



Exploring Generational and Ethnic Diversity in the School Nutrition Setting



INTRODUCTION

The discussion of diversity continues to evolve in the United States. Diversity encompasses a large spectrum of people, and includes age, race, ethnicity, gender, physical ability, and sexual orientation. It also involves communication style, religious beliefs, ethnic customs, relationship and family status, education, income, and general appearance.

Studies have found that diversity within a workplace can increase bottom line returns, organizational effectiveness and efficiency, knowledge transfer, and acceptance among consumers. However, diversity has also been viewed as a barrier. Some of those challenges include communication barriers, discrimination issues, interpersonal conflicts, and training challenges.

Improving the diversity climate is critical in managing a diverse workforce. This topic has not been explored to a great degree in the school nutrition (SN) environment, so the purpose of this project is to explore issues and challenges associated with managing an ethnically and generationally diverse SN workforce.

METHOD

This project was conducted in two phases:

- In Phase One, 17 SN directors from across the United States participated in an electronic expert panel, which used a modified Delphi process.
 - Two rounds of communication were conducted to reach agreement concerning issues, challenges, beliefs, and behaviors related to diversity in SN programs.
- In Phase Two, six schools districts, within five states, participated in case study site visits. Case site participants responded to structured interview questions about diversity climates in the SN environment. Topics included:
 - Benefits for hiring, training, and managing a diverse staff;
 - Barriers/challenges for hiring, training, and managing a diverse staff; and
 - Policies and procedures for recruitment and retention of a diverse staff.

RESULTS

- The optimal methods for managing and leading diverse workgroups included:
 - Increasing awareness of diversity within the SN program;
 - Creating and maintaining a diversity plan for the SN program;
 - Providing leadership with tools for effectively communicating across cultures and ethnicity; and
 - Practicing patience and fairness among staff.
- The optimal methods for training a diverse staff included:
 - Offering training materials in different languages;
 - Utilizing multilingual staff for training;
 - Understanding staff ethnicities and cultures; and
 - Being patient with multiethnic and multigenerational staff.
- The main advantage identified in managing a diverse SN workforce was the wisdom and knowledge gained from working with a diverse SN staff.
- The barriers to managing a diverse SN workforce include the need to provide additional training and supervisory oversight for younger employees, and the need to mediate language barriers among ethnically diverse staff.

APPLICATIONS

School nutrition and school professionals participating in this study provided the following recommendations for managing a diverse SN workforce:

- Be an active listener.
- Know your staff and their needs.
- Be patient with your SN workforce.
- Train a diverse SN workforce by offering training materials that have been translated into common languages held by your staff, and utilize multi-lingual staff during training, as needed.

For more information,
you can download the original technical report at
<http://www.nfsmi.org/ResourceOverview.aspx?ID=592>

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