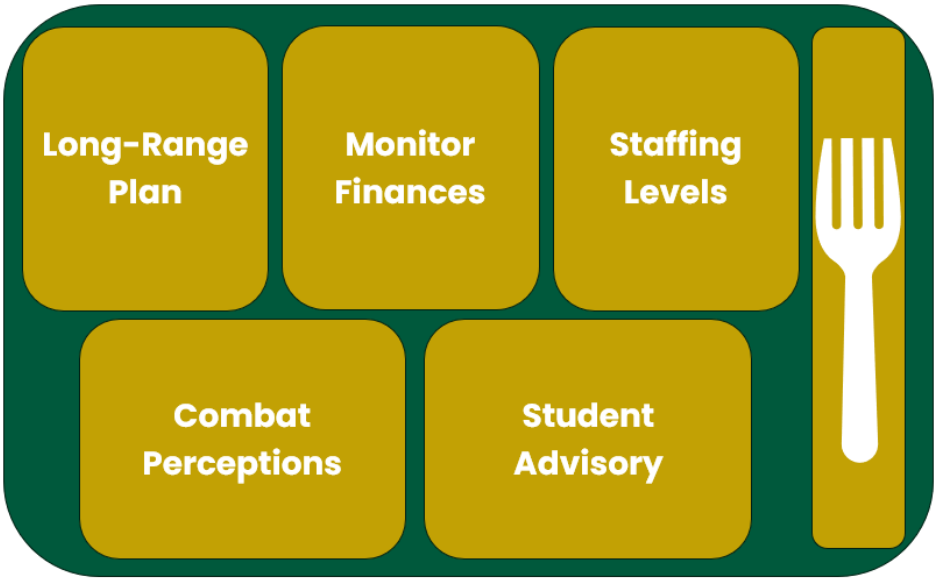
Currently, approximately 54% of all meals served to students feature options from the Farm to School Program, including locally sourced fruits, vegetables, and beef. Although the School Nutrition Program aims to promote the Farm to School initiative across all schools, participation and enthusiasm vary widely. The evaluation revealed that while the SNP aims to promote the Farm to School Program in all schools, implementation varies widely. From site visits and interviews, it was revealed that some schools prioritize it as a key focus, while others show little interest or participation. Many schools displayed outdated signage, and several lacked proper Farm to School messaging altogether. School gardens also differ significantly in their use and funding, often driven by staff hobbies, leading to inconsistent involvement with the SNP. Although some schools donate garden-grown food to the SNP, most of the produce is donated locally without SNP involvement.

There is potential for expanding the Farm to School Program within the district, but doing so would require careful planning and collaboration between various departments. One opportunity for growth lies in strengthening partnerships between SNP and schools to address the educational gap. For example, SNP has developed lessons aligned with curriculum standards that teachers could incorporate into their classroom activities.

Limitations and Considerations

The SNP's transition to healthier meal options, while essential for students' long-term health, presents financial challenges. While the department is promoting these programs, schools are hesitant to fully commit due to the strain on their financial performance. To address this, a long-term approach that balances nutritional goals with fiscal responsibility is needed. Gibson suggests that to better align work effort and cost with food production, the SNP should consider a staff productivity measure based on "meals produced" rather than "meals served or sold." This might require additional recordkeeping but provides a more accurate reflection of resource allocation.

Although the SNP’s fund balance as of June 30, 2023, indicates strong financial stability, many schools are experiencing losses in their food service operations. As staffing adjustments are made and meal participation stabilizes, the district will need to find a new financial equilibrium to maintain the SNP’s sustainability while promoting healthier meals.



Recommendations

1. Gibson recommends developing a long-range plan for the School Nutrition Program (SNP). It's important for the district to define and commit to a long-term strategy that aligns with both the district's goals and the program's needs.
2. The SNP needs to closely monitor the financial performance of the program as it adjusts post-pandemic. Currently, the majority of schools are experiencing losses in their food service operations. It's essential to determine what the new "normal" looks like for sustained financial stability. This includes the next recommendation.
3. A review of the approach to staffing is needed—finding the optimal levels based on industry standards while considering the district's higher pay rates.
4. There's a clear need to address and overcome negative perceptions about school meal programs being primarily for low-income households or offering low-quality food.
5. One way to address perceptions is by establishing a student advisory committee. This committee could provide input on preferences at both the zone and school level, ensuring we offer culturally appropriate options, including vegetarian choices, to better serve all students.

Conclusion

The evaluation of the School Nutrition Program revealed that while the program is financially stable and recovering from pandemic-related challenges, there are areas for improvement. Participation rates in lunch and breakfast programs remain lower, particularly in middle and high schools, with students expressing a desire for healthier, fresher, and more varied meal options. Additionally, staff turnover, though decreasing, remains a concern, and addressing food waste and perceptions of meal quality will be crucial.

To ensure the program's long-term success, the district should focus on developing a strategic plan that prioritizes financial sustainability, enhances student involvement, and addresses negative perceptions about school meals. Strengthening initiatives such as Farm to School and establishing a student advisory committee will be essential to ensuring the program remains responsive to student needs and preferences.