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Evaluation of the Team Nutrition E-STAR Training Program

FINAL REPORT



JULY 2024

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About This Report

This report was funded by the Food and Nutrition Service of the United States Department of Agriculture, under contract with Abt Global to evaluate the **Team Nutrition E-STAR Training Program**. Abt has developed this report to describe findings across the two-year E-STAR program. Process evaluation findings include findings from the Mentor Orientation, Manager Orientation, and Workshop observations; Mentor focus groups; Workshop satisfaction forms; year 1 and 2 Action Plan reviews; year 1 and 2 School Nutrition Manager and Mentor participation data; and year 1 and 2 Manager and Mentor interviews for the E-STAR evaluation contract.

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Executive Summary

A program of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)'s Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), Team Nutrition Training Grants have two objectives: to develop the knowledge and skills of School Nutrition Managers such that they are able (1) to assist students participating in the National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program in making healthy food choices, and (2) to improve the nutritional content of meals and snacks served by programs receiving Child and Adult Care Food Program funding.

In 2019, FNS awarded a Team Nutrition Training Grant to a single State agency (the Michigan Department of Education, or MDE) to implement the **Enhanced Strategies, Training, Action Plans, and Resources (E-STAR)** program (FNS, 2022a) to achieve those goals. A two-year implementation period was set to begin in Summer 2020 and continue through the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years. However, due to the COVID-19 public health emergency, implementing the E-STAR program during the 2020-21 school year was not feasible. Thus, implementation was delayed by one year.

EVALUATION GOALS

FNS is committed to evaluating the strategies that State grantees implement under Team Nutrition Training Grants, including the E-STAR program. Toward that end, Abt Global was contracted to conduct a process evaluation of the E-STAR program as implemented by the State grantee.

Our process evaluation of the E-STAR program centered around understanding the extent to which Managers were actively engaged in the program, the extent to which the key program components were implemented as intended, and facilitators of and barriers to both engagement and implementation. This final report summarizes evaluation findings, describing the program as implemented by the grantee, and participants' experience of the program, focusing on what made the program work, the barriers encountered, and suggestions for improvement.

THE E-STAR PROGRAM AS DESIGNED

The E-STAR program was developed in 2018 by FNS and the Institute of Child Nutrition (ICN). The E-STAR program includes ICN instructor-led intensive training for School Nutrition Managers ("Managers") and ongoing support from a Mentor to help Managers develop and implement Action Plans to improve (1) meal quality and (2) student perception of meal quality. Managers develop their Action Plans during training; the Plans identify strategies and activities that Managers and their frontline staff will implement over the two-year implementation period to achieve those two objectives.

To prepare Managers to implement the program, ICN leads several E-STAR trainings. At the beginning of the E-STAR program, Managers are expected to attend two online (recorded) prerequisite courses on presentation fundamentals and on developing

“SMART” (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) goals. Next is a virtual (live) training Workshop split into three 4-hour sessions over three days. The Workshop sessions cover three content areas:

- 1. Training and Facilitation** — Managers learn to identify and recognize the skills of an effective instructor/facilitator and how to apply the effective training and facilitation techniques when they train their frontline staff.
- 2. SMART Goals and Action Plans** — Managers learn the components of a SMART goal, and how to develop SMART goals and an associated Action Plan for achieving the goals.
- 3. Practical Skills for Quality Meals** — Managers learn culinary skills and preparation techniques as well as presentation skills to use when training their frontline staff.

Throughout the two-year implementation period, ICN also delivers six Virtual Instructor-Led Trainings (VILTs) for Managers (three each year), structured as one-hour online (live) trainings. VILT topics were *Utilizing the Cafeteria as a Classroom—Marketing Healthy Options; Utilizing the Cafeteria as a Classroom—Reaching Out to the School Community; Customer Experience, Merchandising, and Food Presentation; Meal Accommodations and Special Dietary Needs; Menu Planning: Latin American Flavor; and Human Resources.*

The E-STAR program also includes a train-the-trainer component, with the expectation that Managers will train their frontline staff. The Workshop includes sessions on training and facilitation, as well as time for Managers to practice delivering a 15-minute scripted lesson. Managers receive a compendium of 43 lessons, called *Manager’s Corners*, that can be delivered to frontline staff to increase their knowledge and skills in preparing quality meals. Managers are expected to choose and deliver 16 *Manager’s Corner* lessons that align with their Action Plan goals, eight each year.

As a Team Nutrition Training Grant recipient, MDE also received funding to provide subgrants to Managers to support Action Plan activities; for example, purchasing small equipment or posters or covering staff time or paying for substitutes. Managers also can apply for subgrants, administered through MDE, for up to \$3,500, or a laptop and \$2,500.

Ongoing mentoring throughout the two-year implementation period is a key component of the E-STAR program. FNS intends Mentors to be professionals with experience supervising school nutrition programs and providing quality school meals as part of the National School Lunch Program; for example, former School Nutrition Directors. An ICN-led Orientation for Mentors introduces them to the program and their role, delivered in two virtual half-day sessions. Over the course of the E-STAR program, Mentors are responsible for:

- Facilitating breakout sessions in the Manager training Workshop.
- Facilitating the development of Action Plans during the Workshop.
- Meeting with each mentee Manager to provide accountability, support, and problem-solving to overcome barriers to Managers' implementation of their Action Plans. Mentors are expected to meet with Managers quarterly, or eight times over the two years.

THE E-STAR PROGRAM AS DELIVERED

MDE's E-STAR program management team consisted of a Project Director and Project Manager. The Project Director was responsible for oversight of all grant activities, including planning, implementation, reporting, and monitoring the budget. The Project Manager assisted the Project Director with grant management, and also served as the primary contact for both Managers and Mentors. MDE recruited 76 Managers and eight Mentors to participate in the E-STAR program. Delivery of the E-STAR program components began in Summer 2021 and continued through the

2022–23 school year.

In addition to the ICN–designed E–STAR program activities and components, MDE offered the following activities and supports to both Managers and Mentors:

- A live Manager Orientation webinar, to explain the E–STAR program requirements and answer any questions.
- Quarterly Meetings for Managers, as well as an end of year 1 Celebration Package and virtual event, an end of year 2 Celebration Event, and a newsletter, to build a community of practice.
- Mentor meetings with the MDE E–STAR Program Project Director and Project Manager.
- MDE responses to questions/requests from Mentors or Managers.
- Trackers (Excel) to document grant–required activities such as Mentor Sessions, Action Plan progress, and delivery of Manager’s Corners.

As well as participating in Abt’s process evaluation, MDE was required to conduct a local evaluation of the program. MDE partnered with the Michigan Public Health Institute (MPHI) to conduct that local evaluation to examine the school–based interventions implemented by Managers trained through the E–STAR program. The local evaluator, MPHI, collaborated with MDE to define research questions and outcomes and develop electronic grant activity monitoring systems. Abt provided evaluation technical assistance to the local evaluator to support the design and conduct of the grantee–led local evaluation of E–STAR.

The local evaluation included studying the engagement and experience of frontline staff with the E–STAR training, examining the changes in school meal quality targeted in the Managers’ Action Plans, and examining changes in students’ perception of school meal quality.



INTENDED E-STAR PROGRAM OUTCOMES

Together, the E-STAR program activities are intended to affect both short- and long-term outcomes. The intended short-term outcomes include increased skills, knowledge, and behavioral changes for Managers and frontline staff. The E-STAR program intends to improve Managers' ability to successfully manage their food service program and, via the Manager's Corner trainings, frontline staff should deepen their knowledge and broaden their skills to prepare and serve high-quality meals. MDE's additional activities and support intend to foster the formation of a community of practice among Managers and Mentors that might persist, at least in the short term.

These short-term outcomes aim to support the E-STAR program's stated long-term objectives: improved school meal quality and improved student perception of meal quality. With their additional training and knowledge, Managers should be able to continue practicing the skills developed during the E-STAR program to make continued improvements to their food service programs.

EVALUATION METHODS

Abt's process evaluation relied on extant administrative data augmented by primary data collection, including training observations, Mentor focus groups, Manager and Mentor interviews, and MDE and local evaluator interviews.

Administrative data provided by MDE and MPHI included Manager, Mentor, school, and School Food Authority characteristics; Action Plans developed by Managers; Manager attendance and participation in each of the components of the E-STAR program; and Mentor attendance. These data were used to describe participant engagement throughout the implementation period and to summarize the Action Plans developed in the training Workshop.

At the start of the E-STAR program's first year, Abt staff observed the Mentor and Manager Orientations as well as the training Workshop. We used observation data to document the content and delivery of the E-STAR training and to determine the extent to which the E-STAR Workshop was implemented as intended.

Abt staff convened two Mentor focus groups in July and August 2021, shortly after the training Workshop. Abt conducted interviews with Mentors and Managers toward the end of year 1 (March–May 2022) and year 2 (March–May 2023). All eight Mentors participated in year 1 and year 2 interviews and year 1 focus groups; 41 Managers participated in interviews (36 in year 1 and 29 in year 2, with 24 Managers completing interviews in both years). Abt conducted interviews with the MDE Project Director, MDE Project Manager, and the local evaluator. We used interview and focus group data to identify and summarize facilitators of and barriers to continued engagement of Mentors and Managers in the E-STAR program; Mentor Session implementation, content, and facilitators and barriers; facilitators of and barriers to implementing Action Plans; and Managers' perceptions of the various components of the E-STAR program. Interviews with MDE staff and the local

evaluator provided information about the implementation process and context for Manager and Mentor interview findings.

Our findings describe, for each component of the E-STAR program, what participants found facilitated their success and what barriers they encountered, as well as any suggested improvements.

EVALUATION STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

The evaluation had several strengths. The mixed methods approach blended rich qualitative data with quantitative analysis of primary and extant data. We collected implementation data at multiple levels: training observations, Manager and Mentor interviews, MDE and local evaluator interviews, administrative data, and Action Plan data. In addition, we were able to adapt our evaluation design in the face of implementation delays and challenges due to the COVID-19 public health emergency and other factors.

The evaluation also had some limitations. First, though Abt was able to directly observe participation and engagement in some components of the E-STAR program (e.g., the Workshop), our findings about implementation of the Action Plans and progress toward meeting their goals rely on self-reports from Managers and Mentors. Despite our efforts to clarify that we would not share interview data (to encourage candor), participants still might have overstated progress to show themselves in a favorable light. Alternatively, they might have understated progress if they did not recall early milestones by the time we interviewed them in the spring of the school year.

Second, MPHI shared data that tracked participation in five “snapshots” over the two years of the program. Therefore, we calculated participation rates with estimates of the number of Managers still engaged in the E-STAR program at the time of each activity.

Finally, we were unable to follow up with Managers who withdrew from the E-STAR program prior to our interviews in the spring of each school year. Withdrawn Managers might have responded differently to our interview prompts and identified different barriers or facilitators to participation. We achieved fairly high response rates among the Managers whom we pursued for interviews in each year — 84 and 85 percent, respectively, of those actively participating at E-STAR at the time of the interview — and were able to interview 41 unique Managers across the two years. That said, it is still possible that the few Managers who we pursued, but were unable to interview, could have encountered other barriers or facilitators that are not represented in our data.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Implementation of the E-STAR program included a mix of successes and challenges that are highlighted throughout this report. In this section, we summarize its key takeaways as broad findings. (Detailed findings are summarized at the start of each report chapter.)

Maintaining consistent engagement among Managers throughout the two-year E-STAR implementation period was a challenge.

Ongoing engagement varied widely among the 64 Managers who were recruited to participate in the E-STAR program at the beginning of year 1, with some Managers completing all components of the program and others participating in only one activity. More than half of these Managers ($n=39$, or 61%) withdrew at some point during the two years.

Overall, Managers spoke highly of the professional development offerings, particularly the training materials and the training staff as well as support from their Mentor, citing them as facilitators of both program engagement and

implementation. Barriers to engagement included competing demands for Managers' time, indicating that Managers might have struggled to stay engaged even when they were motivated to improve meal quality and student perception and had positive views of the program. The State grantee implemented Quarterly Meetings with Managers and held a virtual celebratory event at the end of the first school year, which likely contributed to Managers feeling supported and motivated to stay engaged with the E-STAR program.

All program components were delivered as intended; however, participation was uneven.

As designed, the E-STAR program includes clearly articulated program components and expectations for implementation. But because this was the first time the E-STAR program was implemented, the extent to which its components were feasible to deliver was an open question. It is therefore worth noting that all the components articulated in the E-STAR logic model (those originally planned by ICN and those added on by MDE; [Figure 1-1](#)) were available and delivered to Managers.

Participation varied widely across program components. Though 76 Managers enrolled in the program over years 1 and 2, 59 Managers attended the training Workshop, 50 Managers ultimately developed Action Plans, and only 29 Managers attended the expected number of sessions with their Mentor. However, the availability and content of the components and resources offered by the E-STAR program were not a significant barrier to engagement or implementation.

Manager implementation of the Action Plan activities and delivery of Manager's Corner lessons fell short of program expectations. Managers reported making some progress implementing their Action Plans, but not as much progress as they intended. Further, they reported needing to adapt their Action Plans during year

1 to respond to barriers to implementation. Those Managers who stayed engaged into year 2 were encouraged to set new goals for that second year, yet were less likely to report needing to adapt their Action Plans in year 2. Managers identified being allowed to adapt their Plans, along with the support of their Mentors, as key facilitators to continued implementation and engagement. The barriers Managers faced in implementing their Action Plans were staff shortages, navigating COVID restrictions, supply chain issues, and a lack of staff buy-in to the program. Despite reporting falling short on implementing their Action Plans, Managers reported feeling that the E-STAR program improved student perception of food and meal quality and improved the quality of training for staff.

Most Managers were unable to deliver eight Manager's Corner lessons to their frontline staff in their first year of the program; about one-quarter of (27%) of the 45 Managers with year 1 Action Plans met this expectation ($n=12$). Again, Managers and Mentors both reported feeling satisfied with the Manager's Corner lesson materials, sometimes adapting them to better suit their needs. The barriers to Manager's Corner delivery were more external to the program, including limited time with frontline staff and staffing shortages.

The E-STAR program created a community focused on improving meal quality and student perception that, for those who stayed engaged, was a positive outcome of the program. Several components of the E-STAR program focused as much on community building as they did on developing individual skills and capacity for improving meals. Managers identified the opportunity to connect with other Managers, their Mentors, and MDE staff as a facilitator across components. Examples included breakout sessions at the Workshop and at the VILTs, as well as the MDE Quarterly Meetings for Managers. At the end of the two years, 28 Managers were engaged, representing a community poised to continue improving meal quality in their schools. Twelve Managers were able to attend a Celebration Event that MDE hosted at the end of year 2.

There was substantial Manager turnover in the E-STAR program, which required adaptations to E-STAR training.

Almost 60 percent of Managers who started the E-STAR program ($n=39$ of the 64 who initially engaged with the program; $n=5$ of the 12 who started later) left the program at some point during the two years. Though MDE continued to try to engage new Managers into the second year, the E-STAR program did not include a clear process for recruiting and training new Managers after the training Workshop was delivered in Summer 2021. MDE adapted the E-STAR training process to engage new Managers, but withdrawals far exceeded recruitments, and participation was uneven for those who were recruited.

Of the Managers who completed a baseline survey ($n=67$), a much larger proportion of Managers with no formal credentials (79%) withdrew from the E-STAR program after enrollment than did Managers with formal credentials (45%). This could indicate that Managers with no formal credentials were having more difficulty participating in the E-STAR program in its entirety. Barriers to participation identified in this report, including lack of capacity, could be particularly salient for this group; perhaps Managers without formal credentials were more time constrained. Additionally, Managers with no formal credentials might be less familiar with formal training programs or formal mentorship models. Regardless of the reason, Managers without formal credentials appear to need additional support or incentive to participate in the E-STAR program fully.

E-STAR participants who are in a Food Service Director or Manager role and have additional supervisory duties compared to E-STAR participants who are Head Cooks could need additional support to improve their capacity and allow them to participate in the E-STAR program more easily. A higher proportion of E-STAR participants who held Director (63%) or Manager (69%) roles cited



lack of capacity as a barrier to Action Plan implementation than did Head Cooks (25%). Directors and Managers seem to have additional competing responsibilities related to kitchen management, people management, and grant management that contribute to insufficient capacity to take on new roles or tasks. Anecdotally, Directors and Managers spent a lot of time covering when other staff were out. Many Managers cited staff shortages as a barrier.

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

During our interviews and observations, Managers and Mentors offered the following suggestions for improving the E-STAR program:

- Clarify expectations of participating in the E-STAR program for Mentors, Managers, frontline staff, and school administrators; provide a calendar that communicates the expected timeline for participation and implementation.
- Include time between the Manager and Mentor Orientations and the Workshop for Managers to meet with their Mentors to complete a structured needs assessment exercise, so they can think through what goals, strategies, activities, and subgrant uses are most appropriate or helpful for their unique school environment.
- Provide Mentors with background information on their assigned Managers (e.g., experience level, school characteristics) so Mentors can better support Managers' Action Plan development. Scheduling an initial meeting between Mentors and Managers before the Workshop could help with this, as well. Though it was not required, Mentors noted that in-person site visits were also helpful, to understand the Managers' school environments.
- Provide additional funding to relieve capacity barriers for understaffed and overworked Managers.
- Develop communication strategies responsive to differing levels of technological skill and comfort to reduce barriers for participants who are less familiar with software systems and virtual platforms.

- Add quarterly group Manager and Mentor meetings as an official E-STAR component, to give Managers from different schools more time to interact with one another.

During our interviews with MDE staff, they offered the following suggestions for future grantees:

- Budget more hours and money for Mentors to work with Managers.
- Provide Managers with more time to practice delivering Manager's Corners during the training Workshop and later with their Mentors to ensure they understand how to use the materials and deliver the Manager's Corners training as intended.
- Have Managers focus on one Action Plan goal at a time.
- Ensure there is a non-burdensome system for tracking Action Plan progress and delivery of Manager's Corners; and ensure the Manager and Mentor trainings include instruction on the tracking system and procedures.

In addition, we reviewed the overall findings, including barriers to E-STAR program implementation named by Mentors and Managers and our observations and understanding of the school nutrition program setting. That review leads us to offer the following suggestions for improvement:

- Develop or align Manager's Corner lesson choices with goals for developing specific culinary skills, so that Managers can choose trainings to address specific needs of their frontline staff.
- Cover less information in each Manager training (i.e., Workshop and VILTs) and use repetition to reinforce learning. Both Managers and Mentors emphasized the challenge of absorbing the volume of information within the allotted training time. This challenge was exacerbated by the switch from a three-day in-person training to a shorter virtual training course in response to the COVID-19 public health emergency. Future implementation of the

E-STAR program could consider delivering the information in shorter sessions over more days. It also could build in additional opportunities for the Managers to practice skills and meet with their Mentor and in small peer groups to review and discuss activities and lessons.

- Provide guidance (through mentoring or during group training) on how Managers can increase efficiencies while maintaining quality. Many Managers reported implementation barriers, including competing job responsibilities, having a second job, being understaffed, scheduling conflicts, family obligations, health issues, staff turnover, limited experience in their role, and general lack of time. Future implementation of the E-STAR program could include strategies to support Managers in implementing their Action Plans and delivering Manager's Corners in an environment with many competing priorities and short-staffing.
- For Managers with no formal credentials, provide an additional incentive or payoff related to finishing the program, such as a formal certificate of completion, a pathway toward a salary increase, or a direct stipend for participation. Additionally, designing or adapting training materials for a program such as E-STAR should consider participants' varying literacy and technological skill levels, previous training and management experience, and comfort levels with formal training programs.
- Revise the program to anticipate Manager turnover, likely unrelated to the quality of E-STAR program components. Investing in Manager development is a clear way to improve meal quality, but schools risk losing capacity if the Manager later leaves. Future grantees could develop plans for increasing the "stickiness" of school-based strategies for improving meal quality and student perception in a context known for high staff turnover.
- The E-STAR curriculum, including Manager's Corners, was widely viewed as high quality by Managers. However, it is unclear whether Managers, even with the support of their Mentors, were able to operationalize their improved

knowledge and skills into the school-based strategies envisioned by FNS. Future implementation of the E-STAR program could include more scaffolds to support Managers in going the “last mile” to fully implement strategies for improving meal quality and student perception.

- Many Managers and Mentors reported benefits from the mentoring and peer relationships that were built through participation in the E-STAR program. Future implementation could encourage community building to create networks and relationships that can potentially support and sustain E-STAR activities after the program ends. Grantees might have more success recruiting Managers into a supportive community rather than into a “program.” Managers who feel supported by and connected to a community might be more likely to stay engaged in program activities.
- Define the participant group for E-STAR; for example, new Managers, experienced Managers, or Managers in a supervisory role (Food Service Directors and Managers). There is some indication that these categories of Managers experienced E-STAR differently, with different needs and different barriers to successful participation. For example, Managers who were supervisors reported lack of capacity more frequently than did those who were not supervisors (Head Cooks), and Managers newer to their role needed more support with their job duties before they could implement E-STAR Action Plan activities.

CONCLUSION

Over the two-year implementation, the key components of the E-STAR program were delivered to Managers even if participation was uneven. While recruitment, active engagement, and implementation were all challenging, the barriers cited by Managers and Mentors were most often external to the program and reflected the challenging context of school food service during the pandemic. Participants clearly emphasized that being allowed to adapt program components, support from their Mentor, and being included in a community of Managers were facilitators of program engagement and implementation.

This evaluation reported on to whom and how the E-STAR program was delivered and, at a high level, what the training content was. Future research is needed, however, to assess school-level implementation of the program's school-based interventions on a deeper level.

The next study of E-STAR could include measuring the effects of those school-based interventions on intermediate outcomes such as the knowledge and skills of frontline staff to prepare and serve quality meals, which is a necessary if not sufficient condition for improving meal quality. The study should document the content and amount of training delivered to frontline staff, what activities are undertaken as part of Action Plans or Manager's Corners, how far activities progress, and what outcomes are achieved. The findings would help FNS and ICN define expected intermediate outcomes of E-STAR and test whether participants in E-STAR experience better outcomes those who do not participate in E-STAR.





1

Introduction

In 2019, FNS awarded a Team Nutrition Training Grant to a single State agency — the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) — to implement the **Enhanced Strategies, Training, Action Plans, and Resources (E-STAR)** program (FNS, 2022a) to improve meal quality and student satisfaction. A two-year implementation period was set to begin in Summer 2020 and continue through the 2020–21 and 2021–22 school years. However, due to the COVID-19 public health emergency, implementing the E-STAR program during the 2020–21 school year was not feasible, and implementation was delayed by one year. Thus, the Institute of Child Nutrition (ICN) began delivering the E-STAR program components in June 2021, with its final training held in May 2023. MDE held its final Celebration Event in June 2023.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)'s Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) established the Team Nutrition initiative in 1995. Team Nutrition aims to improve USDA Child Nutrition programs using three behavior-focused strategies: (1) providing training and technical assistance (TA) to school food service professionals so they can prepare and serve nutritious meals that appeal to children, (2) teaching children the importance of making healthy food choices, and (3) building support for healthy school environments (FNS, 2022b). Team Nutrition offers a wide range of web-based resources, including training, TA, and nutrition education materials for schools, childcare providers, and summer meal sites that participate in USDA Child Nutrition programs.

Each year, Team Nutrition also provides competitive grants to State agencies that administer Child Nutrition programs (FNS, 2022c). Team Nutrition Training Grants have two objectives: (1) to assist students participating in the National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program in making healthy food choices, and (2) to improve the nutritional content of meals and snacks served by programs receiving Child and Adult Care Food Program funding.

FNS is committed to evaluating the strategies that State grantees implement under Team Nutrition Training Grants, including the E-STAR program. Abt Global conducted a process evaluation of the E-STAR program as implemented by the State grantee. Our process evaluation of the E-STAR program centered around understanding the extent to which School Nutrition Managers ("Managers") were actively engaged in the E-STAR program, the extent to which the key program components were implemented as intended, and the facilitators of and barriers to both engagement and implementation.

The MDE partnered with the Michigan Public Health Institute (MPHI) to track and evaluate the implementation of the E-STAR program locally. MPHI worked in



TEAM NUTRITION TRAINING GRANTS

Team Nutrition Training Grants have two objectives:

(1) to assist students participating in the National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program in making healthy food choices, and (2) to improve the nutritional content of meals and snacks served by programs receiving Child and Adult Care Food Program funding.

collaboration with MDE to define research questions and outcomes and develop electronic grant activity monitoring systems. Abt Global provided evaluation TA to the local evaluator to support the design and conduct of the grantee-led local evaluation of E-STAR. The local evaluation objectives included (1) studying the engagement and experience of frontline staff with the E-STAR training; (2) examining the changes in school meal quality targeted in the Action Plans; and (3) examining changes in students' perception of school meal quality.

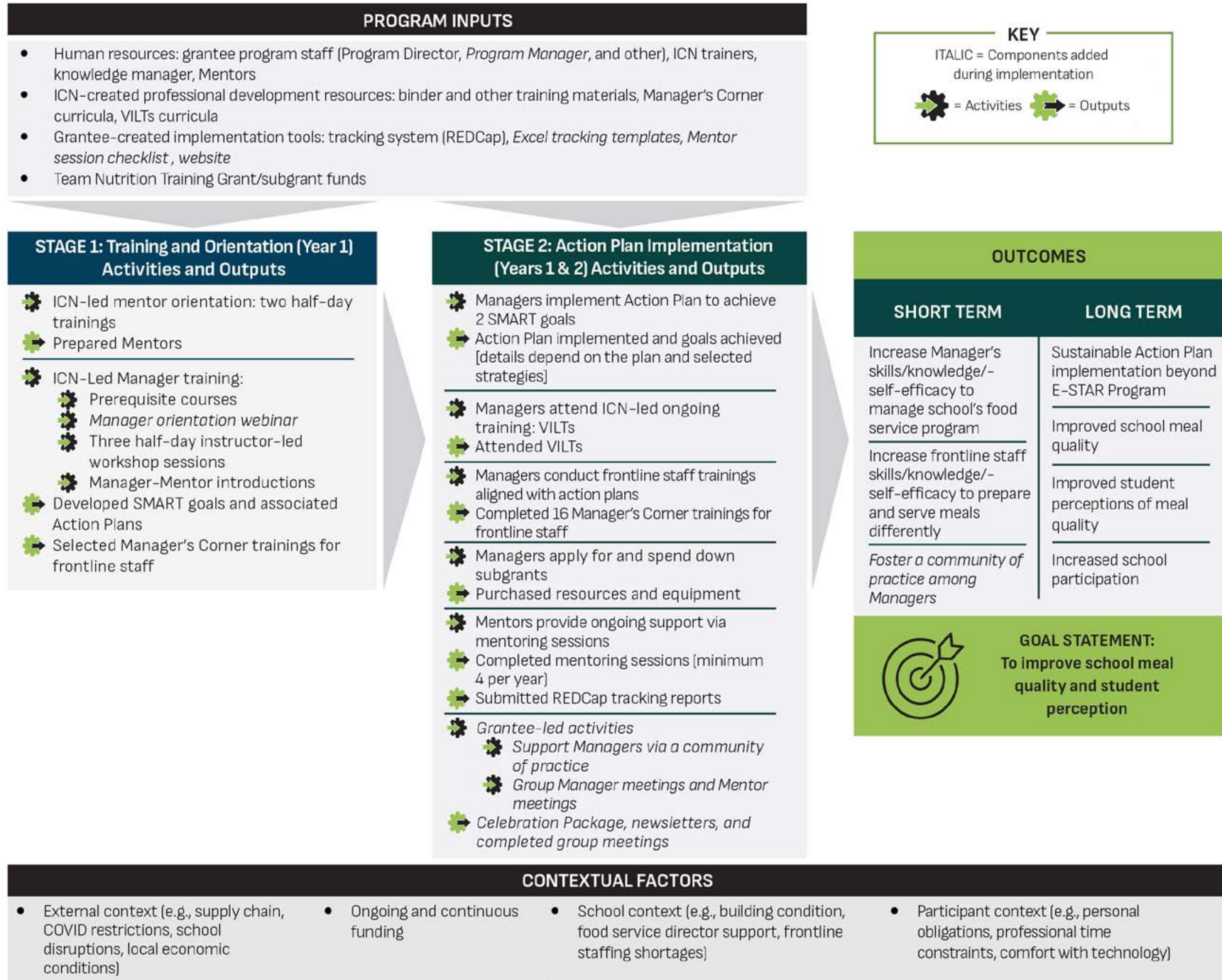
1.1 THE E-STAR PROGRAM

The E-STAR program was developed in 2018 by FNS and ICN. E-STAR is a two-year program, depicted in [Figure 1-1](#). It includes intensive training for Managers led by ICN instructors and ongoing support from a Mentor to help Managers develop and implement Action Plans to improve meal quality and student perception of meal quality. The Request for Applications for the E-STAR grant specified that States should hire as Mentors individuals with experience supervising school nutrition programs and providing quality school meals as part of the National School Lunch Program, such as School Nutrition Directors. During training at the start of the first program year, Managers are to develop their Action Plans; the Plans identify strategies and activities that Managers and their frontline staff will implement over the two years to accomplish their goals.

The logic model in [Figure 1-1](#) depicts implementation of the E-STAR program as a combination of **inputs** and **activities** that generates **outputs** and leads to both **short- and long-term outcomes**. Our figure illustrates the program both as it was originally conceived by ICN prior to Michigan's implementation and with several additional components MDE added during the course of program implementation. Those additional components are identified in italicized text.



FIGURE 1-1. E-STAR PROGRAM LOGIC MODEL



1.1.1 Program Inputs

As designed, the program's inputs include the resources, funding, materials, staff, and any other supports available to the program and its participants.¹ Acquisition and development of all inputs — including human resources, required curricula, and funded subgrants — depend on sufficient funding from the Team Nutrition Training Grant, which is itself an input to program implementation. As implemented by MDE, inputs include human resources; specifically, MDE's program staff, recruited Mentors, and support staff from ICN. A Project Director led implementation for MDE, but after launching the program, the Director identified a need for additional management support. A Project Manager was hired to fill that role; in this case, the Project Manager also served as a Mentor. MDE contracted with a local evaluator who, in addition to carrying out evaluation-related activities, also supported implementation of the program by helping MDE track Action Plans and Managers' participation in training and mentoring. To that end, the evaluator filled a "Knowledge Manager" role, which is identified in the logic model among other human resource inputs.

The program design also includes a reporting system for tracking Managers' progress and professional development materials developed by ICN, such as the Manager and Mentor training curricula, Instructor's Manual for Managers, Mentor Training Manual, and curricula for frontline staff trainings (i.e., Manager's Corners, discussed below). The Instructor's Manual (sometimes referred to as "the binder" by participants), which allows participants to follow along during the training Workshop, contains the E-STAR training curriculum: detailed scripts, PowerPoint slides, worksheets for completing activities, Manager's Corners lessons, and supporting handouts. A dedicated MDE-hosted E-STAR website includes a calendar of events, grant requirements, REDCap data collection and tracking tutorial, and other resources for Mentors and Managers.

¹ The definitions of logic model components are taken from Lemire, Porowski, and Mumma (2023).

The model assumes inputs are in place prior to the enrollment of participating Managers. However, during the course of its implementation, Michigan developed two additional resources that we consider inputs: a Microsoft Excel template for tracking a Manager's progress and a checklist of topics that Mentors should expect to cover in their mentoring.

1.1.2 Activities and Outputs

In our logic model in Figure 1-1, we divided the program's activities and outputs into two stages. Stage 1 includes the orientations and start-up training provided to E-STAR's participating Managers and their Mentors. An ICN-led **Orientation for Mentors** introduces them to the program and their role, delivered in two virtual half-day (four-hour) sessions. There are several ICN-led Manager trainings. At the beginning of the E-STAR program, Managers are expected to attend two online (recorded) **prerequisite courses** on presentation fundamentals and on developing "SMART" (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) goals; followed by a virtual (live) training **Workshop**, split into three 4-hour sessions over three days. During the Workshop, Mentors and Managers meet one another via breakout sessions facilitated by Mentors. In addition to receiving a certificate of completion, Managers finish the Workshop having developed a draft of their **Action Plan** including selected SMART goals and selected specific frontline staff trainings they expect to deliver.

The program's design intends for ICN's live training to begin with the Workshop, but Michigan's implementation of the E-STAR program also included a two-hour **Manager Orientation** webinar prior to the Workshop, where Managers learned about the program's requirements and got initial questions answered. Though the Orientation was not included in E-STAR's original design, MDE expected Managers to attend.

Stage 2 spans both years of the E-STAR program's period of performance and includes the majority of the program's activities and outputs. Central to Stage 2 is the implementation by Managers of their Action Plans, the details of which depend on the strategies and activities selected and written into their Plans. For example, a Manager who opts to develop a student advisory committee to inform menu planning has to carry out all of the activities and generate the associated output. We discuss typical goals and implementation activities identified by Managers in detail in subsequent chapters of this report.

Concurrent with Action Plan implementation, several Stage 2 activities offer support to Managers. Throughout the two-year program, ICN delivers six **Virtual Instructor-Led Trainings (VILTs)** for Managers (three each year), structured as one-hour online (live) trainings. For this implementation, VILT topics included *Utilizing the Cafeteria as a Classroom—Marketing Healthy Options*; *Utilizing the Cafeteria as a Classroom—Reaching Out to the School Community*; *Customer Experience, Merchandising, and Food Presentation*; *Meal Accommodations and Special Dietary Needs*; *Menu Planning: Latin American Flavor*; and *Human Resources*. In Michigan, Managers also could apply for **subgrants**, administered through MDE, to support their Action Plan activities; for example, purchasing small equipment or posters or covering staff time or paying for substitutes. MDE decided to award each subgrantee up to \$3,500, or a laptop and \$2,500.

Ongoing mentoring throughout the two-year period is a key component in the program design. Having facilitated breakout sessions and development of draft Action Plans during the Workshop, Mentors are responsible for supporting up to 10 Managers throughout the rest of their participation in the program. Mentors meet with each of their mentee Managers in **Mentor Sessions** quarterly over the two-year E-STAR period to provide support and problem-solving to overcome barriers to Managers' implementation of their Action Plans. Mentors also engage with Managers



VIRTUAL INSTRUCTOR-LED TRAININGS (VILTS) TOPICS FOR MANAGERS:

1. Utilizing the Cafeteria as a Classroom – Marketing Healthy Options
 2. Utilizing the Cafeteria as a Classroom – Reaching out to the School Community
 3. Customer Experience, Merchandising, and Food Presentation
 4. Meal Accommodations and Special Dietary Needs
 5. Menu Planning: Latin American Flavor
 6. Human Resources
-

directly on the tracking and reporting of Managers' progress in implementing their Action Plans, through the program's **tracking system in REDCap**.²

The E-STAR program also includes a train-the-trainer component, with the expectation that Managers will flow down training to their frontline staff. The Workshop includes sessions on training and facilitation, as well as time for Managers to practice delivering a 15-minute scripted lesson. Managers are provided with a compendium of 43 lessons that can be delivered to frontline staff called **Manager's Corners** (see [Appendix D: Action Plan Strategies, Activities, and Corresponding Manager's Corner Lessons](#)). Each Manager's Corner is a lesson aimed at increasing frontline staff knowledge and skills in preparing quality meals. Managers are expected to choose 16 Manager's Corner lessons that align with their Action Plan and to deliver them to frontline staff during the two years of the E-STAR implementation period (eight lessons each year). The binder provided to Managers during the Workshop includes Manager's Corner curricula and resources such as posters and handouts to use with the Manager's Corners or as standalone training resources.

In addition to the ICN-designed E-STAR activities and components, MDE incorporated its own activities and supports during Stage 2. Taken together, activities generally fostered a sense of community among participants, both Managers and Mentors. MDE held group **Quarterly Meetings** with Managers and a combination of group and individual meetings with Mentors. MDE tried to keep the Managers in consistent groups for all Manager meetings to facilitate consistent peer-to-peer interaction, which aided the development of a community of practice. At the end of year 1, MDE rewarded Managers for completing the first Action Plan with a Celebration Package and virtual event containing resources for their meal program such as posters, serving line clings, and stickers, as well as a star-shaped paperweight. At the end of year 2, MDE invited all Mentors and Managers to a Celebration Event, which included culinary training and a tour of the kitchen and dining facilities at Michigan State University. Throughout

² REDCap (Research Electronic Data Capture) is a secure, web-based software platform designed to support data capture for research studies.

the two-year period, MDE distributed a quarterly newsletter on the program's implementation. MDE also sent periodic messages of encouragement and guidance, distributed notes from all meetings, and circulated formal responses to questions submitted by Managers and Mentors, all of which kept participants informed on the latest implementation guidance.

1.1.3 Outcomes

Given successful implementation of the prescribed activities, the logic model documents the program's intended outcomes, in both the short and the long term. Directly following from program implementation, intended short-term outcomes include increased skills, knowledge, and behavioral changes for Managers and frontline staff. The E-STAR program intends to improve Managers' ability to successfully manage their food service program. Via the Manager's Corner trainings, frontline staff should deepen their knowledge and broaden their skills to prepare and serve meals. MDE's additional supports fostered the formation of a community of practice among Managers and among Mentors that might persist, at least in the short term.

These short-term outcomes aim to support the E-STAR program's stated long-term objectives: improved school meal quality and improved student perception of meal quality. With their new experience, Managers should be able to continue practicing the skills developed during the E-STAR program to make continued improvements to their food service programs.

1.2 E-STAR PROCESS EVALUATION

As defined by FNS, the E-STAR process evaluation was guided by the following objective and corresponding research questions:

1.2.1 Objective

Conduct a **process evaluation** of the E-STAR Training Program as implemented and as experienced by the State grantee and selected School Food Authorities.

1.2.2 Research Questions (RQs)

- RQ1.** To what extent do Managers remain involved in the two-year program and continue implementing the train-the-trainer model through implementation of Manager's Corners with their staff?
- RQ2.** What processes or actions serve as facilitators of continued engagement of Managers and Mentors in the E-STAR Training Program?
- RQ3.** What processes or actions serve as barriers of continued engagement of Managers and Mentors in the E-STAR Training Program?
- RQ4.** How much of the expected training do Managers receive?
- RQ5.** How do the Mentors operationalize the goals of the Mentor Sessions? What do the sessions include, and what do they look like? What do the Mentors see as the key facilitators or barriers to providing effective mentoring to the Managers?
- RQ6.** What goals and content are included in the Managers' Action Plans? What are the facilitators of and barriers to executing the Action Plans as intended?
- RQ7.** To what extent was the E-STAR Training Program implemented as intended, and did it result in the appropriate outputs? What challenges were encountered in implementing the E-STAR training? What worked well in the E-STAR training?
- RQ8.** How valuable are the various components of E-STAR (e.g., mentoring, Virtual Instructor-Led Trainings, Manager's Corners) to the Managers' perceptions of their success with the program?

Abt's evaluation of MDE's implementation of the E-STAR program to address these RQs relied on extant data as well as primary data collection, including training observations, Manager and Mentor interviews, Mentor focus groups, MDE and local evaluator interviews, administrative data, and Action Plan data. A brief description of data collection and analysis methods is included below; see [Appendix A: Methods](#) for further details.

We observed the Mentor and Manager Orientations, as well as the training Workshop. We used observation data to document the content and delivery of the E-STAR training and to determine the extent to which MDE implemented the E-STAR Workshops as intended (RQ7).

We convened two Mentor focus groups in July and August 2021, shortly after the training Workshop. We conducted interviews with Managers and Mentors toward the end of year 1 (March–May 2022) and end of year 2 (March–May 2023). In year 1, all eight Mentors participated in interviews and focus groups; 36 Managers participated in interviews. In year 2, all eight Mentors and 29 Managers participated in interviews. (Twenty-four Managers participated in both interviews. See [Figure 1-2](#).) We used interview and focus group data to identify and summarize facilitators and barriers of continued engagement of Managers and Mentors in the E-STAR Training Program (RQ2 and RQ3); mentoring session implementation, content, and facilitators and barriers (RQ5); facilitators of and barriers to implementing Action Plans (RQ6); and Managers' perceptions of the various components of the E-STAR program (RQ8).

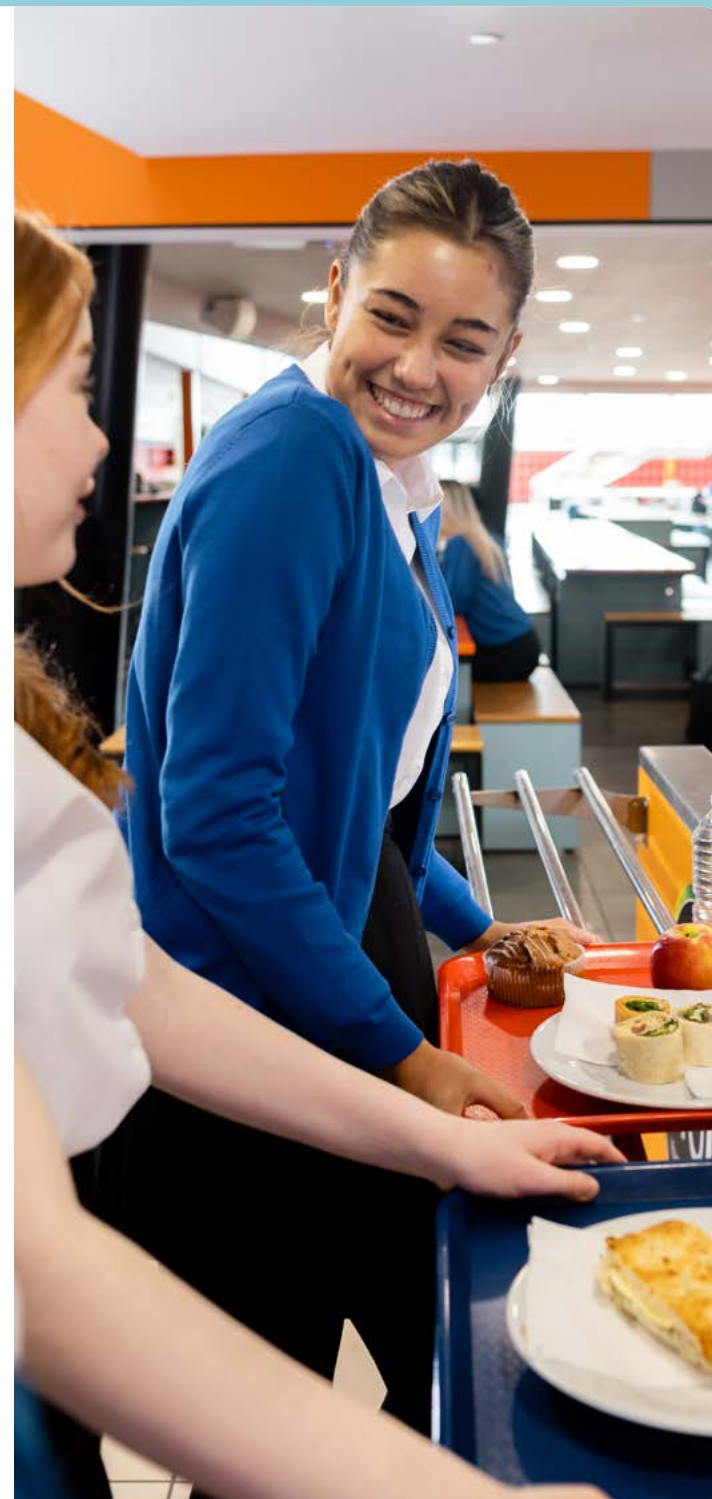
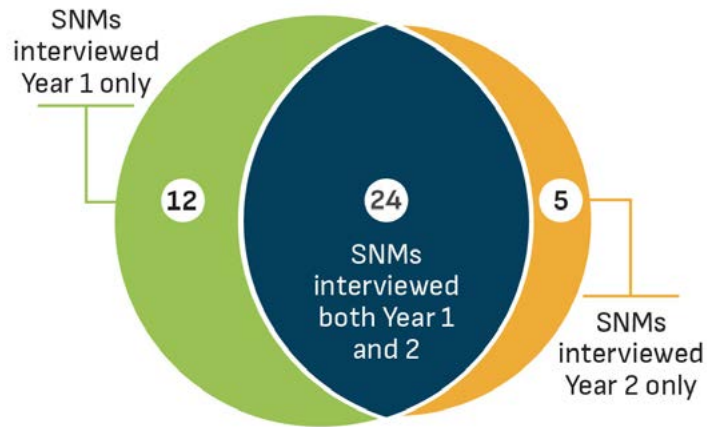


FIGURE 1-2. MANAGER INTERVIEW SAMPLE, YEARS 1 AND 2



Abt conducted interviews with the MDE Project Director, MDE Project Manager, and the local evaluator. Interviews with MDE staff and the local evaluator provided information about the implementation process and context for Manager and Mentor interview findings.

Administrative data provided by MDE/MPHI included Manager, Mentor, school, and School Food Authority characteristics; Action Plans developed by Managers; Manager attendance and participation in each of the components of the E-STAR program; and Mentor tracking and participation. We used these data to describe participant engagement throughout the program (RQ1 and RQ4) and to summarize the Action Plans developed in the training Workshop (RQ6).

1.3 REPORT ORGANIZATION

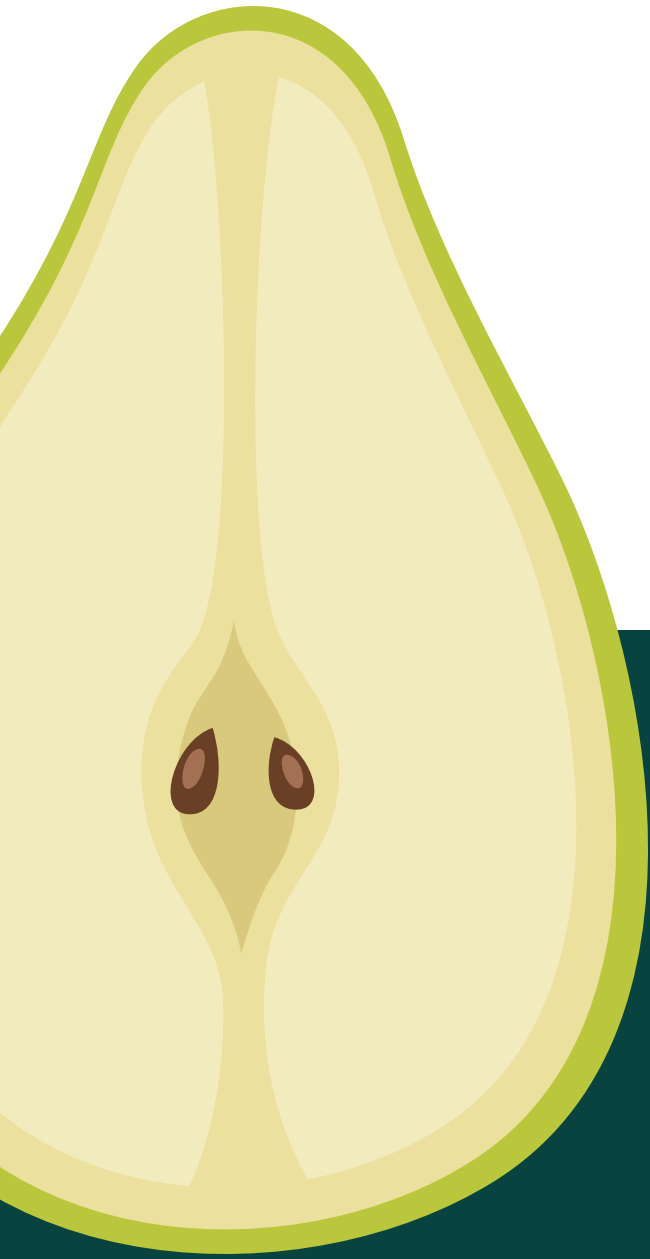
This report presents E-STAR process evaluation results:

- Participation and engagement ([Chapter 2](#)).
- Participant perceptions ([Chapter 3](#)).
- Implementation of the training components: Mentor Orientation, Manager Orientation, training Workshop, and VILTs ([Chapter 4](#)).
- Mentoring ([Chapter 5](#)).
- Action Plans ([Chapter 6](#)).
- Manager's Corner trainings ([Chapter 7](#)).

For each component of the E-STAR program, we describe what participants found facilitated their success and what barriers they encountered, as well as any improvements participants suggested. Throughout the report, we use specific terms or phrases to correspond to the number and percentage of Managers or Mentors we are discussing (e.g., "most" or "some"). The complete framework guiding use of those terms can be found in Appendix B: Framework for Reporting Frequencies.

Throughout this report, key findings are presented in blue; they also are collected at the front of each chapter in a **Key Takeaways** box.

The report ends with a discussion ([Chapter 8](#)) of key findings and how that information can be used to improve the program before expanding to additional states.



2

Participation and Engagement in the E-STAR Program

The E-STAR Training Program is designed as a two-year program in which Managers receive training and support to develop and implement Action Plans aimed at improving meal quality and student perception of school meals. Continued engagement in the program by Managers over the two-year implementation period is central to the theory of action. In this chapter we describe Managers' participation in each of the program's key components using data provided by MPHI.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

- There were **clear training and implementation expectations** for Managers participating in the E-STAR program.
- Seventy-six Managers participated in at least one component of the E-STAR program, but **maintaining Managers' engagement was a challenge**. Only one-third of Managers were continuously engaged throughout the two-year implementation period.
- Even among actively engaged Managers, **participation in E-STAR activities was uneven**.
- All of the Managers who withdrew more than halfway through year 1 had completed the training Workshop and almost all had developed Action Plans for year 1. Most Managers who withdrew early, within the first few months of enrollment, had not attended the Workshop or developed an Action Plan for year 1.
- Engagement in the E-STAR program varied for 12 Managers who joined in the latter half of year 1 or early in year 2. Seven of the 12 Managers who joined late stayed active for the remainder of the two years of the program; the other five withdrew before the end of the program.
- **Participation in E-STAR activities was variable and inconsistent throughout program implementation**, suggesting Managers might have had difficulty attending some activities.



TABLE 2-1. EXPECTATIONS FOR MANAGERS

ACTIVITY	EXPECTED PARTICIPATION
Attend Manager Orientation	2-hour, virtual orientation session
Complete Prerequisite Courses	2 courses (3 hours total, recorded)
Complete Training Workshop	3 four-hour virtual sessions over 3 days (live in Summer 2021 but available as a recorded training after that) ^a
Develop, Implement, and Update Action Plan	Action Plan for year 1 developed and submitted to their Food Service Director and MDE ^b . Year 1 Action Plan updated and submitted for year 2 implementation.
Attend Virtual Instructor-Led Trainings (VILTs)	3 one-hour VILTs each year
Attend Quarterly Meetings Held by MDE	3-4 one-hour meetings each year
Attend Mentor Sessions	4 sessions with a Mentor each year
Deliver Manager's Corner Lessons	8 lessons to frontline staff each year

a The three-day Workshop was offered four times to different groups of Managers.

b This evaluation did not measure Action Plan implementation as part of participation and engagement.



There were clear training and implementation expectations for Managers participating in the E-STAR program.

Seventy-six Managers participated in the E-STAR program over years 1 and 2, with 64 joining at the beginning of year 1 and 12 joining in the second half of year 1 or later. These Managers fell into three groups: Managers who remained active throughout its two years (“active” Managers), Managers who withdrew from the E-STAR program, and Managers who joined more than six months after the E-STAR implementation period began (after February 2022). MDE maintained a database of Managers and the activities they completed. Managers designated by MDE as active at any point during the two years were expected to participate in ongoing E-STAR activities. If a Manager withdrew at any point during the two-year program, the date was recorded and the Manager was no longer expected to participate in E-STAR activities. Late-joining Managers were added to MDE’s database sometime after February 2022. Recall that E-STAR implementation (year 1) began in the 2021-22 school year, during the COVID-19 public health emergency.

ACTIVE PARTICIPATION WAS CHALLENGING

76 Managers participated in E-STAR:



Managers were **active** throughout the two-year program.



Managers **withdrew** before the end of the two-year program.



Managers **joined** in the latter half of year 1 or later.



Seventy-six Managers participated in at least one component of the E-STAR program but maintaining Managers’ engagement was a challenge. Only one-third of Managers were continuously engaged throughout the two-year implementation period.

2.1 ACTIVE MANAGER PARTICIPATION

Of the 64 Managers that started the E-STAR program at the beginning of year 1, 39 percent ($n=25$) actively participated throughout both school years.



Training Workshop and Action Plans. The training Workshop and Action Plans are foundational to E-STAR program implementation, as they provide a road map for Managers to follow over the two-year implementation period. All active Managers completed the three-day Workshop, and each developed an Action Plan. As seen in [Table 2-2](#), active Managers varied in their engagement in other expected E-STAR activities.



Ongoing Training Opportunities. The E-STAR program includes four activities that provide Managers with additional training: the Manager Orientation, two prerequisite courses, VILTs, and Quarterly Meetings at which Managers share information and resources. Manager engagement in ongoing training was fairly high. More than two-thirds of active Managers attended the Manager Orientation and prerequisite courses. Attendance by active Managers at VILTs and Quarterly Meetings varied over the two years. Participation in VILTs ranged from 52 percent to 84 percent, and participation in Quarterly Meetings ranged from 48 percent to 84 percent.



Mentoring and Delivering Manager's Corners. Active Managers were engaged in mentoring; 80 percent of Managers attended four or more sessions with their Mentor each year. Only 32 percent of active Managers delivered at least eight Manager's Corners in year 1, but 60 percent delivered at least eight lessons in year 2.



Even among actively engaged Managers, participation in E-STAR activities was uneven.

TABLE 2-2. PARTICIPATION AMONG ACTIVE MANAGERS (N=25)

ACTIVITY	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
Training Workshop and Action Plans		
Workshop (either in person or viewed a recording)	25	100%
Developed Action Plan (year 1)	25	100%
Updated Action Plan (year 2)	25	100%
Ongoing Training Opportunities		
Year 1		
Manager Orientation	18	72%
Prerequisite course (Fundamentals of Presentation)	17	68%
Prerequisite course (Effective Goal Setting)	19	76%
Virtual Instructor-Led Training 1	21	84%
Virtual Instructor-Led Training 2	17	68%
Virtual Instructor-Led Training 3	13	52%
Quarterly Meeting 1	15	60%
Quarterly Meeting 2	19	76%
Quarterly Meeting 3	21	84%
Quarterly Meeting 4	16	64%
Year 2		
Virtual Instructor-Led Training 4	18	72%
Virtual Instructor-Led Training 5	15	60%
Virtual Instructor-Led Training 6	14	56%
Quarterly Meeting 5	18	72%
Quarterly Meeting 6	15	60%
Quarterly Meeting 7	12	48%

ACTIVITY	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
Mentoring and Delivering Manager's Corners		
Year 1		
Attended 4 or more Mentor Sessions	20	80%
Delivered 8 or more Manager's Corners	8	32%
Year 2		
Attended 4 or more Mentor Sessions	20	80%
Delivered 8 or more Manager's Corners	15	60%

2.2 WITHDRAWN MANAGER PARTICIPATION

Of the 64 Managers who started the E-STAR program at the beginning of year 1, 61 percent ($n=39$) withdrew at some point during the two years. About half of those Managers ($n=20$, or 51%) were “early withdrawers” who withdrew within the first few months after enrollment; the other half ($n=19$, or 49%) were “late withdrawers” who withdrew more than halfway through year 1 (after January 2022).



Training Workshop and Action Plans. Only 30 percent of early withdrawers attended the Workshop and only one developed an Action Plan in year 1. In contrast, all late withdrawers completed the Workshop and 84 percent developed year 1 Action Plans. None of the early withdrawers, and only 16 percent of late withdrawers, developed/updated year 2 Action Plans.



Ongoing Training Opportunities. Fewer than two-thirds of late withdrawers participated in the Manager Orientation (63%) or prerequisite courses (58% and 63%). Even fewer early withdrawers participated in these training opportunities (45% attended the Orientation and only 30% attended prerequisites). Early withdrawers participated in almost no



All of the Managers who withdrew later (more than halfway through year 1) completed the Workshop and almost all developed Action Plans for year 1. Most Managers who withdrew early (within the first few months after enrollment) did not attend the Workshop or develop an Action Plan for year 1.

VILTs or Quarterly Meetings in year 1 and had withdrawn prior to year 2. Late withdrawers participated in some ongoing training; slightly fewer than half of these Managers attended the first three Quarterly Meetings and as many as 47 percent attended a VILT in year 1. Very few withdrawn Managers participated in E-STAR ongoing training activities in year 2.



Mentoring and Delivering Manager’s Corners. Early withdrawers did not participate in Mentor Sessions or deliver Manager’s Corners to their frontline staff. Late withdrawers did participate in some Mentor Sessions, although only 21 percent completed at least four sessions in year 1 and none completed at least four sessions in year 2. Four late withdrawers (21%) delivered at least eight Manager’s Corners in year 1, though none delivered at least eight Manager’s Corners in year 2.

TABLE 2-3. PARTICIPATION AMONG EARLY (N=20) AND LATE (N=19) WITHDRAWN MANAGERS

ACTIVITY	EARLY WITHDRAWERS		LATE WITHDRAWERS	
	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
Training Workshop and Action Plans				
Workshop (Summer or Fall)	6	30%	19	100%
Developed Action Plan (year 1)	1	5%	16	84%
Updated Action Plan (year 2)	0	0%	3	16%

ACTIVITY	EARLY WITHDRAWERS		LATE WITHDRAWERS	
	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
Ongoing Training Opportunities				
Year 1				
Manager Orientation	9	45%	12	63%
Prerequisite course (Fundamentals of Presentation)	6	30%	11	58%
Prerequisite course (Effective Goal Setting)	6	30%	12	63%
Virtual Instructor-Led Training 1	2	10%	9	47%
Virtual Instructor-Led Training 2	0	0%	7	37%
Virtual Instructor-Led Training 3	0	0%	5	26%
Quarterly Meeting 1	2	10%	8	42%
Quarterly Meeting 2	1	5%	8	42%
Quarterly Meeting 3	0	0%	9	47%
Quarterly Meeting 4	0	0%	2	11%
Year 2				
Virtual Instructor-Led Training 4	NA	NA	1	5%
Virtual Instructor-Led Training 5	NA	NA	0	0%
Virtual Instructor-Led Training 6	NA	NA	0	0%
Quarterly Meeting 5	NA	NA	0	0%

ACTIVITY	EARLY WITHDRAWERS		LATE WITHDRAWERS	
	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
Ongoing Training Opportunities				
Quarterly Meeting 6	NA	NA	0	0%
Quarterly Meeting 7	NA	NA	0	0%
Mentoring and Delivery of Manager's Corners				
Year 1				
Attended 4 or more Mentor Sessions (year 1)	0	0%	4	21%
Delivered 8 or more Manager's Corners (year 1)	0	0%	4	21%
Year 2				
Attended 4 or more Mentor Sessions (year 2)	NA	NA	0	0%
Delivered 8 or more Manager's Corners (year 2)	NA	NA	0	0%

Note: Early withdrawers are Managers who withdrew from E-STAR within the first few months of enrollment. Late withdrawers are Managers who withdrew from E-STAR more than halfway through year 1, or after January 2022.

According to grantee staff, Managers withdrew because they retired, left for another job, or got overwhelmed. Signs before someone would withdraw were a lack of communication with the Mentor.

When E-STAR participants withdrew, grantee staff would try to recruit replacement Manager hires at the school to participate in the E-STAR program, but those Managers usually wanted to focus on their new position instead of grant activities. For participants who stopped engaging, grantee staff would initially reach out and give the participant flexibility to be "on hold" if desired, but eventually would mark them as withdrawn after not hearing from them.

“
And I think it was hard for some people to tell us, "No. I can't do this." I think they just wanted to fade out, maybe, because they didn't want to be quitters, let's say or viewed as somebody that couldn't succeed. But it was easier to just ignore those communications.
”

2.3 LATE-JOINING MANAGER PARTICIPATION

MDE continued to recruit Managers to participate in the E-STAR program well after the program began in Summer 2021. Nine Managers were recruited to replace Managers who had withdrawn or switched schools, and three Managers were recruited to begin implementing the E-STAR program at a school that was new to E-STAR implementation. Seven of the 12 Managers who joined late stayed active for the remainder of the two years of implementation; the other five withdrew before the end of implementation.



Training Workshop and Action Plans. Three-quarters of Managers who joined late viewed a recording of the Workshop. Late-joining Managers were not expected to develop Action Plans for year 1. Although they were expected to develop Action Plans for year 2, only two-thirds of them did.



Ongoing Training Opportunities. None of the Managers who joined late participated in the Manager Orientation or the prerequisite courses. They did not tend to participate in VILTs (participation rates ranged from 8% to 25%) or Quarterly Meetings (participation rates ranged from 8% to 42%).



Mentoring and Delivering Manager's Corners. Fewer than half (42%) of Managers who joined late attended at least four Mentor Sessions in year 2, and only one delivered at least eight Manager's Corners in year 2.

Late joiners missed the opportunity to attend the live virtual training and breakout sessions, had a late start developing relationships with Mentors and other Managers, and also delayed in their Action Plan development and implementation, which might have influenced their engagement with the E-STAR program.



Engagement in the E-STAR program varied for 12 Managers who joined in the latter half of year 1 or early in year 2.

TABLE 2-4. PARTICIPATION AMONG LATE-JOINING MANAGERS

ACTIVITY	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
Training Workshop and Action Plans		
Workshop	9	75%
Developed Action Plan (year 2)	8	67%
Ongoing Training Opportunities		
Year 1		
Manager Orientation	0	0%
Prerequisite course (Fundamentals of Presentation)	0	0%
Prerequisite course (Effective Goal Setting)	0	0%
Virtual Instructor-Led Training 1	1	8%
Virtual Instructor-Led Training 2	1	8%
Virtual Instructor-Led Training 3	2	17%
Quarterly Meeting 1	1	8%
Quarterly Meeting 2	1	8%
Quarterly Meeting 3	1	8%
Quarterly Meeting 4	2	17%
Year 2		
Virtual Instructor-Led Training 4	3	25%
Virtual Instructor-Led Training 5	2	17%
Virtual Instructor-Led Training 6	3	25%
Quarterly Meeting 5	5	42%
Quarterly Meeting 6	4	33%
Quarterly Meeting 7	2	17%

ACTIVITY	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
Mentoring and Delivery of Manager's Corners		
Year 1		
Attended 4 or more Mentor Sessions (year 1)	0	0%
Delivered 8 or more Manager's Corners (year 1)	0	0%
Year 2		
Attended 4 or more Mentor Sessions (year 2)	5	42%
Delivered 8 or more Manager's Corners (year 2)	1	8%

2.4 ACTIVITY PARTICIPATION

The previous sections explored the extent to which three groups of Managers remained engaged in the E-STAR program during the two-year implementation period. In this section, we describe participation in each E-STAR activity by focusing on when each activity was offered and accounting for Managers who might have withdrawn before or joined afterwards. We report how well the activity was attended by Managers who were active at the time the activity was offered and therefore were expected to participate in it. For example, of the 68 Managers who were expected to attend the Manager Orientation, 39 (57%) attended that training opportunity.



Training Workshop and Action Plans. Workshop attendance was fairly high among Managers who were expected to attend (78%). In year 1, 66 percent of Managers developed Action Plans, whereas in year 2, 78 percent of Managers developed or updated their Action Plans.



Participation in E-STAR activities was variable and inconsistent throughout program implementation, suggesting Managers might have had difficulty attending some activities.



Ongoing Training Opportunities. Participation in ongoing training opportunities varied widely. Of those expected to participate:

- Only 57 percent of Managers attended the Manager Orientation.
- Approximately half of Managers participated in the prerequisite courses (50% and 54%).
- Between 43 percent and 68 percent of Managers attended the VILTs.
- Between 41 percent and 65 percent of Managers attended the Quarterly Meetings.

The inconsistency in attendance rates across E-STAR activities, even among Managers actively participating in the E-STAR program at the time of each activity, suggests that Managers encountered barriers to participation. Later chapters of this report will discuss Managers' perceptions of those barriers.



Mentoring and Delivering Manager's Corners. The percentage of Managers participating in at least four Mentor Sessions was higher in year 2 compared to year 1 (69% versus 53%). Fewer than half of

Managers delivered at least eight Manager's Corners each year, and more did so in year 2 than in year 1 (44% versus 27%).



Participation in E-STAR activities by Managers active at the time of the activity varied widely, from 27 percent to 78 percent ([Table 2-5](#)).

TABLE 2-5. PARTICIPATION IN E-STAR ACTIVITIES

ACTIVITY	NUMBER OF MANAGERS EXPECTED TO PARTICIPATE ^a	NUMBER OF MANAGERS WHO PARTICIPATE	PERCENTAGE
Year 1			
Manager Orientation	68	39	57%
Prerequisite course (Fundamentals of Presentation)	68	34	50%
Prerequisite course (Effective Goal Setting)	68	37	54%
Workshop	76	59	78% ^b
Developed Action Plan	68	45	66%
Attended 4 or more Mentor Sessions	45	24	53%
Delivered 8 or more Manager's Corners	45	12	27%
Virtual Instructor-Led Training 1	45	32	71%

- a All Managers enrolled in year 1 were expected to participate in the Manager Orientation, prerequisite courses, and Workshop and to develop a year 1 Action Plan. All Managers enrolled in year 2 were expected to develop/update a year 2 Action Plan. For each year, Managers were expected to attend four or more Mentor Sessions and to deliver eight or more Manager's Corners if they had an Action Plan for that year. Managers were expected to attend VILTs and Quarterly Meetings if they were active in E-STAR in the month of the activity.
- b Of Managers who attended the Workshop (or viewed a recording of the Workshop), most did so in year 1 (53 of the 59); the remaining 6 joined E-STAR after year 1 and attended the workshop (or viewed a recording) in year 2. This attendance rate includes Manager Workshop attendance across both years.

ACTIVITY	NUMBER OF MANAGERS EXPECTED TO PARTICIPATE ^a	NUMBER OF MANAGERS WHO PARTICIPATE ^b	PERCENTAGE
Year 1			
Virtual Instructor-Led Training 2	44	24	55%
Virtual Instructor-Led Training 3	44	20	45%
Quarterly Meeting 1	50	25	50%
Quarterly Meeting 2	45	28	62%
Quarterly Meeting 3	43	30	70%
Quarterly Meeting 4	45	20	44%
Year 2			
Developed/Updated Action Plan (year 2)	46	36	78%
Attended 4 or more Mentor Sessions	36	25	69%
Delivered 8 or more Manager's Corners	36	16	44%
Virtual Instructor-Led Training 4	41	22	54%
Virtual Instructor-Led Training 5	35	17	49%
Virtual Instructor-Led Training 6	32	17	53%
Quarterly Meeting 5	40	23	58%
Quarterly Meeting 6	37	19	51%
Quarterly Meeting 7	34	14	41%

For each activity, we also looked at differences in participation by Manager characteristics that might be expected to affect their E-STAR program engagement. Specifically, we compared the participation rates of Managers with two or fewer years of experience as a Manager versus more than two years, and we compared the participation rates of Managers who oversaw as many as three frontline staff versus more than three staff.

Managers who had more than two years of experience were more likely than those with less experience to have attended four or more Mentor Sessions in the second year (88% versus 55%, $p=.038$), though not in the first year. Otherwise, we did not find any patterns of differences in participation rates.





3

Participant Perceptions of the E-STAR Program

In this chapter, we discuss Managers' and Mentors' overall perceptions of the E-STAR program, including its most useful components, perceived influence on meal quality and student perception of meal quality, and whether they planned to continue participating. We also discuss what Managers liked and disliked about the E-STAR program, what helped them to stay engaged, and what made it challenging to remain engaged. Information about Managers' perceptions or experiences with the E-STAR program comes from interviews. Information about Mentors' perceptions and experiences comes from interviews and focus groups. Forty-one Managers participated in interviews across both years, 36 in year 1 and 29 in year 2, with 24 of them participating in both years. All eight Mentors participated in year 1 focus groups and interviews and in year 2 interviews.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Managers reported the **most useful component of the E-STAR program was the E-STAR resources including the Manager’s Corners, followed by Mentor support and peer relationships** facilitated by the program.
- Managers reported the least useful component of the E-STAR program was the VILTs, though in year 1, nearly half the respondents did not cite anything as “least useful.”
- Managers reported that **the E-STAR program improved meal quality, the amount and quality of training for staff, and student perception of food.**
- About half of Managers continued one or both of their year 1 goals into year 2 while also adding new goals in year 2. **The majority of Managers planned to continue to implement E-STAR beyond the program end**, using its activities and resources or expanding the program to other schools.
- In year 1, Managers reported the **opportunities for professional development were the biggest engagement facilitator**; in year 2, it was **Mentor support**.
- Limited capacity, whether due to workloads, family commitments, illness, or experience, was the **most frequently reported engagement barrier** for Managers.
- Managers also faced barriers **understanding the expectations of E-STAR and completing evaluation and reporting tasks.**



3.1 PARTICIPANT PERCEPTIONS OF THE E-STAR PROGRAM OVERALL

This section presents findings related to Managers' overall perceptions of the E-STAR program. All interviews with Managers included a discussion about what Managers found to be the most and least useful components of the E-STAR program. The interviews ended by asking Managers whether there was anything else they wanted to share about their experience with the E-STAR program. Probes were used as needed to draw the Managers into providing additional information about their perception of E-STAR impacts and their thoughts on continuing with the program.

3.1.1 *Most and Least Useful Components of the E-STAR program*

Twenty-seven Managers and three Mentors said that the resources provided as part of the E-STAR program were its most useful aspect. The most commonly cited resource was the Manager's Corners, mentioned by 10 Managers in year 1 and nine in year 2. All three Mentors in year 1 said the Orientation materials were most useful; two of them in year 2 said the Manager's Corners were the most useful resource. Managers found the subject matter of the Manager's Corners of interest for their schools and specific circumstances. Manager's Corners filled the gaps in their own knowledge and were useful for training less-experienced frontline staff. Managers said the trainings helped frontline staff understand why certain practices are used in school food service; for example, how batch cooking (preparing food in small batches as needed) can help maintain the quality of food throughout a meal service.

Managers' positive views of E-STAR resources and materials also came up during the discussion of their Action Plans. Asked how the E-STAR training Workshop prepared them for developing and implementing their Action Plans, a majority of Managers in year 1 ($n=20$) reported that the materials and resources provided



Managers reported the most useful component of the E-STAR program was the E-STAR resources including the Manager's Corners, followed by Mentor support and peer relationships facilitated by the program.

at the Workshop were beneficial to their success with the E-STAR program. For more information, see Chapter 6: E-Star Action Plans.

Across both years, 16 Managers identified Mentor support as the most useful component of the E-STAR program. Notably, mentorship came up more frequently in year 2 ($n=13$). Of the 13 Managers citing mentorship as most useful, seven explained that the individualized support provided by Mentors and the ability to have their questions directly answered was what made the mentoring most useful. Another two Managers appreciated the accountability and reminders provided by their Mentor. One Manager liked the general encouragement they received from their Mentor. Three of the 13 said their Mentor was the most useful part of the E-STAR program without further explanation.

Managers also identified the community of practice that grew out of participation in the E-STAR program that allowed for connections among members of the school nutrition field as one of the most useful components of the program across the two years ($n=9$). This theme also emerged throughout the various components of the E-STAR program. For example, 15 Managers in year 1 reported peer relationships as the most beneficial part of the E-STAR Workshop, describing how they learned from other Managers during the Workshop and how the breakouts allowed them to build personal relationships. Managers enjoyed participating in small groups, activities, and presentations because it allowed them to get to know their peers and learn from others' experiences. Their appreciation for these peer relationships came up in the VILTs and even in Mentor Sessions.

Across both years, the resources most commonly cited by Managers as least useful were the VILTs ($n=10$) and REDCap ($n=9$). In year 1, nearly half of Managers ($n=16$) said they could not think of a specific aspect of the E-STAR program that was not useful. This was possibly due to the timing of year 1 data collection, not far into



The Mentors. I like the fact that you actually have a one-on-one person you can go to. You can call them. They're available. Who's going to be, like, "Hey, call me if you need anything?" So, that was great. The Mentor was my favorite part.



Managers reported the least useful component of the E-STAR program was the VILTs, though in year 1, nearly half the respondents did not cite anything as "least useful."

the start of the program, before most respondents had much experience with the various program components. Among the Managers in year 1 who specified a least useful component ($n=14$), their response varied: REDCap and technology, the Workshop, the VILTs, scheduling, Manager's Corners, the scorecard,³ and their Mentor. None of these specific examples was reported by more than five Managers.

In year 2, the component most commonly cited as least useful was the VILTs ($n=9$), followed by REDCap ($n=5$) and nothing ($n=4$). In year 2, interviewers probed on the question of the least useful component differently than in year 1, to solicit more specific answers. Of the nine Managers who listed VILTs, two respondents did not offer an explanation; another two said they did not feel strongly about their answer: *"If I have to choose one, I guess I'd probably say the VILTs."* Another two respondents said they were not the right audience for the VILTs; one respondent said it was because they already knew the information. Two respondents were unable to attend and so found them least useful.

3.1.2 Perceived Program Influences on Meal Quality, Training for Frontline Staff, and Student Perception

Thirty-eight Managers and all nine of the Mentors discussed E-STAR program impacts during the interviews across both years. Thirty-five Managers discussed its impact on meal service and quality, and 34 said it had improved both. In year 1, 14 respondents said the E-STAR program improved meal quality; this number increased in year 2 to 34 respondents. One respondent in year 1 was not sure: *"I would hope so, but I don't know how much it's improved yet."* In year 2, asked

³ Scorecards are a tool that food service staff can use to evaluate whether they are following best practices in food preparation or presentation for specific groups of foods; for example, quick breads or fresh produce. A quality scorecard lesson was included in the E-STAR Manager's Corner curriculum.



Managers reported that the E-STAR program improved meal quality, the amount and quality of training for staff, and student perception of food.

whether the E-STAR program affected meal quality, a respondent stated:

Absolutely. Absolutely. Every aspect of it, from just [...] the different menus, to the quality of the food, to thinking outside the box, to getting the kids engaged and involved, like, getting the admin involved, too.

Two Mentors observed that Managers' cooking involved more spices, greater variety, batch cooking methods, fresher produce, and faster food lines.

Twenty-seven Managers reported that the E-STAR program helped increase the amount and quality of training provided to food service staff: *"We get really good responses from people about the trainings. They really — staff like them. They feel like they're good."*

Overall, four Mentors and 19 Managers reported observing the E-STAR program's positive impact on student perception of food and meal quality. In year 1, respondents noted that student participation in taste tests and surveys increased as a result of E-STAR programming, while in year 2 they noted increased school meal participation increased student feedback via student advisory committees, and general enthusiasm for cultural and ethnic meals. Managers reported observing positive feedback on school meals and noticed that students seemed more willing to try new foods. One mentor warned against collecting student feedback too early in the implementation process, before students have time to observe action plan activities.

Lastly, E-STAR provided Managers with a greater sense of agency and self-efficacy, as reported by 13 Managers themselves and observed by four Mentors. This was more commonly noted in year 1 than in year 2, potentially due to the initial shift in perspective of Managers as they began the E-STAR program in realizing they had more of an influence over their kitchens than they previously thought. A Mentor noted that Managers were finding "solutions to things that just seemed so insurmountable." A Manager described their sense of ownership in the kitchen they developed from the E-STAR program.



E-STAR has really helped to enable maybe some more overlooked areas of just the kitchen and the cafeteria to — to be strengthened in ways that without E-STAR, I don't know if I would have had the resources or had the help to prioritize those things.

3.1.3 Sustainability

Thirty-six Managers discussed continuing with the E-STAR program. Thirty-one Managers said they planned to continue to work on their E-STAR goals. In year 1, a participant shared:

Yesterday in our meeting, our quarterly meeting, they talked about in June to get prepared to look at the second year, what kind of Action Plans you want to work on. And so, it's already got the wheels turning and looking into the 2022-23 school year.

Eighteen Managers reported continuing their goals from year 1 into year 2 while also adding two new year 2 goals. A few Managers purchased menu boards or posters in year 1 and kept them up in the cafeteria in year 2. Several Managers continued serving new menu items and using new food preparation and serving methods they learned in year 1. For example, one Manager shared that they would continue to serve meals they had initially served as part of a cultural cuisine goal in year 1:

Our big focus in year 1 was cultural cuisine and ethnic meals, stuff like that. And we found probably seven or eight that we would have never done in the past that we just tested out one time last year. And we've had a lot of buzz to bring them back. So, we're definitely seeing more of a variety of meals now served.

Notably, all 25 Managers asked in year 2 whether they planned to continue working toward their E-STAR goals after the program ended said yes.

Thirteen Managers planned to continue using E-STAR resources in the future, including the Instructor's Manual (otherwise referred to as "the binder"), Manager's Corner trainings, recipes, cooking techniques, SMART goals, material from the VILTs, and their connection with their Mentor.



About half of Managers continued one or both of their year 1 goals into year 2 while also adding new goals in year 2. The majority of Managers planned to continue to implement E-STAR, using its activities and resources or expanding the program to other schools.



All Year 2 Managers Planned to continue action plans after E-STAR ended.

I would definitely keep those training manuals. Because I — we constantly have new staff. So that would be something that you can incorporate into your training of your new staff, so that they do these training manuals.

Managers also reported wanting the E-STAR program to expand to reach other potential participants. Thirteen respondents, including three Mentors, wanted to expand the E-STAR program to other schools and school districts. One Mentor reported that one of her Managers believed that the student advisory groups she formed as part of her Action Plan would be useful at other schools, as well.

Additionally, E-STAR grant staff shared that the subgrant funding allowed for things that will sustain past the grant, such as new stainless-steel equipment, a rearranged walk-in cooler, and an herb station. The grantee also noted that the Manager's Corners trainings are free and online for Managers to continue to deliver lessons to new staff.

3.2 ENGAGEMENT FACILITATORS AND SUCCESSES

In this section, we present our findings on what Managers said kept them engaged in the E-STAR program throughout its two years. (For more information about Mentor engagement facilitators and barriers, see [Section 5.4](#).)

Across both years, the most common engagement facilitators reported by Managers included Mentor support ($n=16$), internal motivation ($n=13$), professional development ($n=11$), the community of practice ($n=10$), reminders ($n=10$), and positive feedback from students ($n=9$).

Six Mentors and 16 Managers said the support of Mentors was an engagement facilitator for the E-STAR program. One Mentor shared a story of convincing one of her Managers to stay in the program:

I've had one mentee that said, "I'm dropping out because I'm overwhelmed. I

ENGAGEMENT FACILITATORS

- Mentor support
- Internal motivation
- Professional development
- Community of practice
- Reminders
- Positive feedback from students

don't have enough time." And so, the more that we talked, I said, "Look, you've already done three-quarters of your goals for this year. All we need to do is to improve on Manager's Corners." And so, once she did that, she's like, "Oh, yeah. I guess I can do that."

Both Mentors ($n=4$) and Managers ($n=13$) discussed internal motivation as a facilitator for E-STAR program participation. Mentors reported that the Managers tried hard to overcome challenges specifically motivated by improving the experiences of students. Managers reported they were motivated to improve the food for students at their schools:

After the first year again, it made me think, "Okay. How can I do this to... reach students? How can I make an impact there? And how can I make an impact with the food that we're serving and how to get the ladies more involved with the E-STAR program than just me?" And so that was good.

Additionally, in an exploratory analysis examining thematic patterns related to (1) years of formal training and credentials, (2) years of managerial experience, and (3) years of school nutrition experience we found that early-career Managers (with less than two years of experience) more frequently reported that a desire to follow through on E-STAR commitments was an engagement facilitator than did Managers with more experience.

Managers in year 1 ($n=11$) reported that E-STAR program support was useful to their professional development. They benefited from E-STAR resources and the opportunity to learn new skills and take ownership of the activities. Managers found that having goals and deadlines and the ability to do things they had never thought of doing before was a facilitator.

MDE staff also reported that School Nutrition Managers were drawn to joining E-STAR because it offered required hours of professional development, a statewide push to improve meal quality, the subgrant funding, and potentially the relationship with the Mentor.



In year 1, Managers reported the opportunities for professional development were the biggest engagement facilitator; while in year 2, the most common facilitator was Mentor support.



E-STAR is an outstanding [program]...because it opens up whole new ways of doing things that you would never think of doing...I thank E-STAR for that — to help me out in so many different ways...I recommend it for any new food director or anybody that is just learning how to do the job.

Additionally, 10 Managers and four Mentors mentioned that reminders helped keep Managers on track with completing their Manager's Corner trainings and making progress toward their Action Plans.

For 10 Managers, the ability to hear what their peers were doing at their schools and to learn from one another was an engagement facilitator:

We all get together and we talk about our Action Plans and then what we've done that maybe other directors would maybe want to put into their program or decide to choose to go with. I have learned a lot too... with different directors on what they did. Overall, it's kind of cool to hear, like, everybody else's, what they do in their schools.

3.3 ENGAGEMENT BARRIERS AND SUGGESTED IMPROVEMENTS

In this section, we discuss Managers' reported barriers in staying engaged in the E-STAR program.

Seven Mentors and 25 Managers cited limited capacity as a barrier to the engagement of Managers in the E-STAR program. Mentors believed that Managers were limited in capacity due to family commitments; health issues; being understaffed or high turnover at their school resulting in greater workloads; having to balance second jobs; limited time in their role as a Manager; or limited experience with using technology such as email, website order forms, and computers. One mentor explained:

I have one that can't even find an email that I've sent her. And I have another — and she didn't know how to order posters, and she didn't know what to do for menu boards. And she didn't even know what kind of computer to purchase.



Limited capacity, whether due to workloads, family commitments, illness, or experience, was the most frequently reported engagement barrier for Managers.

Another Mentor shared: *"I don't think it had anything to do with E-STAR at all. She is working two full-time jobs. Well, two 30-hour-a-week jobs, and I think she's just totally overwhelmed."*

Managers offered examples of capacity limitations that included competing job responsibilities, having a second job, being understaffed, scheduling conflicts, family obligations, health issues, staff turnover, limited experience in their role, and general lack of time.

Retaining people in the program was difficult due to staff shortages, supply chain issues, and Managers having *"more pressing issues."* Grantee staff noted that Managers viewed E-STAR as *"something extra"* and as a lot of work. MDE staff also described manager issues with doing two Action Plan goals at once and having to track progress in REDCap. MDE staff noted that the time commitment for data and evaluation work was a barrier to retaining participants.

E-STAR participants who are in a Food Service Director or Manager role⁴ and have additional supervisory duties compared to E-STAR participants who are Head Cooks could need additional support to improve their capacity and allow them to participate in the E-STAR program more easily. A higher proportion of E-STAR participants who held Director (63%) or Manager (69%) roles cited

ENGAGEMENT BARRIERS

- Limited Manager capacity
- Family commitments, health issues
- Understaffing or high turnover at their school resulting in greater workloads
- Having to balance second jobs
- Limited time in their role as a Manager
- Limited experience with using technology such as email, website order forms, and computers
- COVID-19 (Year 1)
- Communication issues
- Evaluation and reporting issues

⁴ The participants in E-STAR are called School Nutrition Managers ("Managers") throughout this report because they fulfill the duties of the Manager, as described in the Team Nutrition E-STAR Program Training Grant: Fiscal Year 2019 Request for Applications: "School Nutrition Managers have direct responsibility for the day-to-day operations at one or more school buildings. May also be referred to as 'supervisors'." But they could have multiple roles or have a different job title in their district, including that of Food Service Director or Cook. When joining E-STAR, MDE asked participants to complete a baseline survey that asked, "What is your current role? (check all that apply)." Respondents could select from one or more of the following: Director, Manager, Head Cook, or Other. These responses allowed us to look at those in supervisory positions (Directors and Managers) compared to Head Cooks.

lack of capacity as a barrier to Action Plan implementation (compared to 25% of Head Cooks). Our exploratory thematic analysis found that Directors and Managers might have additional competing responsibilities related to kitchen management, people management, and grant management that leave insufficient capacity to take on new roles or tasks. Anecdotally, Directors and Managers spent a lot of time covering when other staff were out.

The theme of not having enough time came up across many different lines of questioning during Manager and Mentor interviews. It was mentioned in relation to the Mentor Orientation, the training Workshop and developing the Action Plan, and the Mentor Sessions and as a reason for Managers not having conducted all eight expected Manager's Corners with their frontline staff.

Several year 1 barriers were rarely or not at all reported in year 2. These included COVID-19, evaluation and reporting issues, and communication issues. Though only eight Managers explicitly named COVID-19 as a barrier, the limited capacity described by both Managers and Mentors could have been related to the pandemic, as year 1 interviews were conducted during the 2021-22 school year.

For Managers, the most commonly reported communication issue was not understanding the full expectations of the program ($n=4$), which included a general lack of clarity around what the E-STAR program was and how to participate. A specific example was not knowing that the E-STAR program was a two-year training program. For example, one Mentor shared:

But just talking to the folks that I had a chance to meet during training, the mentees in my group. I had six who dropped out. And they were clueless as to what this project was about. They — I think their Directors just said, "Attend this training."



Managers also faced barriers understanding the expectations of E-STAR and completing evaluation and reporting tasks.

Other communication-related issues included Managers' technical difficulties with the video format of E-STAR meetings and events, feeling out of the loop when unable to attend meetings, and not understanding how to apply for the subgrant. Managers reported mixed feelings regarding the largely virtual nature of E-STAR activities, noting that they missed in-person communication, but also appreciated the flexibility of the virtual option given their limited time.

Managers reported difficulties with the evaluation and reporting aspects of the E-STAR program, including tracking their progress on their Action Plans and their delivery of Manager's Corners, and administering surveys to frontline staff after presenting a Manager's Corner. The barrier was both the time needed and lack of familiarity with Excel and the tracking system used (REDCap). A Manager described the burden of evaluation and reporting tasks:

Honestly, like, even these evaluations, like, it's another chunk of time. Everything has just been one thing after another. Their REDCap computer program — like, I've taught myself many computer programs — I cannot figure that thing out for anything.

For some Managers, Mentors assisted or took over data entry. One Mentor (who also served as Project Manager) noticed that the data was inconsistently entered across Managers, making it difficult to determine whether or not they met their SMART goals. This meant Mentors had to do a lot of data retrieval. Mentors shared that the late rollout of the tracking process, which occurred after the training Workshop, contributed to Manager tracking difficulties. One Mentor recommended:

Introducing [the tracking process] in the first place — because we didn't get it introduced to [Managers] until probably well into the fall after they had been trained in June and July.



That actual tracking process, I think, has been a big...barrier for those Managers.

—Mentor





4

E-STAR Training Implementation

In this chapter, we discuss how participants reported feeling about the training components (Mentor Orientation, Training Workshop, and VILTs), based on interviews with Managers and Mentors as well as a post-Workshop satisfaction survey: what worked well, barriers encountered, and any suggestions for improvements. We did not ask Managers about the Manager Orientation or the prerequisite courses separate from the training Workshop. Forty-one Managers participated in interviews, 36 in year 1 and 29 in year 2, with 24 of them participating in both years. All eight Mentors participated in year 1 focus groups and interviews and in year 2 interviews. We also describe the extent to which the Mentor Orientation and Manager training Workshop were implemented as intended.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Mentors and Managers expressed similar ideas about what they liked and what they found challenging about the Mentor Orientation and Manager training Workshop they attended: **the materials and resources shared were commonly cited as facilitators and the volume of information presented was commonly cited as a barrier.**
- In addition to the useful resources provided in the Mentor Orientation, Mentors most frequently reported finding **the Orientation helpful because it familiarized them with the goals and objectives of the E STAR program.**
- **Half the Mentors reported feeling unprepared after the Orientation** and that the biggest barriers with the Orientation were the gaps in the training content and the delay in receiving Orientation materials.
- Mentors most frequently suggested improving the Orientation by **providing clearer instructions to Mentors and by improving the use of the materials during the Orientation.**
- **Workshop participants reported high satisfaction** immediately after the Workshop.
- Managers most frequently reported that the Workshop resources and Mentor support during the Workshop were key facilitators to developing their Action Plans.
- **In addition to the large volume of information presented during the Workshop, the most frequently reported barrier for both Managers and Mentors was insufficient time** for building relationships and working on the Action Plans.
- **Mentors most frequently suggested adjusting the pacing or length of the Workshop and allowing more time to develop the Action Plans.** Manager suggestions varied considerably.
- Managers most frequently noted as facilitators that the **topics were relevant and engaging, their structure and timing made it easy to participate, and they were an opportunity for peer learning.**
- Mentors and Managers most frequently reported a **lack of capacity or scheduling issues and VILT content as barriers** to their participation.



The E-STAR training included the Orientation for Mentors and the Manager Orientation, prerequisite courses, training Workshop, and VILTs. Each training component is described in the following sections except for the Manager Orientation and prerequisite courses, described next.

MDE held an Orientation for Managers in early Summer 2021.⁵ The purpose of the Orientation was to ensure that Manager participants understood the requirements of the E-STAR program and to answer their questions. MDE was able to field a number of logistical questions.

Managers also were expected to complete two prerequisite courses, described below. Both were prerecorded, to be completed online before the training Workshop.

FIGURE 4-1. TWO PREREQUISITE COURSES WERE TO PRECEDE THE TRAINING WORKSHOP



⁵ As noted in Chapter 1, the Manager Orientation was developed by MDE and was not part of ICN's original E-STAR program design.

4.1 COMMON PARTICIPANT PERCEPTIONS ACROSS E-STAR TRAINING

Mentors found value in the materials shared as part of the Mentor Orientation, and Managers considered the materials and resources shared as part of the training Workshop as essential to their success with the E-STAR program.

Both Managers and Mentors found that the volume of information presented was challenging. For Managers, the most frequently reported barrier was the volume of information presented during the training Workshop ($n=6$). Managers said that too much information was covered all at once, especially for those new to their role. One Manager, who already worked full-time, said: *“Don’t know so much if it was the Workshop. It was just a lot of information. And it was a little overwhelming.”* Managers reported the information did not stick with them as a result. Another Manager suggested breaking the four-hour Workshop sessions into smaller blocks that were easier to navigate and would allow for more mental breaks.

Three Mentors reported that the volume of information presented during the Mentor Orientation was a barrier, especially over such a short period of time. These three Mentors described the Instructor’s Manual (sometimes referred to as “the binder” by participants) as being a valuable resource, despite it being confusing and difficult to navigate. There were no tabs or dividers to identify different sections, making it difficult to find specific content quickly or easily. One Mentor said that the binder *“could be better organized,”* though the Mentor reported feeling more comfortable navigating it after having been able to *“delve into it.”*



Mentors and Managers expressed similar ideas about what they liked and what they found challenging about the Orientation and Workshop they attended: the materials and resources shared were commonly cited as facilitators and the volume of information presented was commonly cited as a barrier.

4.2 MENTOR ORIENTATION

In the E-STAR design, Mentors are critical to engaging Managers in the training and in implementing their Action Plans. Our review of the Mentor Orientation's agenda and our observation of its presentation confirmed that it provided an overview of the training Workshop curriculum intended for Managers, including an introduction to the breakout activities that Managers would complete during the Workshop. A Mentor was expected to attend the Workshop on the same schedule as their assigned Managers and to lead the Workshop's small-group breakout sessions to begin to establish their Mentor-Managers working relationship. During the Orientation, the Mentors also discussed how they would lead their group of mentee Managers to develop Action Plans during the last day of the Workshop. Finally, Mentors discussed the E-STAR program's expectations for their support of Managers throughout its two-year implementation period. The Orientation also included information about setting up an account in REDCap — the system that MDE, with support from MPHI, used to track Mentor and Manager activities.

All eight Mentors participated in a Mentor Orientation: seven participated in the Orientation delivered in June 2021 and one watched a recording of the Orientation. The Orientation consisted of two 4-hour sessions across two days.

In this section, we discuss what worked well, barriers encountered, and Mentors' suggestions for improvements to the Mentor Orientation.

4.2.1 Facilitators and Successes

The majority of Mentors ($n=5$) reported the Mentor Orientation as a generally positive experience. One said it prepared them for their role. Some Mentors said the Orientation did a good job of defining SMART goals and the objectives of the E-STAR program. The Orientation set their expectations going forward into the training Workshop for Managers.

Three Mentors described the Orientation as an opportunity to understand their role in helping Managers achieve E-STAR objectives and providing them support. Three Mentors said the Mentor Orientation clarified their responsibilities as Mentors, as well as practices to ensure their mentorship would be effective and supportive.

I think it was well done. They really stressed about what kind of things do you do as a Mentor. What are you supposed to do as a Mentor? How do you approach it? And we talked about things like being a good listener and coaching, trying to help people along.

One Mentor reported the Orientation prepared them to help Managers to “[focus] on their goals” and to identify solutions for potential challenges their Managers might face during developing or implementing their Action Plans.

Despite the Orientation being held virtually, three Mentors said the ICN trainers were able to cultivate a positive and open learning environment. One Mentor said directly that “[the ICN trainers] leading the trainings did a great job.” Another Mentor said the Orientation was “well organized” and “thought out” even though it took place online. Overall, comments of these three Mentors highlighted the importance of having knowledgeable and friendly trainers leading the Orientation.



In addition to the useful resources provided in the Mentor Orientation, Mentors most frequently reported finding the Orientation helpful because it familiarized them with the goals and objectives of the E-STAR program.



I think just going over the SMART goals really helped solidify what the goals were going to be and what [Managers] needed to do in the session in terms of developing their SMART goals. You know, I kept going back to that sheet during the training Workshop, as well as when I did the — prerequisite course, — and also during the actual Orientation. I think that was really helpful. It set the framework of where to go.

4.2.2 Barriers

The most frequent barrier noted by Mentors was a gap in training content ($n=7$). Mentors said that details on next steps, REDCap, the Mentor role in Workshop breakouts and presentations, and goal setting should have been more thoroughly covered during their Orientation. The majority of Mentors ($n=5$) reported not being clear on what was expected of them when breaking Managers into small groups during the Workshop. One said they were confused about what they were supposed to present during the breakout groups. Another Mentor was unsure of the timeline and goal-setting process for the Workshop. One Mentor said they were notified via email that Managers would enter their goals into REDCap but was confused on the instructions and goal-setting process. This same Mentor reported that during the Orientation they felt like they understood the process, but then during the Workshop they were confused again and felt that they were *“kind of backpedaling sometimes.”*

A majority of Mentors ($n=5$) noted how the virtual nature of the Orientation had inherent challenges affecting their ability to fully digest and understand the information being presented to them. One Mentor said they were a *“more effective learner in person than [on] computers,”* a sentiment also expressed by the other four Mentors. Others simply noted that the Orientation would simply be *“different”* if it were held in person.

Finally, three Mentors said they received binders too late to review and familiarize themselves with the content before the Orientation. One Mentor said they received the binder only two days prior to the Orientation; another said they did not review the binder prior to the Orientation. The third Mentor highlighted the importance of requiring Mentors to review the binder prior to the Orientation to ensure they were able to effectively follow review of the program by the trainers.



Half the Mentors reported feeling unprepared after the Orientation and that the biggest barriers with the Orientation were the gaps in the training content and the delay in receiving Orientation materials.



I just know that I would have been so much better prepared if we would have gotten this binder two months ahead of time instead of two days ahead of time.

4.2.3 Suggested Improvements

Half the Mentors ($n=4$) in focus groups suggested that the E-STAR program provide clearer instructions during the Orientation. Specifically, they said directions for the Workshop breakout group were unclear. Three Mentors suggested either an outline or script of what they were to discuss, so they could more confidently lead their breakout groups.

Half the Mentors ($n=4$) in focus groups discussed suggestions they had to improve the use of materials at the Orientation. A few Mentors ($n=3$) said they should have received their binders a month or two in advance, rather than a few days before. Then they would have had time to familiarize themselves with topics ahead of the Orientation and training Workshop and organize their binders ahead of time. Another Mentor said the binder should have come organized with tabs or sticky notes so they could more easily sort through it.

4.3 E-STAR TRAINING WORKSHOP

In this section, we first describe the E-STAR training Workshop for Managers, detailing the components included and the topics covered, followed by a brief discussion of how closely the training was delivered as planned. Four subsections discuss participants' initial post-workshop impressions, what worked well during the Workshop, barriers encountered during the Workshop, and participants' suggestions for improvements. Initial post-workshop impressions are based on data from the ICN satisfaction survey. Manager and Mentor interviews provided information on what worked, barriers, and suggested improvements.

ICN delivered the three-day virtual Workshop (four hours on each day) four times to groups of Managers during Summer 2021. Due to COVID-19, ICN changed the format of the Workshop from the original 2.5 day in-person training to a virtual, three half-days training.



Mentors most frequently suggested improving the Orientation by providing clearer instructions to Mentors and by improving the use of the materials during the Orientation.



There were a ton of positives. The Institute did a marvelous job of presenting something that was supposed to be twice as long in person.
-Mentor

Managers attended the Workshop with the goal of implementing the E-STAR program in their schools for the 2021–22 and 2022–23 school years. Managers who joined the E-STAR program after Summer 2021 were able to watch a recording of the training Workshop in Fall 2021 or Winter 2022. The recording did not include the breakout sessions. After watching the training, Managers met with their Mentor and developed their Action Plans.

The first two days of each Workshop delivered highly scripted lessons in three content areas:

- 1. Training and Facilitation** — Managers learned to identify and recognize the skills of an effective instructor/facilitator and how to apply the effective training and facilitation techniques when they trained their frontline staff.
- 2. SMART Goals and Action Plans** — Managers learned the components of a SMART goal and how to develop SMART goals and an associated Action Plan for achieving the goals.
- 3. Practical Skills for Quality Meals** — Managers learned culinary skills and preparation techniques as well as presentation skills to use when training their frontline staff.

During these first two days, ICN instructors delivered 12 lessons across the three content areas. Many lessons included breakout groups, during which Managers completed an activity or engaged in a small-group discussion. These breakout groups were each led by a Mentor, and Managers attended the breakout group that was led by the Mentor they were paired with for the two-year E-STAR implementation period.

The third day of the workshop consisted of two structured, but unscripted activities:

- 1. SMART Goal and Action Plan Development** — Managers each developed two SMART goals and an associated Action Plan, one goal related to improving meal quality and one goal related to improving student perception of meal quality.⁶
- 2. Practice delivering a Manager's Corner** — Managers selected one of the Manager's Corner trainings and presented it to their peers, who provided feedback.

On this third day, each Mentor led a small group usually comprising the Managers with whom they would be working over the next two years implementing the E-STAR program. Mentors supported Managers while they formulated their SMART goals and Action Plan and helped them practice delivering a Manager's Corner training and providing feedback.

On this third day, each Mentor led a small group usually comprising the Managers with whom they would be working over the next two years implementing the E-STAR program. Mentors supported Managers while they formulated their SMART goals and Action Plans and helped them practice delivering a Manager's Corner training and providing feedback.

6 To facilitate the development of SMART goals, the E-STAR Workshop training materials included a suggested list of strategies and activities that were specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound. For each goal, Managers could choose from three strategies and nine activities; the combination of a strategy and activity formed the SMART goal. The complete set of options is included in Appendix C: Framework for Action Plans. Managers could also choose to articulate their own activity.

The three-day Workshop was largely delivered consistently each time. Although the duration of some lessons deviated from what was planned, the planned content was covered during the vast majority of lessons. The instructors and Mentors kept Managers engaged by making the script their own without deviating substantially from the content planned in the Instructor's Manual. They also employed a variety of training approaches (lecture, polls, discussion, paper/pencil activities, videos, and hands-on activities), in different combinations, giving Managers different opportunities to engage with and learn the material.

Each Manager attending the Workshop successfully drafted an Action Plan that included two SMART goals and articulated strategies and activities they would complete to achieve their goals. Finally, Managers were able to frequently engage with their Mentor, setting the stage for an effective working relationship over the next two years as the Managers implemented the E-STAR program in their schools.

4.3.1 Initial E-STAR Post-Workshop Impressions

At each Summer 2021 Workshop, ICN administered an anonymous satisfaction survey to Workshop attendees on the final day. The post-Workshop survey included 15 questions asking respondents to what extent they agreed with various statements expressing satisfaction with different aspects of the Workshop, on a scale from 1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree. Abt created a composite score for each respondent by averaging the respondent's answers to the 15 items. Overall, respondents rated the Workshop as meeting if not exceeding their expectations, as reflected in an average composite score across respondents of 4.77.

Average workshop
satisfaction score

4.77/5



Workshop participants reported high satisfaction immediately after the Workshop.

All respondents agreed that the objectives were clearly presented; questions were answered adequately by the trainers; and Workshop activities helped them to understand the content, increasing their knowledge and skills in the related topic areas. Furthermore, most respondents reported that immediately after the Workshop, they felt prepared to implement the Action Plans they had developed.

Respondents frequently reported that the Workshop being virtual and the support of their supervisors for their attending the training both made it easier for them to attend. However, a few respondents reported that the three-day duration of the Workshop and technological challenges made attending more difficult.

The sections below describe Managers' perceptions of the Workshop several months later, during interviews conducted in Spring 2022, after they had the opportunity to apply what they had learned in the Workshop in their schools.

4.3.2 Facilitators and Successes

During the Workshop, Managers set SMART goals and created their Action Plans, primarily in group settings with their Mentor's guidance. Approximately half of Managers ($n=20$) and a few Mentors ($n=3$) reported the resources shared during the Workshop were helpful in Action Plan development. These resources included the binder, training scorecards, training videos, sites to order signage, the ICN website, and tips from chef demonstrations. These resources both inspired ideas for goals and, in some circumstances, demonstrated how Managers could go about achieving those goals.

Managers ($n=15$) also reported as useful their Mentor's guidance and support during the Workshop. Some Managers reported their Mentors reviewed their individual goals one-on-one:

My Mentor was able to critique my Action Plan and my goals and able to put it up



Managers most frequently reported that the Workshop resources and Mentor support during the Workshop were key facilitators to developing their Action Plans.

to give me — I needed more detail, I didn't have that much detailed information, I was just, like, straight to the point, but what that means is that she was able to critique it, and we were able to put that Action Plan and goals together.

Managers appreciated that their Mentor was present at the Workshop and said the one-on-one time with their Mentor was specifically beneficial. Mentors assisted with goal setting, answered questions, and guided Managers through activities. Some Managers ($n=12$) enjoyed the peer-learning and group setting for learning about their fellow Managers' various struggles, successes, and circumstances. Group discussions served as brainstorming sessions for Managers to begin thinking about their goals.

Some Managers ($n=13$) and half of the Mentors ($n=4$) found the way the Workshop approached and organized Action Plan development to be useful. They reported that the Action Plan was clearly explained and that ICN staff were able to provide clear goal-writing instructions. Two Mentors appreciated the MDE-developed framework for Action Plans: a drop-down menu tool for goal setting, which provided structure and helped them guide their Managers through Action Plan development.

4.3.3 Barriers

The most common barrier reported by Mentors was a lack of time in the Workshop to build a relationship with their mentee Managers and to develop Action Plans ($n=5$). Mentors strongly valued breakout session time during the Workshop, when Managers could get to know one another, and the Mentor could build a relationship with each of them. One Mentor said seven minutes was not nearly enough time for each person to introduce themselves; another suggested everyone submit biographies beforehand if the Workshop could not allocate more time to introductions:



In addition to the large volume of information presented during the Workshop, the most frequently reported barrier for both Managers and Mentors was insufficient time for building relationships and working on the Action Plans.



Having more time in advance to get to know your mentees, to help support them in the development of the Action Plan, and understand where they're coming from, and what level they're at.

A few Mentors ($n=2$) also said they needed more time to discuss the goals their Managers were placing in their Action Plans to make sure the goals were doable and to troubleshoot technical difficulties entering goals into REDCap:

I think there should have been more time for the Mentors and the mentees to interact. The time was limited that we had, and we tried to do too much in those small-group breakout sessions that — it didn't give us time to really establish some things that we needed to establish.

Another Mentor reported finding it much more difficult to build relationships virtually than in person, especially when trying to navigate technical difficulties that arose during the Workshop.

Managers and Mentors also shared frustrations surrounding Action Plan development during the Workshop, with some offering solutions to these barriers. Most Mentors ($n=7$) found time constraints limiting. They wanted to know each of their Managers' individual circumstances, which would have better equipped them to guide their Managers in Action Plan development. More time also was needed to explain SMART goals. Two Mentors and four Managers struggled to understand and construct SMART goals in the time allotted.

Finally, both Managers and Mentors said the content wasn't engaging for the range of experience Managers had. Some topics were too basic for veteran Managers, whereas newer Managers felt lost.

4.3.4 Suggested Improvements

Some Mentors and Managers offered suggestions for what would have helped them feel more prepared to implement the E-STAR program. Half of Mentors ($n=4$) suggested adjusting the length or pace of the Workshop, allowing more time for preparing for the Workshop, and extending the sessions. Three Mentors said



Mentors most frequently suggested adjusting the pacing or length of the Workshop and allowing more time to develop the Action Plans. Manager suggestions varied considerably.

more time could be spent thinking through and putting together the Action Plans. Managers agreed that the Workshop could be longer, with more time allocated to Action Plans and relationship building in small-group sessions. Mentors suggested meeting before the Workshop or submitting biographies beforehand so they could better use their time during the Action Plan session. Similarly, some Managers ($n=5$) also wanted more time during the Workshop to develop their Action Plan and time before the Workshop to prepare for goal setting.

Both Mentors and Managers said the binder could have been better organized with tabs so they could easily navigate its different sections and prepare for the Workshop. Managers and Mentors found instructions for REDCap, SMART goals, and Manager's Corners to be insufficient. They also emphasized that topics should have been covered with examples and that there should be ample in-person practice during the Workshop.

Attendees needed technical assistance navigating Zoom and possibly some instructions on how to troubleshoot difficulties. Overall, in-person Workshops were preferred.

4.4 VIRTUAL INSTRUCTOR-LED TRAININGS (VILTS)

In this section, we discuss facilitators and barriers related to the VILTs, as discussed during Manager interviews. Each school year, Managers were offered three VILTs conducted by ICN instructors. As noted in Chapter 2: Participation and Engagement (Tables 2-2, 2-3, and 2-4), for each group of Managers (Active, Withdrawn, Late-Joining), attendance dropped considerably from the first offering until the final one in each year. Managers had mixed feelings about the VILTs. Some Managers said the VILT topics were relevant and engaging; others found them irrelevant. The virtual format made it easier to attend the trainings, but Managers still had scheduling or staffing issues that caused them not to attend.



Managers most frequently noted as VILT facilitators that the topics were relevant and engaging, their structure and timing made it easy to participate, and they were an opportunity for peer learning.

4.4.1 Facilitators and Successes

A majority of Managers ($n=25$) found the subject matter of the VILTs of interest for their schools and specific circumstances. For example, some Managers had as an Action Plan goal to add culturally diverse meals to their menus, and they found the “Latin American Flavor” VILT was helpful in providing recipes toward that goal. Others said the VILTs helped them address special dietary needs of some of their students:

It was helpful because last year I had a girl who was allergic to dairy, eggs, soy, gluten, nuts, like, everything. And I really don't know. It was good having the ideas and stuff of what I could do instead of feeding them the same thing every single day.

Training topics noted as interesting and engaging included menu and meal planning ($n=8$), marketing tools ($n=4$), and knowing your customer ($n=1$).

Twenty-one Managers reported appreciating the structure of the VILTs, noting that they were easy to attend and participate in discussions. Managers found it easy to log onto the training's Zoom meeting using their computer or mobile phone. They were able to join either from their school or at home, allowing Managers who had not finished their workday to attend. Asked how easy it was to access the technology for the VILTs, one Manager responded, *“Oh, it was very easy for me. And I'm not a computer person.”*

Managers ($n=18$) also said the timing of the VILTs was convenient. The 2 p.m. start time meant many Managers had already finished lunch service and could join the meeting without having to leave work early or find coverage for work responsibilities.

Fourteen Managers said that peer learning was a major benefit of the VILTs. Generally, they really enjoyed being able to collaborate and learn from their peers during small breakout groups. They valued hearing from Managers with differing circumstances and/or resources to gain inspiration. Others felt camaraderie with those who were facing similar challenges such as supply chain issues. They also enjoyed hearing from those who had similar goals.



And it's kind of nice to hear what other Directors' struggles have been so I don't feel like I'm just kind of a ship out here by myself. To hear that, no, no, everybody's having that same struggle, or this is what we did to help overcome it. And you know, again, just putting some new thoughts and ideas in my head about different ways to approach things.

4.4.2 Barriers

A majority of Managers ($n=24$) reported a lack of capacity or scheduling issues, generally referring to events happening outside of the E-STAR program, as a barrier to attending VILTs. Capacity constraints included being short-staffed in their kitchens, needing to prioritize their food service responsibilities over the VILTs, and other external commitments such as meetings and family responsibilities.

In the kitchen...having two people is super full staff. There's been weeks where it's just been me and one girl. So sometimes it just wasn't possible to just leave her right at the end of lunch service.

Some Managers ($n=18$) found topics irrelevant to their needs or school situation. In year 1, five said that topics were too rudimentary, better suited to Managers new to their position with little experience. One Manager did not see how VILTs were tied to E-STAR or their Action Plan. Three other Managers operated in alternative settings, such as a residential facility, or with limited resources, where the topics did not apply. Some ($n=5$) said they were not implementing what they had learned in the VILTs, they did not find the information engaging or motivating, or VILTs were not helpful in training their staff.

In year 2, five Managers said that the material did not relate to their SMART goals, three said the VILT topics covered material they already knew, two said the topics were not relevant to the age groups of the students they served, and two said the topics were more relevant to other professions.

A lot of the food that we discussed is — I'm not sure that the elementary kids would even like to eat, but we're thinking about new ideas here and maybe trying to incorporate maybe one of them a month.

The drop-off in participation after the first VILT (described in Sections 2.1, 2.2, and 2.3) could reflect both the difficulties of scheduling and the level of interest in the topic being presented.



Managers most frequently reported a lack of capacity or scheduling issues, and VILT content as barriers to their participation.





5

E-STAR Mentoring

In this chapter, we review the implementation of the mentorship component of the E-STAR program. The chapter begins with a summary of the component's design, as documented in ICN's Mentor Training Manual and presented to Mentors during their Orientation (see Section 4.2). Subsequent sections rely primarily on the qualitative data collected from interviews with Mentors and Managers to describe the implementation of the mentoring component. Forty-one Managers participated in interviews (36 in year 1 and 29 in year 2, with 24 in both years). All eight Mentors participated in year 1 focus groups and interviews and in year 2 interviews.

We begin with a discussion of how respondents described the Mentor role, including the objectives of mentorship and Mentors' typical activities. As appropriate, we compare respondents' own articulation of the Mentor role against ICN's design. The chapter continues with a focus on the Mentor Sessions, including a description of the structure and content of the sessions and the extent to which Managers participated in them. The chapter concludes with perspectives on facilitators of and barriers to implementing the mentorship component of E-STAR.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Mentors identified **two types of objectives: (1) supporting Managers' completion of E-STAR program components to attain their Action Plan goals and (2) encouraging Managers' development beyond the E-STAR program.**
- According to both Mentors and Managers, **mentoring activities were typically tied to the development and implementation of Managers' Action Plans.**
- After Action Plan support, the mentorship activities most commonly cited by Mentors included tracking Managers' progress with implementation and preparing for Mentor Sessions.
- About half of Managers attended the expected number of Mentor Sessions or more in year 1, and about 70 percent did so in year 2. In both years, almost all Managers attended at least one session.
- Mentor Sessions varied in structure, mode, and frequency, but **Mentors typically held more sessions than required by E-STAR guidelines**, often via impromptu communications.
- The primary topics covered in Mentor Sessions were progress with Action Plans, support for subgrants, addressing challenges with Action Plan implementation, and support for Manager's Corners.
- According to both Mentors and Managers, **successful Mentors relied on their own substantial professional experience** and building trusting relationships with Managers.
- Mentors and Managers recognized the **value of holding in-person Mentor Sessions.**
- About half of Managers report that they **appreciate their Mentors' flexibility** and availability for support.
- Mentors often cited **Managers' lack of capacity** to engage with the E STAR program, **limited availability** for Mentor Sessions, **limited professional experience, and unresponsiveness to Mentor communications as barriers** to successful mentorship.
- Some Mentors found that E STAR's **technology requirements posed a barrier to mentorship activities.** However, Mentors rarely cited general barriers associated with E STAR's design, curriculum, or implementation.



5.1 THE MENTORING ROLE: AS DESIGNED

To carry out mentoring activities, the E-STAR program's design intends for States to hire "individuals with school nutrition supervisory experience (such as a School Nutrition Director) with operating the [National School Lunch Program] to serve as Mentors" (Hall-Campbell, 2021b, 2).

Following the E-STAR training Workshop, in which Mentors were expected to participate, Mentors were expected to follow up with mentee Managers assigned to them on selection of the Managers' goals and development of their Action Plans. Over the course of the two-year implementation period, Mentors were expected to continue to follow up with Managers on implementation of their Action Plans and to provide, at minimum, eight Mentor Sessions, either virtually or in person. During those sessions, Mentor and Manager were to discuss progress on goals and the Action Plan, work through any challenges, strategize on delivering frontline staff trainings, and share successes. Finally, Mentors were responsible for reporting on their mentees' progress and activities through REDCap, including progress with Action Plans, achievements, and completion of frontline staff trainings.

E-STAR's training also provided Mentors with guidance on how they should approach the role and on models of mentorship they should try to exemplify. Mentors were told that they should offer objective support and a "listening ear" to Managers. In doing so, Mentors would hear their mentees' issues, provide guidance on resolving those issues, and encourage mentees to commit to E-STAR's objectives.

The training advised Mentors to consider taking on the following kinds of roles:

- **Coach/Advisor** — giving guidance, sharing ideas, and providing feedback.
- **Source of Encouragement/Support** — acting as a sounding board and supporting personal issues.
- **Resource Person** — identifying resources for personal development and professional growth.
- **Champion** — advocating for mentees and increasing their visibility.
- **Devil's Advocate** — being critical to help mentees think through important decisions.

Though not stated directly, ICN's training materials imply that the mentorship component could benefit Managers in ways that extend beyond the narrowly defined objectives of the E-STAR program: that, Mentors should be prepared to *"coach and mentor Managers...on managing and operating quality school meal programs"* (Hall-Campbell, 2021b, 1). That description of mentorship allows for coaching and mentoring on topics that could extend beyond the E-STAR program.

5.2 THE MENTORING ROLE: AS IMPLEMENTED

For the Mentor role, MDE recruited retired Food Service Directors with substantial experience and a history of excellence in Team Nutrition. MDE distributed an informational flyer through various partner organizations and outreach channels across Michigan, inviting interested Food Service Directors to contact the Department. Most Mentors were recruited via snowball sampling, whereby a recruited Mentor would identify other retired Food Service Directors who might be appropriate for the mentorship role. The eight Mentors selected for the role had, on average, 33 active years in school food service. MDE compensated Mentors for their work. Based on assumptions for Mentors' hourly

pay, MDE's budget per Mentor allowed for a total of 220 hours of mentoring services over no more than 10 mentees plus travel funds to support four visits to each School Food Authority.

In this section, we report on the implementation of E-STAR's mentoring component, relying primarily on findings from discussions with Mentors and Managers. Forty-one Managers participated in interviews (36 in year 1 and 29 in year 2, with 24 in both years). All eight Mentors participated in year 1 focus groups and interviews and in year 2 interviews. The section begins with respondents' accounts of the Mentor role (i.e., goals and activities) and the structure and content of Mentor Sessions. We also review program data on Managers' participation in the mentoring component. The section concludes with a discussion of respondents' perspectives on the facilitators of and barriers to successful mentorship.

5.2.1 Mentorship Objectives

Interviews with Mentors began with a discussion of their perceptions of their overall objectives for E-STAR mentorship, including their thoughts on their role and what they hoped Managers would get out of the mentorship process.

A majority of Mentors ($n=5$) reported that their mentorship objectives prioritized their general support for Managers' Action Plan goals. Mentors discussed their support for Managers as both process-oriented and outcome-oriented. Process-oriented responses focused on the support Mentors provided during development and implementation of Action Plans. Mentors' outcome-oriented responses focused on their support for Managers toward E-STAR's target outcomes (i.e., meal quality and student perception) or general improvement to Managers' programs.



Mentors identified two types of objectives: (1) supporting Managers' completion of E-STAR program components to attain their Action Plan goals and (2) encouraging Managers' development beyond the E-STAR program.



Well, as a Mentor, I hope to be helpful to the people I'm assigned to mentor and helpful in any way that they need and to also hold their hand sometimes with the goals and the Action Plans that we've laid out together and also to help them in the first place to establish those goals and those objectives and the Action Plans.

It was really to help others become successful and to the goals that they had laid out so wonderfully.... When I was a Food Service Director, was always improving student perception and meal quality. That's just kind of a central point and goal of everything we do.... To help others achieve that was really excellent.

Consistent with the E-STAR program's logic model ([Figure 1-1](#)), one Mentor suggested this kind of outcome-oriented mentorship objective follows from the process-oriented objectives: *"And you know, the more training they can do with their staff, the better their program will be."*

A majority of Mentors ($n=5$) also reported that their objectives for mentorship extended beyond the E-STAR program. They wanted to prepare their mentee Managers for successful long-term management of their programs. This involved helping Managers with topics relevant to food service generally, such as understanding food service regulations, preparing for audits, and dealing with staff and food shortages.

One Mentor found they had to provide support that extended beyond the E-STAR program because the E-STAR program was being implemented alongside Managers' other school nutrition responsibilities, some of which had to take priority. Before assisting Managers with implementing the E-STAR program, Mentors needed to help their mentees resolve issues with management or operation of their food service programs:

Because of the times we're in, many of the mentees don't want to talk about E-STAR until they've talked about everything else that's right on the forefront, on the big front burner, the fire. So, you have to get that discussed, and you really have to guide them as a Mentor in all ways, so you can talk about the E-STAR grant.... I would have a very difficult time forming relationship[s] with any of them if I really wasn't able to be here, and listen, and help, and guide them always. Because it's not a silo.



As a Mentor — the other goal I hope to provide is to set them up for success. Not just for the two primary goals they are doing in E-STAR, but also for their roles in child nutrition. It's really important for people to have someone to turn to for questions.

5.2.2 Mentorship Activities

All Mentors ($n=8$) reported that their Mentor Sessions and their mentoring activities in general were closely tied to their Managers' Action Plans. Mentors and Managers said that Mentors played some role in the development of Action Plans. Respondents characterized the Mentor role in three different ways: collaborate in helping Managers make goal selections, discuss pros/cons of different goals, and brainstorm ideas.

One Mentor, in particular, played a more prescriptive role by suggesting Managers choose a specific goal that the Mentor considered worthwhile. Another Mentor provided guidance on how to submit goals and reviewed the structure of Action Plans to align with E-STAR requirements, with less input on the content of the Plans and specific goals:

[My Mentor] will just give suggestions if I need anything in the beginning, like when we're writing — when I'm writing the goals and the Action Plan, she will help, like I said before — she'll help give guidelines for how to write them so that it meets the format and stuff that they need.

With regard to Action Plan implementation, Mentors typically followed up on Managers' progress and helped them come up with solutions to challenges with implementation. For example, Mentors helped mentees select items to purchase with subgrant funds. One Manager shared that a Mentor facilitated implementation of a student advisory council by providing survey forms accessible to students to complete:

When I first started doing Student Advisory Committee, I put together this form for the kids to do taste testing. And I don't know what I was thinking, but we got in there and the kindergartners are like, "I don't read" and I'm like, "Oh yeah, that's a problem." So, I mentioned that to [my Mentor], and, boom, the next day...there were kids-friendly survey forms for the kids to fill out that I'm using.



According to both Mentors and Managers, mentoring activities were typically tied to the development and implementation of Managers' Action Plans.



It's a lot of just back and forth discussion on good idea versus bad idea or good implementation against bad implementation. You know, I'm one to bombard with questions in the what-if situations when I'm not comfortable with something, and knowing her background, she was very quick to say, "This is what should work, and this is what definitely won't work."

All Mentors ($n=8$) were involved with the tracking of Managers' progress toward implementing their Action Plan activities, completing SMART goals, and participating in components of the E-STAR program (e.g., holding Manager's Corners). Typically, Mentors took full responsibility over E-STAR's tracking and progress reporting requirements, because most Managers lacked the time or familiarity with the required technologies (e.g., Excel and REDCap). Mentors handled these tasks to support their mentees, and respondents implied that Managers would otherwise track and report on their own progress if they had the capacity to do so.

Most Mentors ($n=7$) highlighted the importance of preparing for each Mentor Session, typically by reviewing their Managers' Action Plans and reviewing the MDE-developed mentoring checklist. Two Mentors said the checklist helped keep them focused on items they needed to go over during sessions. A few Mentors requested written updates from their mentees in advance of Mentor Sessions to strategize and set an agenda for the upcoming meeting.



After Action Plan support, the mentorship activities most commonly cited by Mentors included tracking Managers' progress with implementation and preparing for Mentor Sessions.



After seeing [the Managers] were having a hard time keeping up with [the trackers] monthly, I said, "I'm just going to fill them out. I've already got the original one. You just tell me what you're doing. That way you don't have to get it off your computer, go into REDCap, get it uploaded and everything. And you don't have to worry anything about it." So that's gone really, really well. And they're keeping — we've got track of all of them.

5.2.3 Mentorship Participation

Managers were expected to attend four Mentor Sessions per year (i.e., eight over the two-year E-STAR period). Of the 45 Managers who had developed Action Plans in year 1, 24 (53%) attended four or more Mentor Sessions in year 1 ([Table 2-5](#)). In year 2, 25 (69%) of the 36 Managers with Action Plans attended at least four sessions. In both years, more than 90 percent of Managers attended at least one session. The maximum number of sessions attended by a single Manager was six in year 1 and eight in year 2. The average Manager attended three sessions in year 1 and four sessions in year 2.

5.3 STRUCTURE AND CONTENT OF MENTOR SESSIONS

Though the E-STAR program design requires quarterly Mentor Sessions, a majority of Mentors ($n=6$) reported that they met with mentees more often. One Mentor reported that holding more frequent sessions early in the E-STAR program was helpful for facilitating Managers' engagement with the program.

Beyond the formal Mentor Sessions, all Mentors ($n=8$) and a majority of Managers ($n=27$) reported that they also communicated as needed, to check in on progress or address impromptu questions. This engagement typically happened via email, phone call, or text whenever the Mentor or Manager needed to reach the other. Though Mentors described these communications as impromptu, we cannot confirm whether Mentors reported them as formal Mentor Sessions.⁷

⁷ Like other aspects of the mentoring role, we did not approach the evaluation with a clear definition of what constitutes a Mentor Session. One Mentor informally noted that Mentor Sessions must last at least 30 minutes. We cannot determine the extent to which Mentors truly adhered to that definition when describing their communications with Managers.



About half of Managers attended the expected number of Mentor Sessions or more in year 1, and about 70 percent did so in year 2. In both years, almost all Managers attended at least one session.



Mentor Sessions varied in structure, mode, and frequency, but Mentors typically held more sessions than required by E-STAR guidelines, often via impromptu communications.

Mentors described in-person sessions differently than they did remote sessions. In-person sessions were less frequent, but nearly all Mentors ($n=7$) made at least one visit to observe their Managers' programs and progress with the E-STAR program. Most Mentors ($n=7$) also held some sessions remotely (via video conference or phone). According to one Manager's account, in-person sessions typically lasted at least an hour whereas remote sessions tended to be shorter, lasting less than an hour.

A majority of Managers ($n=29$) reported that their Mentor conducted at least one in-person visit, and several Managers ($n=12$) commented on the value of the in-person approach. In-person sessions afforded Mentors the opportunity to formulate a clearer and deeper understanding of the context in which Managers were implementing their Action Plans. This perspective was particularly important for one Manager who worked in a non-traditional educational setting:

He came to my facility twice, and I thought that was very helpful so that he could see — because a lot of the other people in our group are in schools and I'm in a [facility], like I said. And so him coming here to see what our facility is like and what we were doing helped him to help me with questions that I had, about anything I had about completing the goals that I was supposed to complete.

According to a small number of Managers ($n=2$), an in-person visit also allowed Mentors to provide support for food service management beyond the E-STAR program. One Mentor identified a potential problem with the school's physical space that might have triggered a health inspection issue. Another recognized an opportunity to improve the logistics of moving students through the cafeteria space by looking at the cafeteria's orientation.



Well, she came in person. I think she was here like an hour and a half, and she wanted to come back and schedule some time when it was good for both of us. She wanted to go out to the schools.... She's never short or brushed off or [anything] like that. She made sure that we do have contact. This time is well spent.

Mentors reported some changes to agenda-setting practices for Mentor Sessions between years 1 and 2. In year 1 of the program, Mentors either set a structured agenda of topics to cover during a Mentor Session or allowed Managers to set the session's agenda with their own questions, with neither approach cited as more common than the other. However, in year 2, a few Mentors noted that between year 1 and 2 they made use of the mentoring checklist developed by MDE. They reported that the list helped to structure the sessions, though it is not clear that the checklist significantly changed the typical session's agenda between years.

According to Mentors, the topics covered in a typical session included Managers' progress with Action Plans ($n=8$), support for subgrants ($n=7$), addressing challenges with Action Plan implementation ($n=7$), and support for Manager's Corners ($n=6$). Mentors' support for subgrant implementation included guidance on how to submit applications, appropriate uses of the funds, and how to purchase targeted resources. Between years 1 and 2, we observed some small changes in the topics covered during sessions. From the perspectives of both Mentors and Managers, sessions in year 2 were less likely to cover support for subgrants and refinement of Action Plan goals, perhaps because Managers were more comfortable with both aspects of the program in their second year of participation. As discussed in [Chapter 6: E-STAR Action Plans](#), Managers reported fewer challenges with selecting and developing goals in year 2 and fewer requests for subgrant implementation support, because either they had spent all their subgrant funds in year 1 or they were able to apply lessons learned from year 1 to year 2.



The primary topics covered in Mentoring sessions were:

- progress with Action Plans,
- support for subgrants,
- addressing challenges with Action Plan implementation, and support for Manager's Corners.

5.4 PERSPECTIVES ON SUCCESSFUL MENTORSHIP

Mentors and Managers also shared their perspectives on what worked well and what was challenging about the Mentor role. The sections below highlight key takeaways related to each and, when possible, note any improvements suggested for the E-STAR program.

5.4.1 Facilitators to Successful Mentorship

Most Managers ($n=35$) reported that they appreciated having supportive Mentors with substantial professional experience. Managers cited their Mentors' prior experience as a facilitator to the effective support they provided with respect to a variety of topics, including understanding MDE guidelines, suggestions for spending available grant funds, and ideas for kitchen improvements. Managers appreciated that their Mentors approached their role from a place of understanding and empathy. Half of Mentors ($n=4$) also found that having been in the same role as their mentees and having experience with solving similar problems allowed the Mentors to better assist their Managers.

Nearly all Mentors ($n=7$) said that successful mentorship required building a relationship with their mentees and understanding certain aspects of Managers' personal lives that could affect their engagement with the E-STAR program. A majority of Managers ($n=27$) cited having a positive connection with their Mentor as an important facilitator of E-STAR's mentorship component. Managers valued working with Mentors, whom they reported to be good-natured, personable, honest, and supportive.



According to both Mentors and Managers, successful Mentors relied on their own substantial professional experience and built trusting relationships with Managers.



We've solved problems ourselves in the past, so we have a sort of bag of tricks that we can pull from to make suggestions.... "Do you think this would work? Do you think that would work? Have you thought about this? Have you thought about that?"

One Manager who did not initially have a strong connection with their assigned Mentor switched Mentors and described having a more positive experience, demonstrating the importance of the Mentor-Manager relationship. Though illustrative, this example should not be considered typical. Only a minority of Managers ($n=8$) reported any negative experiences with their Mentors.

[Initial Mentor] was my original Mentor, and I don't — she didn't click well with me. So, there were times where I didn't think that she was doing enough or maybe I wasn't engaging enough with her, but I just wasn't getting what I needed. And I had talked to [New Mentor] and I talked to [MDE Program Manager] and we decided just to switch me out to [New Mentor] and — because, like I said, [My New Mentor's] here with me a lot of times. [My New Mentor's] available to me. [My New Mentor] knows me quite well, and it just worked out better.

Nearly all Mentors ($n=7$) and some Managers ($n=17$) highlighted the value of in-person visits, saying such visits felt “more personal,” encouraged more focused meetings, allowed for observations of nutrition programs in action, and were crucial for understanding a Manager’s context for completion of the E-STAR program.

I think the most important thing is being able to be out in those districts to do that one-on-one, to see their programs, and to be able to see, you know, what they're doing and where they've come [from]. I think that makes far bigger impact than just over the phone or on a Zoom meeting.



I think the Mentor part of it is one of the biggest assets to me that I've taken away from it personally is just having that connection with somebody. I know I can at this point at least reach out with any question at any time about anything regarding school food. And that's important to me because I'm very new to this. I'm still learning and understanding. So, she's awesome. She's just great.



Mentors and Managers recognized the value of holding in-person mentorship sessions.

E-STAR's mentorship component seemed to benefit from Mentors' willingness to be flexible in their scheduling of Mentor Sessions and generally available to support Managers in a way that aligned with Managers' schedules, including timing Mentor Sessions during Managers' quieter times of day or holding sessions at a Manager's school.

She always checks with me to see what my schedule is like. And then she'll compare my schedule to hers...she has never approached me with, "Well, this is what I have available" and try to fit me in hers. She always allow[ed] herself to be fitted into my schedule. So that — I appreciate that a whole lot.

Mentors also reported what kept them engaged in the E-STAR program, including the ability to share expertise ($n=4$), the support of E-STAR program leadership ($n=3$), feedback from Managers ($n=3$), the desire to follow through on the commitment ($n=2$), and the perception of impacts on students ($n=2$). One Mentor commented on how the impact of mentoring on the Managers and the broader impact of the Manager on the community was an engagement facilitator: *"I like to see people flourish and do positive things in this business and just reaching — it reaches people. It changes lives."* Mentors enjoyed being able to share what they had learned in their careers with less-experienced food staff: *"It gives me a little something that I can pass on, maybe some of my knowledge as a Director for 25 years."*

5.4.2 Barriers to Successful Mentorship

Every Mentor reported that at least some of their mentees struggled with a lack of capacity to engage with mentorship activities, which they attributed to staffing shortages or other work-related obligations that took priority, such as State reviews of their food service programs. Relatedly, all Mentors noted that they faced some barriers with scheduling Mentor Sessions with Managers, sometimes due to the Managers' other work obligations (e.g., filling in for staff) but often



About half of Managers reported that they appreciated their Mentors' flexibility and availability for support.



Mentors often cited Managers' lack of capacity to engage with the E-STAR program, limited availability for Mentor Sessions, limited professional experience, and unresponsiveness to Mentor communications as barriers to successful mentorship.

due to personal circumstances or unanticipated events (e.g., weather or family obligations). One Mentor had to shift her communication with a Manager to the Manager's alternative email address after the Manager complained that her primary email inbox was inundated with too many messages.

But with one of my [Managers], it's often a — not a good day for a mentoring session. "Oh, I've got to go pick up my kids. Oh, I've got to go to my second job. Oh, this isn't good time for us to talk." This is not the primary focus of their day to do E-STAR.

Accounts from Managers lend additional support to Mentors' perceived barriers. About half of Managers identified their own scheduling issues ($n=21$) and lack of capacity ($n=18$) as barriers to engaging in mentorship activities.

Mentors reported successful mentorship required tailoring the mentoring activities to the needs of individual Managers, but they framed the variation across Managers as a barrier to that mentorship. Nearly every Mentor ($n=7$) found that some of their Managers needed more intensive support due to a lack of professional experience. On the need to tailor their mentorship, one Mentor noted, *"I do not believe the United States Department of Agriculture realized that was going to have to be a part of this grant."* Another discussed how she had to engage her Managers' Food Service Director to provide additional support to a less-experienced Manager.

Relative to year 1 of E-STAR program implementation, Mentors were less likely to identify Managers' lack of experience as a barrier in year 2. Though we cannot definitively determine why this was the case, it is possible that Mentors perceived their mentees as more experienced after working with them for a year and observing their growth through participation in the E-STAR program.



Well, they're all different. It depends on the skills of that Manager. I have two that are, like, they're really getting trained to step up to be a Director. So those meetings are very productive...where others are just lost little ducks in the sea. And then I have reached out to the Director. So now I'm combining — the Director will sit in on one of the Manager's sessions. They just know that their Manager needs a little more help.

Every Mentor ($n=8$) found that at least one of their mentee Managers generally lacked investment in E-STAR's mentorship component. In most cases ($n=7$), such Managers were unresponsive or communicated insufficiently with their Mentor. Mentors reported that when Managers did not respond to emails or share updates on their progress, Mentors found it frustrating and disheartening. These Managers required extra reminders from Mentors and generally increased Mentors' workload. One Mentor suggested that the Food and Nutrition Service could set clearer expectations for Managers' participation in the E-STAR program:

I will tell you, that's what I've struggled with the most. I call two of them my wayward children. I do not hear from them.... So maybe if [FNS] could give some tips on what's the best way to work with mentees. Maybe in the beginning we establish set meeting dates or set times that we meet with them, rather than being loosey-goosey kind of thing. I guess that would be my suggestion — is that there be a protocol for when Mentors and mentees need to meet.

The E-STAR program, as implemented by MDE during the COVID-19 pandemic, depended on Managers' use of technology tools, such as REDCap and videoconferencing platforms. A majority of Mentors ($n=6$) also identified some barriers when working with Managers who were less comfortable using those tools. Some Managers struggled with using REDCap and submitting subgrant applications online. As noted above, Mentors opted to complete activities such as updating progress trackers and REDCap on those Managers' behalf.

Mentors rarely reported barriers associated with the E-STAR program's design, curriculum, or implementation. As noted above, one Mentor did ask for clearer guidance or more detailed protocols around when to meet with Managers. Three Mentors reported frustration with insufficient funds allocated for mentoring work, particularly for labor hours and travel.



Some Mentors found that E-STAR's technology requirements posed a barrier to mentorship activities. However, Mentors rarely cited general barriers associated with E-STAR's design, curriculum, or implementation.

I just wish I could be in their buildings more. You know, the funds...and we had all said that in the very beginning, that they know that they didn't allow enough money of what we really needed. You know, that money probably could have been doubled — in the dollar amount that was set aside for each Mentor to be able to do the travel and to be able to spend, you know, the time.

Some Mentors also discussed barriers that prevented them from fully engaging in E-STAR, including personal life challenges ($n=3$), which included health issues in their family. Other barriers included frustration with the requirements to track Managers' participation in the E-STAR program to support evaluation of the program ($n=1$), difficulty scheduling E-STAR commitments as a retiree ($n=1$), and frustrations with the Managers' lack of commitment to the E-STAR program ($n=1$).





6

E-STAR Action Plans

In this chapter, we detail Action Plan content and describe Managers' experiences developing and implementing their Action Plans in Michigan, what worked well, and barriers encountered. Action Plan content descriptions come from interview data and from program data provided by MPHI, including Action Plan documents from all 45 schools that submitted them in year 1 and 36 schools that submitted them in year 2. Information on facilitators and barriers comes from interviews with Managers and Mentors. Forty-one Managers participated in interviews, 36 in year 1 and 29 in year 2, with 24 of them participating in both years. All eight Mentors participated in year 1 focus groups and interviews and in year 2 interviews.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Managers' SMART goals for improving meal quality were **most often aimed at increasing menu variety and choices for students**. Their SMART goals for improving student perception were **most often aimed at improving the school environment**.
- In their Action Plans, Managers proposed activities to be conducted more frequently to improve school meal quality than to improve student perception.
- Managers most **often reported Mentor and Director support** as a facilitator of their Action Plan development.
- Managers and Mentors most frequently reported **buy-in to the E-STAR program from frontline staff, other school staff, and Food Service Directors** as a facilitator of Action Plan implementation.
- A majority of Managers reported that **support from their Mentors** helped them implement their Action Plans.
- In year 1, the majority of Managers reported making **changes to their Action Plans to facilitate continued implementation and engagement**; this was less common in year 2.
- Managers **most commonly reported lack of capacity**, including both lack of staff and lack of time, as a barrier to implementing their Action Plans.
- Several Managers and **the majority of Mentors reported navigating the subgrant as a barrier** to implementation.
- Several Managers reported that **getting the food and equipment they needed was challenging due to supply issues**, especially in year 1.
- **Lack of buy-in from frontline staff, other school staff, and Directors** posed a barrier to Action Plan implementation for some Managers.
- In year 1, **pandemic-related restrictions made it harder** for Managers to implement their Action Plans.



6.1 CONTENT OF THE ACTION PLANS

In this section, we discuss Action Plan content, including the types of goals Managers selected, the activities for each goal selected, and how goals were measured, using data from MPHI. Throughout these descriptions, we also provide narrative examples Managers provided during the interviews when discussing how they implemented their goals. Managers created Action Plans to create a roadmap for implementing the E-STAR program in their schools using an MDE-developed scaffolded framework and process provided during the training Workshop (See [Appendix C: Framework for Action Plans](#)). Every Action Plan required two goals, one for improving meal quality and one for improving student perception of meal quality. Managers' goals were expected to be "SMART": Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound.

To facilitate the development of SMART goals, the E-STAR Workshop training materials provided a list of suggested strategies and activities that were specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound. For each goal, Managers chose one of three strategies and one of nine activities; the combination of a strategy and activity formed the SMART goal. Managers could also choose to articulate their own activity. The most frequently chosen SMART goals for improving meal quality and student perception of meal quality that Managers included in their Action Plans are shown in Figures 6-1 through 6-4. The complete set of options is included in [Appendix C: Framework for Action Plans](#). The data provided by MPHI are suited to quantitative analysis, and so we report the distribution of Manager's choices related to Action Plans.

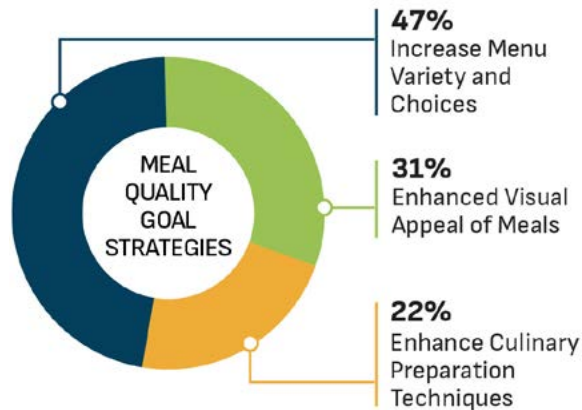
For the meal quality goal, increasing menu variety and choices for student selections was by far the most frequently chosen strategy, selected by almost half of the Managers (47%). About a third of Managers (31%) selected a strategy for enhancing the visual appeal of meals at breakfast and lunch. Only about one-fifth (22%) chose to enhance culinary preparation techniques.

The most common activity Managers chose to reach their meal quality goal was to periodically provide cultural menu options (22%). For example, one Manager described planning their cultural menu offering around corresponding holidays:

[In] March, we did a St. Paddy's Day pizza. It had corned beef, cabbage, and carrot and potatoes on it. And April was Celebrate Diversity Month, and we did an egg roll. And it was ground turkey, cabbage, and carrot in it. And we're doing a chicken quesadilla for May because of Cinco de Mayo.

The other two most frequently selected activities were using quality scorecards to ensure standards are met (16%) and using salad or food bars (15%).

FIGURE 6-1. MANAGERS MOST FREQUENTLY CHOSE INCREASING MENU VARIETY AS THEIR MEAL QUALITY GOAL STRATEGY IN YEARS 1 AND 2 (N=81)



Managers' SMART goals for improving meal quality were most often aimed at increasing menu variety and choices for students. Their SMART goals for improving student perception were most often aimed at improving the school environment.

FIGURE 6-2. TOP THREE ACTIVITIES MANAGERS CHOSE FOR MEAL QUALITY GOALS IN YEARS 1 AND 2

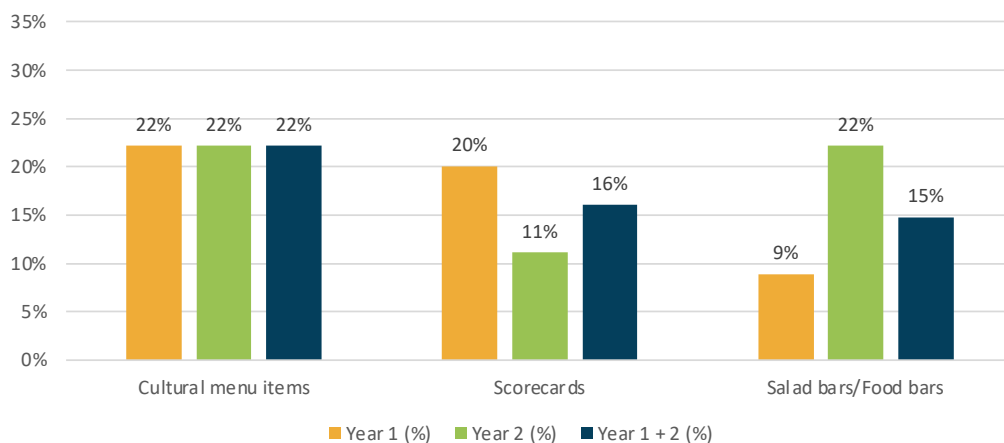


Table Notes: Year 1: $n=45$; Year 2: $n=36$; Year 1 + 2: $n=81$.

To improve student perception of meal quality, almost half of the Managers (42%) chose a strategy of improving the school environment. Fewer Managers chose strategies focused on marketing efforts (31%) or nutrition education (27%). The top three activities chosen to reach their student perception goal were displaying posters or signs to promote healthy eating (33%), forming a student advisory committee (21%), and upgrading an aspect of the cafeteria (14%). One Manager coordinated their activities across goals by introducing a new spice as part of the meal quality goal and having corresponding educational campaigns about the value of the new spice:

One time, I put up a sign — featured spice was cinnamon, and then I put out cinnamon. So, I had a cinnamon stick and then ground cinnamon. And then I put up where cinnamon originated from and then what cinnamon is good for.... And then, just — the shock to me was where — you learn in history about the spice trail. Well, holy cow. Cinnamon — all of them are Asian spices.... It got us all talking, and [the students] were really interested in the nutritional value of each spice.

FIGURE 6-3. MANAGERS MOST FREQUENTLY CHOSE ENHANCING THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT AS THEIR STUDENT PERCEPTION GOAL STRATEGY IN YEARS 1 AND 2 (N=81)

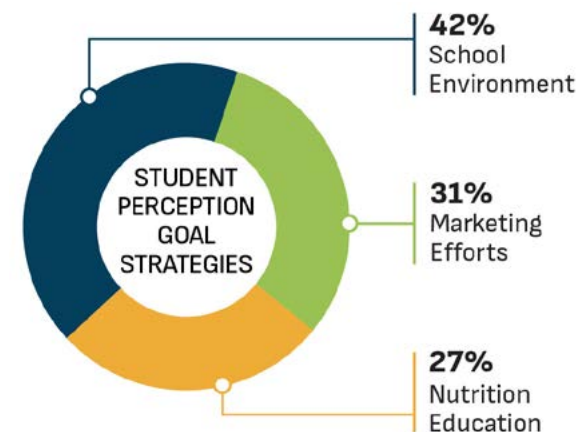


FIGURE 6-4. TOP THREE ACTIVITIES MANAGERS CHOSE FOR STUDENT PERCEPTION GOALS IN YEARS 1 AND 2

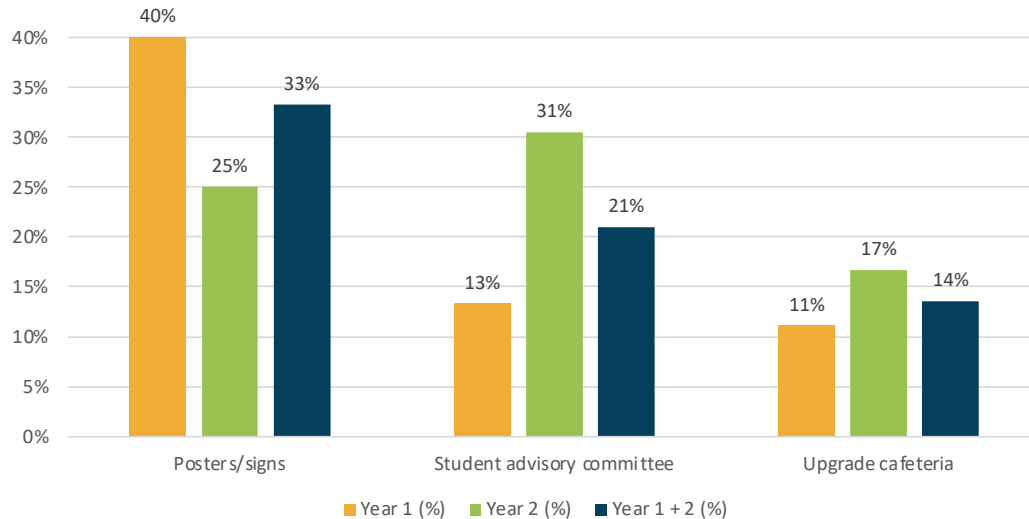


Table Notes: Year 1: n=45; Year 2: n=36; Year 1 + 2: n=81.

Activity selection differed somewhat from year 1 to year 2. For the meal quality goal, inclusion of the food and salad bar activity went up from year 1 to year 2 (from 9% to 22%). Meanwhile, inclusion of the garnish and batch cooking activities went down from year 1 to year 2 (from 13% to 6% for each). For the student perception goal, the use of posters and signs in the cafeteria went down from year 1 to year 2 (from 40% to 25%), whereas the use of a student advisory committee went up from year 1 to year 2 (from 13% to 31%). Action Plans that included providing nutrition education to students increased in frequency from 7 percent in year 1 to 14 percent in year 2.

Several factors affected year 2 selections. First, MDE instructed Managers to update their Action Plans by selecting a new strategy and activity combination for each year 2 goal. (MDE granted exceptions to the “new year 2 goal”

instruction on a case-by-case basis.) Second, Managers learned from their peers throughout year 1 of the E-STAR program, hearing Managers' success stories with particular activities. And third, Mentors sometimes encouraged mentees to include a particular activity in their Action Plans.

But with the student perception, like I said, my Mentor really thought that [the student advisory committee] would be a good thing for me to try. And I would—like, I was leery of doing it, but once I did it, I loved it. So, I'm so glad that that's something that I ended up doing.

Managers occasionally discussed reasons for keeping their year 1 goals for year 2. A few Managers ($n=3$) said they used a year 1 goal as a year 2 goal either because they were unable to implement the goal successfully in year 1 or because they wanted to keep the same goal but “up it a notch.”

Consistent with the “measurable” requirement of a SMART goal, most Action Plans included measures of the frequency with which staff would engage in proposed activities, but the target frequency for the activity varied widely, from daily to annually. As seen in Table 6-1, in each year, Managers proposed activities to improve meal quality be conducted more frequently than they proposed activities to improve student perception. In year 1, 27 Managers (60%) aimed to conduct activities to improve meal quality at least weekly, whereas only six Managers (13%) aimed to conduct activities to improve student perception at least weekly. Similarly, in year 2, 22 Managers (61%) aimed to conduct activities to improve meal quality at least weekly, but only 1 Manager (3%) aimed to conduct activities to improve student perception at least weekly.



In their Action Plans, Managers proposed activities to be conducted more frequently to improve school meal quality than to improve student perception.

TABLE 6-1. FREQUENCIES IN MANAGERS' GOALS BY ACTION PLAN YEAR AND GOAL

Frequency of Activity	YEAR 1 ACTION PLANS (N=45)				YEAR 2 ACTION PLANS (N=36)			
	Meal Quality Goal		Student Perceptions Goal		Meal Quality Goal		Student Perceptions Goal	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Daily	8	18%	1	2%	9	25%	0	0%
2-3 times per week	2	4%	1	2%	4	11%	0	0%
Weekly	17	38%	4	9%	9	25%	1	3%
2- 3 times per month	4	9%	2	4%	2	6%	1	3%
Monthly	4	9%	14	31%	6	17%	11	31%
Every 2-3 months	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	8	22%
2-3 times per year	1	2%	10	22%	1	3%	10	28%
Annually	0	0%	2	4%	0	0%	0	0%
Unspecified frequency	9	20%	11	0%	5	14%	5	14%

This finding could reflect differences in the opportunity to conduct the activities themselves. Activities to improve meal quality typically change the way food is prepared and served, which would happen daily. Activities to improve student perception typically change the environment — for example, by hanging informational posters — which would happen less frequently.

Across the two goals, 13 Action Plans included measures of success rather than frequency of delivery. For example, two Action Plans proposed to measure increases in student participation in school meals over time as a way of gauging progress.

6.2 ACTION PLAN DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION

In this section, we discuss how Managers described their development and implementation of their Action Plans, including facilitators to successful development and implementation, changes they made in order to carry out their Action Plans, barriers they encountered, and whether they continued their year 1 Action Plans into year 2. Discussion is based on interviews with Managers and Mentors that asked them to describe their Action Plans, their implementation of the Action Plans, and any changes they made to their Action Plans. Because these findings are based on qualitative data, the discussion provides thematic insight into the program, rather than a quantitative report of the frequency of experiences across Managers.

In year 1, several Managers ($n=16$) reported they believed they were on track implementing their Action Plans; some Managers ($n=13$) reported they were on track with one of their activities but not the other. A few Managers ($n=4$) reported they were not on track with either activity. In year 2, a majority of Managers ($n=22$) reported being on track, a minority ($n=5$) reported being on track with one activity, and only a few Managers ($n=2$) reported not being on track with either activity. This drop in Managers reporting not being on track likely reflects that some Managers who were not on track in year 1 dropped out of E-STAR after the first year, but it also suggests that in year 2, Managers better understood and fulfilled the expectations of E-STAR.

6.2.1 Facilitators of Action Plan Development and Implementation

Managers most commonly reported that Action Plan development was facilitated by support from their Mentors and Directors. Asked about developing their year 2 Action Plans, Managers often reported choosing goals specific to their school context; a few applied lessons learned in year 1. The most frequently reported facilitator to Action Plan implementation was support from frontline staff and other school staff, followed by support from Mentors. In year 1, a majority of Managers ($n=19$) reported making changes to their Action Plans to aid implementation. The number of Managers who reported changing their Action Plans decreased in year 2.

We asked Managers in both years what helped them most with developing their Action Plans. Across both years, 20 Managers reported that Mentor support was helpful, and 13 reported that Director support was helpful. A few Managers described times when their Mentor steered them toward a specific goal, but many described collaboration where Mentors made suggestions and helped Managers choose between ideas.

We talked about it, and [my Mentor] doesn't dictate as far as what I should do. When I talk about things that I want to develop, [my Mentor] directs me. It's like, "Okay. Do you want to think about this? Then maybe this would be the better thing for you to do because of what you're discussing and telling me that you want to plan."



Managers most often reported Mentor and Director support as a facilitator of their Action Plan development.

In year 2, we asked Managers how they decided on their goals. A majority of Managers ($n=16$) chose goals for reasons specific to their school contexts and how their programs were run, including wanting to leverage skills of certain staff, fit new activities into the physical environment of their kitchen, or address an aspect of their program they had never had the opportunity to focus on. For example, one Manager shared how they already wanted to talk to students, but they were able to do so in a structured way by choosing the student advisory committee activity as part of their Action Plan.

A few Managers ($n=3$) and one Mentor described using lessons they learned in year 1 to develop new Action Plans in year 2. Specifically, Managers had heard from their peers in trainings and mentorship groups about successes with certain activities and decided to try those activities themselves, for example:

The quality scorecards I did because of another participant who did it last year. And hearing her successes, hearing her report back in our mentoring groups that we had, I liked...how she did it. I liked how the responses were and how her participation went up.



They were things that I thought would be beneficial to our school. I've always wanted to be able to go out and ask — I go out and talk to kids anyways. But being able to sit down with them and form that committee was really, really beneficial. So that's been a great thing.

Across both years, 31 Managers reported buy-in and support from frontline staff, other school staff, and the Food Service Directors as a facilitator of Action Plan implementation. This included Managers engaging their frontline staff in brainstorming and collaborating on how to implement their goals, Managers training staff to take on larger roles within the E-STAR program, and staff simply being open-minded about the E-STAR program.

Of these 31 Managers, 18 discussed the benefit of their Food Service Director's support of them, reinforcement of the program, and in some cases, hands-on involvement. Two of these Managers were the Food Service Director at their school; in these instances, they discussed support from their Principal or Superintendent, depending on whom they reported to within their schools. Support for Managers ranged from active collaboration with Directors "working hand in hand" to implement Action Plans to Directors checking in with Managers occasionally. In one example, a Director talked directly with the students to encourage them to engage with the program and take ownership of it. Another Director came into the kitchen and worked with frontline staff to point out fruit that was bruised or damaged.

A few Managers ($n=3$) shared that teachers helped roll out and reinforce Action Plan implementation in their schools. In one example, students ate lunch in their classrooms as a COVID-19 precaution. Because the Manager could not be in the classrooms, the teachers helped to encourage the students to try the new foods on the menu and then relayed the students' feedback to the Manager. In another example, the Manager worked with the classroom teacher to reinforce the addition of cultural meals to the menu in the curriculum.

A majority of Managers ($n=23$) reported their Mentors helped to motivate them, provided practical support on Action Plans, and were available to



Managers and Mentors most frequently reported buy-in to the E-STAR program from frontline staff, other school staff, and Food Service Directors as a facilitator of Action Plan implementation.



A majority of Managers reported that support from their Mentors helped them implement their Action Plans.

answer questions as they arose. One Manager described their Mentor as an accountability partner in helping to prioritize the program amid other competing priorities. Another Manager said their Mentor was available to talk to when they had questions. One Manager was able to work with their Mentor to break down Action Plan goals into manageable steps that helped reduce the Manager's feelings of being overwhelmed.

Managers changed goals for various reasons including lack of capacity and lack of subgrant support (discussed in more detail below). The adjustments they made included changing the frequency of their goals and making the goals more manageable for themselves and their staff. Across both years, 21 Managers reported making changes or modifications to one or both of their goals; 18 Managers reported making no changes to their goals. Managers more frequently reported making changes in year 1: a majority of Managers ($n=19$) reported changing or modifying their goals, and several ($n=13$) reported making no changes. In year 2, the same number of Managers ($n=13$) reported making no changes, but only a minority of Managers ($n=10$) reported changing or modifying one or both goals. One Manager shared that it was easier to implement their year 2 goals as originally written because, having already gone through a year of the E-STAR program, they had chosen goals they knew were attainable for them:

Last year I did have to change my goals in the beginning because I couldn't get them to — I couldn't get cooperation from the school staff to help me. I was going to last year do a student group, meet with a student group to get ideas, that sort of thing, but I was not getting the participation from the Principal or who I needed to help me. So that's when I changed it last year. But this year everything went better. I chose things that I knew I could make work this year.

Overall, 12 Managers reported feeling they had flexibility to change their goals as they saw fit and that the process of changing their Action Plans was easy and



Everything that we were going through, I had this huge book, and she was able to take the whole book and just make it seem so easy, because I was so overwhelmed. And she's like, "Okay. We're going to take this step by step." And she just made it so much, brought it down. Didn't make it look like I was just piled with stuff. You know, she just brought it all into just a little bit.



In year 1, the majority of Managers reported making changes to their Action Plans to facilitate continued implementation and engagement; this was less common in year 2.

straightforward as they identified areas that needed revision. For the Managers who did make changes, the context and reasons around these changes varied. In year 1, three Mentors reported that some of their mentees changed their Action Plans early on, just following the Workshop and in the planning stages for their goals. Two Mentors worked with their Managers to scale back goals immediately following the Workshop because the Mentors believed the goals were too ambitious, based on how the food service program at that school was currently operating.

Additionally, several Managers ($n=7$) reduced the frequency of their activities to be more manageable. Some Managers changed the activities in their Plans to require less input or time from staff ($n=5$) or to qualify for subgrant funding ($n=3$). For example, one Manager changed a goal to be every other week rather than every week. Another Manager, whose kitchen staff did not have the capacity to implement scorecards, changed the goal to ensuring all produce served was not damaged or bruised, which fit better with their existing responsibilities. In another example, where a vendor was not offering programming as expected, the Manager figured out how to lead the educational class themselves.

6.2.2 Barriers to Action Plan Implementation

Similar to the barriers reported around general engagement with E-STAR, a majority of Managers ($n=25$) identified lack of capacity as an implementation barrier, which included Managers having too much on their plates, not enough time to implement E-STAR in addition to their other duties, and staff shortages at their schools. Managers also mentioned other life events such as staff contracting COVID-19 or being out on maternity leave that left them with too few staff to implement their Action Plans. Lack of capacity was especially pervasive in year 1, with 19 Managers identifying it as an issue, compared to 10 Managers in year 2. This could reflect the more profound impact of COVID-19 on staffing in year 1 and the possibility that Managers who continued in year 2



Managers most commonly reported lack of capacity, including both lack of staff and lack of time, as a barrier to implementing their Action Plans.

had more capacity to begin with. As one Manager shared, the barriers to implementing goals were *“mainly just staffing and time and trying to figure out where people are and make sure everything is covered.”* Another Manager reflected on how they and their staff were constantly short on time.

One Manager reported, *“[Frontline staff] don’t have the capacity to be able to do the things that would really make bigger impact.”* Especially in year 1, the challenges of long-term staffing shortages were compounded by staff contracting COVID-19 and being out of work for several weeks or more. Two Managers reported all of their kitchen staff were out with COVID-19 at the same time.

Several Managers ($n=13$) and a majority of Mentors ($n=5$) reported that navigating the subgrant was a pain point. Mentors described some Managers lacking experience or knowledge of grants, including how to identify what is covered, navigating the “chain of command” to get the funding approved, and tracking the grant activity once awarded. Mentors emphasized that Managers did not have the capacity to navigate the confusing and time-intensive process. Similarly, Managers described the additional level of effort required to complete the administrative steps related to the grant, including deciding what to order, working with other departments to invoice correctly, filling out paperwork and getting necessary approvals, and requesting price quotes from vendors. Three Managers planned to leverage funds from subgrants to implement their Action Plans but later realized they could not use the subgrant to purchase the items intended, leading them to change their Action Plans. For example, one Manager planned to improve the cafeteria space; however, the subgrant wouldn’t cover paint for the project. In another case, a Manager described that the subgrant wouldn’t cover adding a new menu option but would cover taste testing, which precipitated the change to their Action Plan.



The challenge is the time because we don’t even have time to take a lunch. We don’t have time to eat. It’s just go. Once you get here, you hit the floor and you go. And I barely get in the office here. It’s usually either after everyone’s gone and then I’ve got time to do my stuff, but it’s, like, you know, I can’t do that all the time either.



Several Managers and the majority of Mentors reported navigating the subgrant as a barrier to implementation.

Twelve Managers reported supply chain issues as a barrier, preventing them from getting the food items or equipment required to implement their goals, often because of supply chain issues. Managers did not make a causal link between supply chain issues and COVID-19, but it is likely they were related. One Manager reported that at one point during year 1, they did not receive as many as 40 items they had ordered. A lack of availability created a barrier to implementing meal quality goals, such as integrating cultural meals into menus or using a new cooking technique that required specialized equipment that was back-ordered. Two of these Managers specifically described how unpredictable food availability also put stress on already understaffed teams, who had to quickly reconfigure meal plans. In year 2, a small number of Managers ($n=4$) still had supply issues, but these issues were less profound and less frequent than what Managers reported in year 1 ($n=8$). For example, in the first year, one Manager could not get basic supplies such as rice, whereas in the second year, one Manager had trouble finding more specialty items such as pierogies.

Some Managers ($n=11$) and a few of Mentors ($n=2$) cited lack of buy-in from frontline staff, other school staff, and Food Service Directors as a barrier to Action Plan implementation. Lack of buy-in was more frequently cited by Managers in year 1 ($n=6$) than in year 2 ($n=3$). For example, one Manager described how a disagreement with the administration and school board about how the cafeteria should operate interfered with their goal to incorporate batch cooking:

We wanted to go out of the gate with feeding hot lunch. And we thought we could accomplish that with the social distancing and all of that. But our Principals didn't want it. Our school board didn't want it. So, at the beginning of the year, because we had our entire menu set for the beginning of school and in two days, they had us — we had to switch it and go back.



Several Managers reported that getting the food and equipment they needed was challenging due to supply issues, especially in year 1.



Lack of buy-in from frontline staff, other school staff, and Directors was a barrier to Action Plan implementation for some Managers.

Managers and Mentors also described challenges with getting frontline staff and other school staff on board with their goals. One Manager described their staff as being resistant to change, one Manager reported that staff were generally negative about the program, and another Manager wished their staff would pass on more feedback about the cultural meals they were implementing. Managers also described lack of buy-in from other school staff, including their not being willing to help set up a student advisory council and or not communicating information that was important for goal implementation to the Manager.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, launch of the E-STAR program was delayed by a year (from Summer 2020 to Summer 2021) due to the COVID-19 public health emergency. Even so, the first year of implementation was significantly affected by it. Beyond staff contracting COVID-19, six Managers talked about how pandemic-related restrictions created practical challenges for implementing Action Plan activities in year 1. One common precaution for COVID-19 was having children eat meals in their classrooms rather than in a cafeteria. This created barriers to implementing goals as written, including trying to batch cook while also packaging meals and delivering them to classrooms, not being able to put up posters in lunchrooms as students were not eating there, and generally having to dedicate more energy to adapting. Beyond the practical considerations, COVID-19 created general emotional stress.



In year 1, pandemic-related restrictions made it harder for Managers to implement their Action Plans.



How far can you push people and change and do things when they're dealing with all of these things that are perceived tragedies in the world?





7

E-STAR Manager's Corners

Frontline staff play a key role in improving meal quality and student perception of meal quality. As designed, the Manager's Corner trainings are brief, 15-minute lessons delivered by Managers to give frontline staff the knowledge and skills they need to prepare higher-quality meals that students perceive favorably. From the compendium of 43 lessons the E-STAR program makes available, Managers are expected to deliver 16 Manager's Corner lessons to their staff over the two-year E-STAR implementation period, eight in each year.

In this chapter, we present a summary of Manager's Corners included in Action Plans in Michigan, as well as facilitators and barriers encountered while implementing them. Information on facilitators and barriers comes from interviews with Managers and Mentors. Forty-one Managers participated in interviews, 36 in year 1 and 29 in year 2, with 24 of them participating in both years. All eight Mentors participated in year 1 focus groups and interviews and in year 2 interviews.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Managers were **more likely to deliver all eight Manager's Corners in year 2 than in year 1.**
- For each goal, **four Manager's Corner trainings were more frequently included** in Action Plans than the others.
- Managers **liked the structure and content of the Manager's Corners** and credited the success of the lessons to their **staff's openness to new ideas.**
- Managers **appreciated being able to make changes and adapt the trainings** to their needs.
- Managers most often reported a **lack of frontline staff buy-in, lack of time, and scheduling** as barriers to delivering the Manager's Corners.



Manager's Corner lessons cover a variety of topics and skills. The E-STAR materials align many of the lessons to specific strategies and activities that Managers include in their Action Plans. (See [Appendix D: Action Plan Strategies, Activities, and Corresponding Manager's Corner Lessons](#) for a crosswalk between activities and related Manager's Corners.) In developing their Plans, Managers are to choose four Manager's Corner lessons for each of the two goals they articulate in their Action Plan for each year and then deliver those lessons during the school year. Managers are able to choose from any of the Manager's Corners.

7.1 MANAGER'S CORNERS INCLUDED IN ACTION PLANS

In this section, we present findings on how many Manager's Corners the Managers presented and the most frequently chosen topics, based on data received from MPHI.

Managers reported delivering an average of only 3.5 Manager's Corner trainings in year 1, in contrast to the eight Manager's Corners that Managers were expected to deliver that year. In year 2, Managers delivered an average of 5.0 Manager's Corners. Of the 45 Managers who had Action Plans in year 1, only 12 Managers met or exceeded the expectation for Manager's Corner lessons, delivering eight or more ([Table 2-5](#)). Conversely, in year 2, 16 of the 36 Managers who had Action Plans were able to deliver all eight lessons.

Table 7-1 shows the four Manager's Corner topics that Managers most frequently included in their Action Plans for each goal. About two-thirds of Managers selected Meal Quality and Acceptability and Food Presentation Manager's Corners for their meal quality goal. Four-fifths of Managers chose the top Manager's Corner for the student perception goal: Positive Customer Experience. It is interesting to note that Managers who participated in the training Workshop used Knowing Your Customer to practice their facilitation skills in breakout sessions with their Mentor and fellow Managers.



Managers were more likely to deliver all eight Manager's Corners in year 2 than in year 1.



For each goal, four Manager's Corner trainings were more frequently included in Action Plans than the others.

TABLE 7-1. MANAGER'S CORNERS MOST FREQUENTLY INCLUDED IN ACTION PLANS FOR EACH GOAL OVER BOTH YEARS

MANAGER'S CORNERS MOST FREQUENTLY INCLUDED IN MEAL QUALITY GOAL	PERCENTAGE OF ACTION PLANS WITH THAT MANAGER'S CORNER (N=48)	NUMBER OF ACTION PLANS WITH THAT MANAGER'S CORNER (N=48)
Meal Quality and Acceptability	69%	33
Food Presentation	67%	32
Food Bars	42%	20
Quality Scorecard	40%	19
MANAGER'S CORNERS MOST FREQUENTLY INCLUDED IN STUDENT PERCEPTION GOAL	PERCENTAGE OF ACTION PLANS WITH THAT MANAGER'S CORNER (N=48)	NUMBER OF ACTION PLANS WITH THAT MANAGER'S CORNER (N=48)
Positive Customer Experience	81%	39
Nutrition Education	63%	30
Knowing Your Customer	58%	28
Customer Service Communication	58%	28

7.2 FACILITATORS AND SUCCESSES

In this section we present our findings on what helped Managers implement the Manager's Corners, as discussed during interviews.

Overall, Managers had favorable opinions of the Manager's Corners. Facilitators of Manager's Corners were discussed far less in year 2, but the same themes were still common across both years. A majority of Managers talked about the structure or design of the lessons ($n=28$). They reported:



Managers liked the structure and content of the Manager's Corners and credited the success of the lessons to their staff's openness to new ideas.

- Finding it easy to follow the instructions ($n=17$).
- Liking the flexibility of the format, so they could adapt the lessons to their needs or to fit their time constraints ($n=4$).
- Finding the materials provided to conduct the Manager's Corners very useful and easy to navigate ($n=12$), specifically mentioning the visual aids and the questionnaire that kept their staff engaged, knowing they would have to take a test at the end: *"I think the materials that they gave us to present those trainings — they made it foolproof. They made it so you can't fail."*

In both years of the program, Managers reported that they enjoyed the content of lessons ($n=27$). Knowing your customer, meal organization, batch cooking, and knife skills were referenced as some of the most useful topics by Managers. Many Managers said they felt able to incorporate what they learned into their everyday routines. Even a few more-experienced Managers said that the content was a good refresher or useful to teach to their staff, and commented on their ability to integrate their own knowledge and experiences when delivering their Manager's Corners.

I think the information that they had was good. And being able to read them over, and already having the knowledge of some of the stuff that was in there, which my ladies don't have the knowledge of that.... And being [able] to add my own information with it, to tie in with it.

The topics, materials, instructions, and layout of the lessons were all constructed in a way that made them easy to implement and useful to teach. Managers ($n=23$) also credited their staff's positive attitude for the easy implementation of the Manager's Corners and reported that kitchen staff were able to incorporate what they had learned into their daily routines.

I do see the staff — when they're preparing a recipe, they'll take a cart with them and get all of their items that they need so they're not running back and forth. So that's a positive. So, they did take that one in.

MOST USEFUL MANAGER'S CORNERS TOPICS:

- Knowing your customer
- Meal organization
- Batch cooking
- Knife skills

Mentors' comments about Manager's Corners supported the Managers' feedback, with some Mentors ($n=3$) sharing success stories of staff buying into and implementing what they learned. Two Mentors also described how their mentoring helped Managers follow through with delivering the lessons to frontline staff.

A majority of Managers ($n=25$) made changes to the Manager's Corner lesson plans to adjust to the needs of their staff, changing lesson selections, timing, format, structure, and/or the questionnaires. For example, two Managers reported they delivered lessons in a more conversational way, learning and then summarizing the lessons in their own words:

I like to more address them as conversations, like, "Hey, garnishes...does this plate need one? What are you guys thinking? ... So, if we have a chicken, what are we doing with that? Is there something that we can do to improve that? What is the importance of a garnish? What do you think about a garnish when you think about it?"

Managers also reported using the Manager's Corner curriculum as a general guide on what content to cover with their frontline staff, rather than delivering the content as the ICN instructions directed. One Manager reported feeling it was simpler to summarize the trainings and deliver the quizzes verbally:

I followed it to a point...just...what would fit my time or my area, but I went through everything, all the key points and stuff. But sometimes, instead of them writing stuff down, I just would ask them the questions, and if they wanted to, they could write it down on paper. But otherwise, just to share their answers so that everybody could hear.



Managers appreciated being able to make changes and adapt the lessons to their needs.

Other examples of Manager adaptations:

- Delivering multiple Manager's Corners to create a longer training session.
- Developing videos or a Jeopardy-style game to use during delivery of Manager's Corners to increase engagement.
- Conducting different trainings for their Cooks than for their Servers, as different topics were more relevant for each job.

Only a few Managers made more significant changes. One Manager did not have staff, so they delivered the training to their office assistant. Another chose to review the trainings and then "wing it" based on what they had learned, when presenting the information to their team. One Manager did not have time to deliver the Manager's Corners, so they had their team review the materials on their own and would then check their test answers for completion and comprehension. One Manager developed quizzes using E-STAR materials as well as outside resources and then distributed the quizzes to staff to learn the content on their own.

7.3 BARRIERS AND SUGGESTED IMPROVEMENTS

In this section we present our findings on what barriers Managers encountered while implementing the Manager's Corners, as discussed during interviews.

Managers' most commonly reported barrier was around a lack of capacity in staffing and time. Managers ($n=23$) reported they were struggling due to layoffs, supply chain issues, scheduling conflicts, and competing priorities that made it difficult to find time and staff to deliver Manager's Corners to. Three Managers had to wait to conduct Manager's Corners on days with fewer demands, such as school half-days or teacher development days. A few said they and/or their staff held second or third jobs, making scheduling hard.



Managers most often reported a lack of frontline staff buy-in, lack of time, and scheduling as barriers to delivering the Manager's Corners.



I just feel like there's just not enough time in the day to keep, and then I have [frontline staff who] can't stay after or stay longer because they've got another job to get to or have kids to get home to.

Scheduling Manager's Corners was a struggle ($n=14$). Many Managers noted that they were operating with minimal staff due to sickness, weather conditions, and unfilled positions. This resulted in staggered scheduling and small team sizes, which made it difficult to find a time to deliver Manager's Corners or to train all staff.

Managers also experienced frontline staff resistance to Manager's Corners ($n=22$). This included staff being:

- Stubborn to changing their usual procedures.
- Unmotivated to follow through on the new ideas.
- Overwhelmed by the additional trainings.
- Unhappy about the additional time that changes would require.

Only three Managers and one Mentor shared suggestions to improve the Manager's Corners:

- One said that it took too much preparation and research to deliver the lessons, and that a website with online resources and suggestions on how to present would be helpful.
- Another Manager suggested that a calendar with possible dates for completing the activities could be helpful to better plan, prepare, and deliver the Manager's Corners.
- Two comments suggested Manager's Corners could be made to accommodate Managers who do not have frontline staff or have very small teams: *"My advice with the Manager's Corners is they're a little uncomfortable to do one-on-one because they're designed for a larger group, but they work very well with a larger group."*



Some of them. Yeah. I mean, some of them just aren't into change. But yeah. I think, though, it's kind of like, you brought them to the water, and if they drink it or not, it's kind of up to them. But I follow up with them and just ask them questions about it later, if it changed the way they think or not.



8

Discussion

The E-STAR Training Program includes a comprehensive set of resources, training opportunities, and ongoing supports for Managers to improve meal quality and student perception of meal quality in their schools. This final report summarizes the implementation of the E-STAR program during the 2021–22 and 2022–23 school years in the program’s single State grantee. Sixty-four Managers across Michigan were recruited to participate in and implement the E-STAR program. Twelve additional Managers were recruited during implementation, bringing the total number of Managers who participated in the E-STAR program to 76. In the following chapter, we provide a summary of the E-STAR program and process evaluation, discuss strengths and limitations of the evaluation, summarize key takeaways, and propose suggestions for improvement.

8.1 E-STAR PROCESS EVALUATION SUMMARY


Abt's process evaluation of the E-STAR program centered around understanding the extent to which Managers were actively engaged in the program, the extent to which its key components were implemented as intended, and the facilitators of and barriers to both engagement and implementation.

Managers described many positive perceptions of the E-STAR program, with the majority praising the Manager's Corners, the mentoring component, and the community of practice fostered through participation in the program. Regarding the E-STAR training components, Mentors and Managers expressed similar ideas about what they liked and what they found challenging about the Orientation and Workshop they attended: the materials and resources shared were commonly cited as facilitators and the volume of information presented was commonly cited as a barrier.

The evaluation found that the key components of the E-STAR program were feasible and successfully delivered to Managers. The barrier to E-STAR being implemented as intended was that Manager participation was uneven. To build upon the program's successes and encourage increased Manager engagement in future iterations of the program, grantees should consider: adjusting the pacing or length of the Workshop and allowing more time to develop the Action Plans; and increasing the number of examples presented for each topic and time for in-person practice and initial brainstorming between mentors and mentees.

Abt developed participant journey maps to present a sample picture of the Manager and Mentor experience participating in the E-STAR program and aid in understanding participant experiences and pain points to inform future iterations of the program. Figure 8.1 presents a high-level composite of a fictional Manager's journey through the E-STAR program, synthesizing some of the activities, experiences, and related recommendations that emerged from the evaluation's findings.

FIGURE 8.1. E-STAR MANAGER JOURNEY MAP

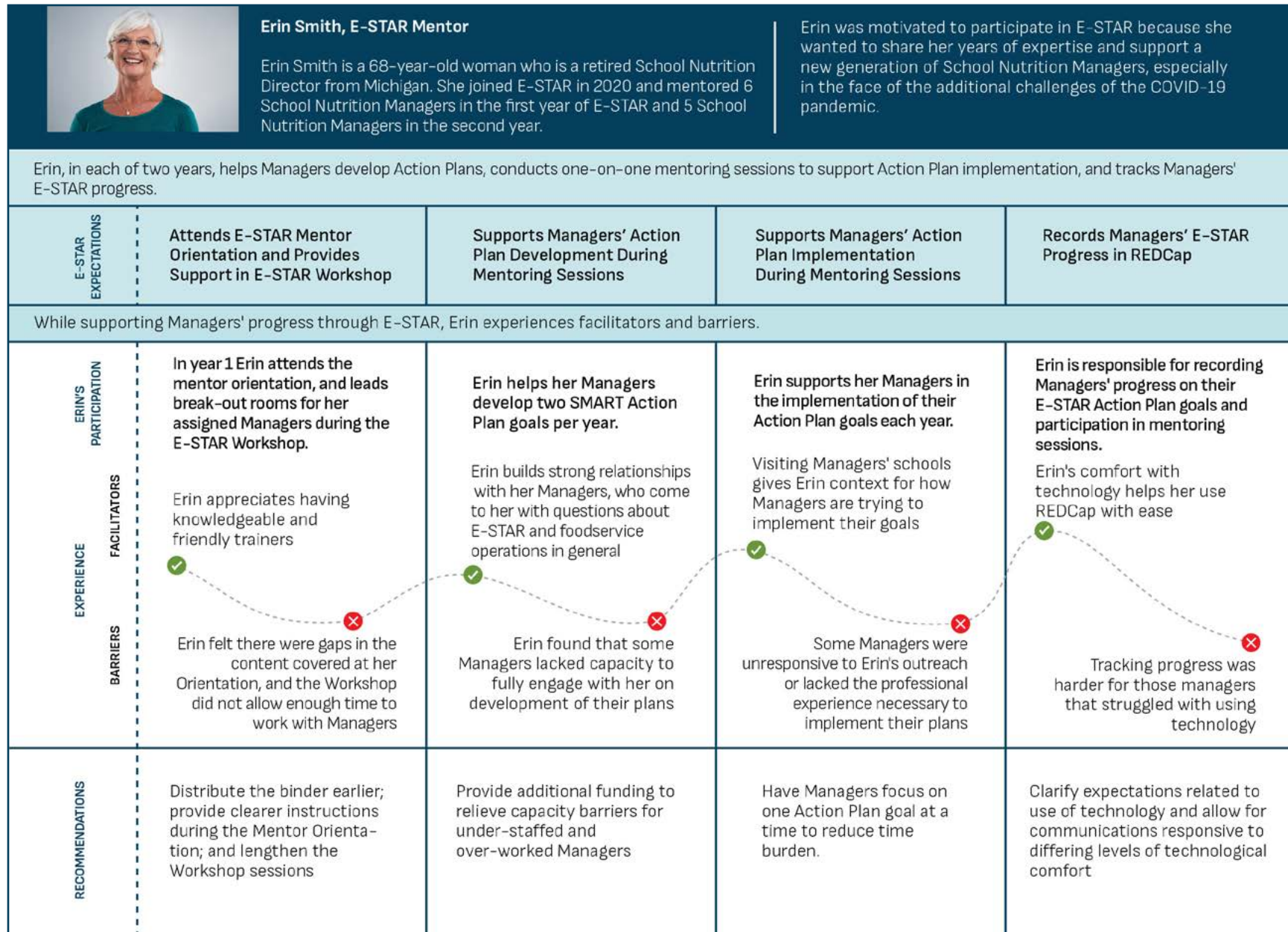
 <p>Julie Miller, School Nutrition Manager</p> <p>Julie Miller is a 58-year-old woman who has been a School Nutrition Manager for one year. She oversees two frontline foodservice staff and has completed some college but does not yet have her degree. She joined E-STAR in 2020.</p>		<p>Julie remained engaged in E-STAR due to the support from her Mentor, internal motivation and dedication to improving school food for her students, and professional development opportunities such as learning new skills and taking ownership of her E-STAR activities.</p>			
<p>Julie, in each of two years, develops an Action Plan, attends required meetings, implements her Action Plan goals, and administers trainings.</p>					
E-STAR EXPECTATIONS	<p>Complete the E-STAR Workshop and training. Develop a one-year Action Plan during the workshop. Action Plans include two SMART goals with eight corresponding Manager's Corner trainings to deliver. Develop a second Action Plan at the start of Year 2.</p>	<p>Attend three, 1-hour Virtual Instructor-Led Trainings (VILTs) each year.</p>	<p>Attend quarterly mentoring sessions (four sessions per year).</p>	<p>Implement the strategies identified in the Action Plan for each of two goals (per year).</p>	<p>Deliver eight Manager's Corner lessons identified in the Action Plan to frontline staff (per year).</p>
	<p>While participating in E-STAR components, Julie Miller experiences facilitators and barriers.</p>				
EXPERIENCE	<p>JULIE'S PARTICIPATION</p> <p>Julie completes the E-STAR Workshop and all required trainings. She develops a complete Action Plan for each of the two E-STAR years.</p>	<p>Julie attends two of the three VILTs in each of the two E-STAR years.</p>	<p>Julie meets with her mentor at least four times in each of the two E-STAR years.</p>	<p>Julie struggles to implement her year 1 goals. She changes these goals to make them more attainable. In year 2, Julie is able to keep up with implementing her goals.</p>	<p>Julie is unable to deliver all eight Manager's Corner lessons in year 1, but delivers all eight in year 2.</p>
	<p>FACILITATORS</p> <p>The Mentor directly supports Julie to develop her Action Plan and its goals in year 1 and year 2.</p>	<p>The 2pm VILTs are at a convenient time for Julie who easily attends virtually from home.</p>	<p>Julie's mentor has a lot of foodservice experience. She feels her mentor understands her struggles and listens to her advice.</p>	<p>Implementing her goals is made easier for Julie with the support of her Foodservice Director, Teachers, and Frontline Staff.</p>	<p>Julie found the Manager's Corners administration instructions easy to follow, and the questionnaire at the end helped to engage her staff.</p>
<p>BARRIERS</p> <p>Julie did not experience many barriers with the Workshop but wanted more time to understand SMART Goals</p>	<p>Other professional and personal obligations prevented Julie from attending, and some VILT topics were not relevant to her.</p>	<p>Julie struggled to schedule mentoring sessions, given her own scheduling conflicts and a general lack of time to engage.</p>	<p>Julie has a lot on her plate and often not enough time to implement ESTAR in addition to her other duties and staff shortages.</p>	<p>Staff were not always open to new ideas or changes to their usual procedures, and Julie struggled to find the time to complete the trainings.</p>	
RECOMMENDATIONS	<p>Lengthen the Workshop, allowing more time for Action Plans and relationship building in small group sessions.</p>	<p>Align the topics of VILTs with typical Action Plans and selected SMART Goals.</p>	<p>Provide additional funding to relieve capacity barriers for under-staffed and over-worked Managers.</p>	<p>Have Managers focus on one Action Plan goal at a time to reduce time burden.</p>	<p>Reduce prep time by making resources available online with suggestions on how to present the trainings.</p>

Note: This profile represents the average experience and characteristics of an E-STAR Manager. The photo and details do not represent any one Manager who participated in E-STAR.

Recruitment, active engagement, and implementation were all challenging, but many barriers cited by Managers and Mentors were external to the program and reflective of the challenging context of school food service during the COVID-19 public health emergency. In interviews, focus groups, and surveys, program participants clearly emphasized that being allowed to adapt program components, support from their Mentor, and being included in a community of Managers were facilitators of program engagement and implementation.

The evaluation identified the Mentor role as critical to the successful implementation of the program. Recruiting mentors with decades of experience in school nutrition and training and a commitment to supporting Manager career development served as a tool to sustain engagement. Figure 8.2 shows a high-level composite of a fictional Mentor's journey through the E-STAR program.

FIGURE 8.2. E-STAR MENTOR JOURNEY MAP



Note: This profile represents the average experience and characteristics of an E-STAR mentor. The photo and details do not represent any one Mentor who participated in E-STAR.

8.2 EVALUATION STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

The evaluation had several strengths. The mixed methods approach blended rich qualitative data with quantitative analysis of primary and extant data. We collected implementation data at multiple levels: training observations, Manager and Mentor interviews, MDE and local evaluator interviews, administrative data, and Action Plan data. In addition, we were able to adapt our evaluation design in the face of implementation delays and challenges due to the COVID-19 public health emergency and other factors.

The evaluation also had some limitations. First, though Abt was able to directly observe participation and engagement in some components of the E-STAR program (e.g., the Workshop), our findings about implementation of the Action Plans and progress toward meeting their goals rely on self-reports from Managers and Mentors. Despite our efforts to clarify that we would not share interview data (to encourage candor), participants still might have overstated progress to show themselves in a favorable light. Alternatively, they might have understated progress if they did not recall early milestones by the time we interviewed them in the spring of the school year.

Second, MPHI shared data that tracked participation in five “snapshots” over the two years of the program. Therefore, we calculated participation rates with estimates of the number of Managers still engaged in the E-STAR program at the time of each activity.

Finally, we were unable to follow up with Managers who withdrew from the E-STAR program prior to our interviews in the spring of each school year. Withdrawn Managers might have responded differently to our interview prompts and identified different barriers or facilitators to participation. We achieved fairly high response rates among the Managers whom we pursued for interviews

in each year — 84 and 85 percent, respectively, of those actively participating at E-STAR at the time of the interview — and were able to interview 41 unique Managers across the two years. That said, it is still possible that the few Managers whom we pursued unsuccessfully could have encountered other barriers or facilitators that are not represented in our data.

8.3 SUMMARY OF KEY TAKEAWAYS

Implementation of the E-STAR program included a mix of successes and challenges that are highlighted throughout this report. In this section, we summarize its key takeaways as broad findings.

Maintaining consistent engagement among Managers throughout the two-year E-STAR implementation period was a challenge.

Ongoing engagement varied widely among the 64 Managers who were recruited to participate in the E-STAR program at the beginning of year 1, with some Managers completing all components of the program and others participating in only one activity. More than half of these Managers ($n=39$, or 61%) withdrew at some point during the two years.

Overall, Managers spoke highly of the professional development offerings, particularly the training materials and the training staff, as well as support from their Mentor, citing them as facilitators of both program engagement and implementation. Barriers to engagement included competing demands for Managers' time, indicating that Managers might have struggled to stay engaged even when they were motivated to improve meal quality and student perception and had positive views of the program. The State grantee implemented Quarterly Meetings with Managers and held a virtual celebratory event at the end of the first school year, which likely contributed to Managers feeling supported and motivated to stay engaged with the E-STAR program.

All program components were delivered as intended; however, participation was uneven.

As designed, the E-STAR program includes clearly articulated program components and expectations for implementation. But because this was the first time the E-STAR program was implemented, the extent to which its components are feasible to deliver was an open question. It is therefore worth noting that all the components articulated in the E-STAR logic model (those originally planned by ICN and those added on by MDE; Figure 1-1) were available and delivered to Managers.

Participation varied widely across program components. Though 76 Managers enrolled in the program over years 1 and 2, 59 Managers attended the training Workshop, 50 Managers ultimately developed an Action Plan, and only 29 Managers attended the expected number of sessions with their Mentor. However, the availability and content of the components and resources offered by the E-STAR program were not a significant barrier to engagement or implementation.

Manager implementation of the Action Plan activities and delivery of Manager's Corner lessons fell short of program expectations. Managers reported making some progress implementing their Action Plans, but not as much progress as they intended. Further, they reported needing to adapt their Action Plans during year 1 to respond to barriers to implementation. Those Managers who stayed engaged into year 2 were encouraged to set new goals for that second year, yet were less likely to report needing to adapt their Action Plans in year 2. Managers identified being allowed to adapt their Plans, along with the support of their Mentors, as key facilitators to continued implementation and engagement. The barriers Managers faced in implementing their Action Plans were staff shortages, navigating COVID restrictions, supply chain issues, and a lack of staff buy-in to the program. Despite reporting falling short on implementing their Action Plans, Managers reported

feeling that the E-STAR program improved student perception of food and meal quality and improved the quality of training for staff.

Most Managers were unable to deliver eight Manager's Corner lessons to their frontline staff in their first year of the program; about one quarter of (27%) of the 45 Managers with year 1 Action Plans met this expectation ($n=12$). Again, Managers and Mentors both reported feeling satisfied with the Manager's Corner lesson materials, sometimes adapting them to better suit their needs. The barriers to Manager's Corner delivery were more external to the program, including limited time with frontline staff and staffing shortages.

The E-STAR program created a community focused on improving meal quality and student perception that, for those who stayed engaged, was a positive outcome of the program. Several components of the E-STAR program focused as much on community building as they did on developing individual skills and capacity for improving meals. Managers identified the opportunity to connect with other Managers, their Mentors, and MDE staff as a facilitator across components. Examples included breakout sessions at the Workshop and at the VILTs, as well as the MDE Quarterly Meetings for Managers. At the end of the two years, 28 Managers were engaged, representing a community poised to continue improving meal quality in their schools. Twelve Managers were able to attend a Celebration Event that MDE hosted at the end of year 2.

There was substantial Manager turnover in the E-STAR program, which required adaptations to E-STAR training.

Almost 60 percent of Managers who started the E-STAR program ($n=39$ of the 64 who initially engaged with the program; $n=5$ of the 12 who started later) left the program at some point during the two years. Though MDE continued to try to engage new Managers into the second year, the E-STAR program did

not include a clear process for recruiting and training new Managers after the training Workshop was delivered in Summer 2021. MDE adapted the E-STAR training process to engage new Managers, but withdrawals far exceeded recruitments, and participation was uneven for those who were recruited.

Of the Managers who completed a baseline survey ($n=67$), a much larger proportion of Managers with no formal credentials (79%) withdrew from the E-STAR program after enrollment than did Managers with formal credentials (45%). This could indicate that Managers with no formal credentials are having more difficulty participating in the E-STAR program in its entirety. Participation barriers identified in this report, including lack of capacity, could be particularly salient for this group; perhaps Managers without formal credentials were more time-constrained. Other barriers to finishing the program might additionally exist for Managers with no formal credentials. For example, Managers with no formal credentials might be less familiar with formal training programs or formal mentorship models. Regardless of the reason, Managers without formal credentials appear to need additional support or incentive to participate in the E-STAR program fully.

A higher proportion of E-STAR participants who held Director (63%) or Manager (69%) roles cited lack of capacity as a barrier to Action Plan implementation than did Head Cooks (25%). Directors and Managers seem to have additional competing responsibilities related to kitchen management, people management, and grant management that contribute to insufficient capacity to take on new roles or tasks. Anecdotally, Directors and Managers spent a lot of time covering when other staff were out. Many Managers cited staff shortages as a barrier.

8.4 SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

During our interviews and observations, Managers and Mentors offered the following suggestions for improving the E-STAR program:

- Clarify expectations of participating in the E-STAR program for Mentors, Managers, frontline staff, and school administrators; provide a calendar that communicates the expected timeline for participation and implementation.
- Include time between the Orientations and the Workshop for Managers to meet with their Mentors to complete a structured needs assessment exercise, so they can think through what goals, strategies, activities, and sub-grant uses are most appropriate or helpful for their unique school environment.
- Provide Mentors with background information on their assigned Managers (e.g., experience level, school characteristics) so Mentors can better support their Managers' Action Plan development. Scheduling an initial meeting between Mentors and Managers before the Workshop could help with this as well. Though it was not required, Mentors noted that in person site visits were also helpful, to understand the Managers' school environment.
- Provide additional funding to relieve capacity barriers for understaffed and overworked Managers.
- Develop communication strategies responsive to differing levels of technological skill and comfort to reduce barriers for participants who are less familiar with software systems and virtual platforms.
- Add quarterly group Manager and Mentor meetings as an official E-STAR component, to give Managers from different schools more time to interact with one another.

During our interviews with MDE staff, they offered the following suggestions for future grantees:

- Budget more hours and money for Mentors to work with Managers.
- Provide Managers with more time to practice delivering Manager’s Corners during the training Workshop and later with their Mentors to ensure they understand how to use the materials and deliver the Manager’s Corners training as intended.
- Have Managers focus on one Action Plan goal at a time.
- Ensure there is a non-burdensome system for tracking Action Plan progress and delivery of Manager’s Corners; and ensure the Manager and Mentor trainings include instruction on the tracking system and procedures.

In addition, we reviewed the overall findings, including barriers to E-STAR program implementation named by Mentors and Managers and our observations and understanding of the school nutrition program setting. That review leads us to offer the following suggestions for improvement:

- Develop or align Manager’s Corner lesson choices with goals for developing specific culinary skills, so that Managers can choose trainings to address specific needs of their frontline staff.
- Cover less information in each Manager training (i.e., Workshop and VILTs) and use repetition to reinforce learning. Both Managers and Mentors emphasized the challenge of absorbing the volume of information within the allotted training time. This challenge was exacerbated by the switch from a three day in-person training to a shorter virtual training course in response to the COVID-19 public health emergency. Future implementation of the E-STAR program could consider delivering the information in shorter sessions over more days. It also could build in additional opportunities for the Managers to practice skills and meet with their Mentor and in small peer groups to review and discuss activities and lessons.

- Provide guidance (through mentoring or during group training) on how Managers can increase efficiencies while maintaining quality. Many Managers reported implementation barriers, including competing job responsibilities, having a second job, being understaffed, scheduling conflicts, family obligations, health issues, staff turnover, limited experience in their role, and general lack of time. Future implementation of the E-STAR program could include strategies to support Managers in implementing their Action Plans and delivering Manager's Corners in an environment with many competing priorities and short-staffing.
- For Managers with no formal credentials, provide an additional incentive or payoff related to finishing the program, such as a formal certificate of completion, a pathway toward a salary increase, or a direct stipend for participation. Additionally, designing or adapting training materials for a program such as E-STAR should consider participants' varying literacy and technological skill levels, previous training and management experience, and comfort levels with formal training programs.
- Revise the program to anticipate Manager turnover, likely unrelated to the quality of E-STAR program components. Investing in Manager development is a clear way to improve meal quality, but schools risk losing capacity if the Manager later leaves. Future grantees could develop plans for increasing the "stickiness" of school-based strategies for improving meal quality and student perception in a context known for high staff turnover.
- The E-STAR curriculum, including Manager's Corners, was widely viewed as high quality by Managers. However, it is unclear whether Managers, even with the support of their Mentors, were able to operationalize their improved knowledge and skills into the school-based strategies envisioned by FNS. Future implementation of the E-STAR program could include more scaffolds to support Managers in going the "last mile" to fully implement strategies for improving meal quality and student perception.

- Many Managers and Mentors reported benefits from the mentoring and peer relationships that were built through participation in the E-STAR program. Future implementation could encourage community building to create networks and relationships that can potentially support and sustain E-STAR activities after the program ends. Grantees might have more success recruiting Managers into a supportive community rather than into a “program.” Managers who feel supported by and connected to a community might be more likely to stay engaged in program activities.
- Define the participant group for E-STAR; for example, new Managers, experienced Managers, or Managers in a supervisory role (Food Service Directors and Managers). There is some indication that these categories of Managers experienced E-STAR differently, with different needs and different barriers to successful participation. For example, Managers who were supervisors reported lack of capacity more frequently than did those who were not supervisors (Head Cooks), and Managers newer to their role needed more support with their job duties before they could implement E-STAR Action Plan activities.

8.5 CONCLUSION

Over the two-year implementation, the key components of the E-STAR program were delivered to Managers even if participation was uneven. While recruitment, active engagement, and implementation were all challenging, the barriers cited by Managers and Mentors were most often external to the program and reflected the challenging context of school food service during the pandemic. Participants clearly emphasized that being allowed to adapt program components, support from their Mentor, and being included in a community of Managers were facilitators of program engagement and implementation.

This evaluation reported on to whom and how the E-STAR program was delivered and, at a high level, what the training content was. Future research is needed, however, to assess school-level implementation of the program's school-based interventions on a deeper level.

The next study of E-STAR could include measuring the effects of those school-based interventions on intermediate outcomes such as the knowledge and skills of frontline staff to prepare and serve quality meals, which is a necessary if not sufficient condition for improving meal quality. The study should document the content and amount of training delivered to frontline staff, what activities are undertaken as part of Action Plans or Manager's Corners, how far activities progress, and what outcomes are achieved. The findings would help FNS and ICN define expected intermediate outcomes of E-STAR and test whether participants in E-STAR experience better outcomes those who do not participate in E-STAR.





A

Appendices

- A. Methods
- B. Framework for Reporting Frequencies
- C. Framework for Action Plans: Goals, Strategies, and Activities
- D. Action Plan Strategies, Activities, and Corresponding Manager's Corner Lessons

Appendix A: Methods

This appendix describes data collection procedures and analytic methods used for the findings presented in this report.

A.1 EVALUATION SAMPLE

We used different samples for different analyses, depending on the data available and the purpose of the analysis.

A.1.1 Managers' E-STAR Program Participation

We categorized the 76 School Nutrition Managers who had participated in E-STAR at any point into three groups, based on the pattern of participation: Active, Withdrawn, or Late-Joining. The sample includes 25 active Managers, 39 withdrawn Managers, and 12 late-joining Managers. We described the extent to which each group participated in E-STAR activities.

A.1.2 Managers' Activity-Specific Participation

We assessed participation in each E-STAR activity for the subsample of who were expected to participate in that activity. A Manager was expected to participate in each activity if:

1. The activity was a requirement for all Managers (e.g., the training Workshop),
2. The Manager was actively participating in the E-STAR program when the activity was offered, or
3. The Manager was actively participating in the E-STAR program and participated in a key prerequisite activity (e.g., only Managers with Action Plans would be expected to deliver Managers' Corner lessons).

We estimated whether a Manager was actively participating in the E-STAR program in each month by using the approximate dates when Managers joined E-STAR and (if applicable) withdrew from E-STAR and participation information for specific activities.

Table A-1 shows the expected number of schools with Managers who would be expected to participate in each E-STAR activity.

TABLE A-1. MANAGER SAMPLES FOR CALCULATING ACTIVITY-SPECIFIC PARTICIPATION RATES

ACTIVITY	SAMPLE	
	NUMBER OF MANAGERS	DESCRIPTION OF SAMPLE
Year 1		
Manager Orientation	68	Managers who were active in E-STAR in year 1
Prerequisite course (Fundamentals of Presentation)	68	
Prerequisite course (Effective Goal Setting)	68	
Workshop (includes recordings)	76	Managers who were active in E-STAR in year 1 or year 2
Developed Action Plan	68	Managers who were active in E-STAR in year 1
Attended 4 or more Mentor Sessions	45	Managers with an Action Plan in year 1
Delivered 8 or more Manager's Corners	45	
Virtual Instructor-Led Training 1	45	Managers estimated to be active in E-STAR in month of event (December 2021)

ACTIVITY		SAMPLE
	NUMBER OF MANAGERS	DESCRIPTION OF SAMPLE
Year 1		
Virtual Instructor-Led Training 2	44	Managers estimated to be active in E-STAR in month of event (February 2022)
Virtual Instructor-Led Training 3	44	Managers estimated to be active in E-STAR in month of event (May 2022)
Quarterly Meeting 1	50	Managers estimated to be active in E-STAR in month of event (September 2021)
Quarterly Meeting 2	45	Managers estimated to be active in E-STAR in month of event (December 2021)
Quarterly Meeting 3	43	Managers estimated to be active in E-STAR in month of event (March 2022)
Quarterly Meeting 4	45	Managers estimated to be active in E-STAR in month of event (June 2022)
Year 2		
Developed/Updated Action Plan (year 2)	46	Managers who were active in E-STAR in year 2
Attended 4 or more Mentor Sessions	36	Managers with an Action Plan in year 2
Delivered 8 or more Manager's Corners	36	
Virtual Instructor-Led Training 4	41	Managers estimated to be active in E-STAR in month of event (November 2022)
Virtual Instructor-Led Training 5	35	Managers estimated to be active in E-STAR in month of event (February 2023)
Virtual Instructor-Led Training 6	32	Managers estimated to be active in E-STAR in month of event (May 2023)

ACTIVITY	SAMPLE	
	NUMBER OF MANAGERS	DESCRIPTION OF SAMPLE
Year 2		
Quarterly Meeting 5	40	Managers estimated to be active in E-STAR in month of event (September 2022)
Quarterly Meeting 6	37	Managers estimated to be active in E-STAR in month of event (December 2022)
Quarterly Meeting 7	34	Managers estimated to be active in E-STAR in month of event (March 2023)

A.1.3 Interview and Focus Group Samples

Managers

In year 1, Abt initially planned to recruit 43 Managers to participate in the Spring 2022 Manager interviews, based on our understanding that these Managers were participating in the E-STAR program at the time of recruitment. For five of these Managers, the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) informed us that it was working to confirm which of them were still participating in the E-STAR program. For interviewing purposes, Abt placed these five Managers on hold and did not pursue them for interviews. Of the 38 remaining Managers, one Manager did not respond to multiple contact attempts, and one Manager declined to participate. We interviewed the 36 remaining Managers, yielding an 84 percent response rate, and drew on the data from the interviews for analyses for this report.

In year 2, Abt invited 34 Managers to participate in the Spring 2023 Manager interviews, based on our understanding that these Managers were actively participating in E-STAR at the time of the interviews. Three Managers declined

to participate, and two additional Managers could not be reached at the scheduled interview time and could not be reached in further contact attempts to reschedule the interview. We completed interviews with the remaining 29 Managers, yielding an 85 percent response rate.

Twenty-four Managers participated in interviews in both years. We drew on the data from the interviews for analyses for this report. Table A-2 shows the number and percentage of Manager attendees whom Abt interviewed for each activity. To calculate the percentage of Manager attendees who were interviewed for each activity, we used the number of Managers who attended a given activity as the sample as the denominator.

Mentors

In year 1 and year 2, we completed interviews with all eight Mentors, and all eight Mentors participated in focus groups in year 1.

TABLE A-2. MANAGER SAMPLES FOR CALCULATING PERCENTAGE OF MANAGERS INTERVIEWED

	MANAGERS WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE ACTIVITY	NUMBER OF MANAGERS INTERVIEWED IN THE YEAR THE ACTIVITY TOOK PLACE, AMONG THOSE WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE ACTIVITY	PERCENTAGE OF MANAGERS INTERVIEWED IN THE YEAR THE ACTIVITY TOOK PLACE, AMONG THOSE WHO PARTICIPATED THE ACTIVITY
Year 1 Activities			
Attended Prerequisite			
• Fundamentals of Presentation	34	23	68%
• Effective Goal Setting	37	25	68%
Attended Orientation	39	25	64%
Attended Workshop	59 ^a	36	61%
Developed Year 1 Action Plan	45	34	76%
Had Mentoring Sessions			
• Fewer than 4 (including 0)	52	12	23%
• Exactly 4	17	17	100%
• More than 4	7	7	100%
Delivered Manager's Corners			
• Fewer than 8	64	25	39%
• 8 or more	12	11	92%
Attended Virtual Instructor-Led Training			
• VILT 1	32	27	84%
• VILT 2	24	22	92%
• VILT 3	20	18	90%
Attended Quarterly Meeting			
• Sep-21	25	20	80%
• Dec-21	28	24	86%
• Mar-22	30	29	97%
• Jun-22	20	17	85%

a Including 6 who attended in year 2.

	MANAGERS WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE ACTIVITY	NUMBER OF MANAGERS INTERVIEWED IN THE YEAR THE ACTIVITY TOOK PLACE, AMONG THOSE WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE ACTIVITY	PERCENTAGE OF MANAGERS INTERVIEWED IN THE YEAR THE ACTIVITY TOOK PLACE, AMONG THOSE WHO PARTICIPATED THE ACTIVITY
Year 2 Activities			
Developed/Updated Year 2 Action Plan	36	29	81%
Had Mentoring Sessions			
• Fewer than 4 (including 0)	51	6	12%
• Exactly 4	15	14	93%
• More than 4	10	9	90%
Delivered Manager's Corners			
• Fewer than 8 (including 0)	60	13	22%
• 8 or more	16	16	100%
Attended Virtual Instructor-Led Training			
• VILT 4	22	20	91%
• VILT 5	17	17	100%
• VILT 6	17	16	94%
Attended Quarterly Meeting			
• Sep-22	23	21	91%
• Dec-22	19	18	95%
• Mar-23	14	13	93%

A.2 DATA COLLECTION

Abt's evaluation of the Team Nutrition E-STAR Training Program relied on extant data as well as primary data collection, including training observations, Manager and Mentor interviews, Mentor focus groups, MDE and local evaluator interviews, administrative data, and Action Plan data. This appendix section details the methods used to collect that data.

A.2.1 Observation of Manager and Mentor Orientations

We attended both the Manager Orientation and the Mentor Orientation, taking detailed notes to capture attendance as well as the content of the meetings. We used the meeting agendas, provided in advance by MDE, to create templates for capturing data. Two senior staff members attended and observed the Manager Orientation and one senior staff member attended and observed the Mentor Orientation, recording their observations in the templates.

A.2.2 Observation of E-STAR Training Workshop

Abt developed two observation protocols to capture the characteristics of the Manager training Workshop as delivered during Summer 2021.⁸ During the scripted portion of the training (days 1 and 2), we documented the following characteristics:

- Time each training began and ended.
- Type and number of participants.
- The extent to which the content specified in the Instructor's Manual ("binder") was covered.

⁸ The Workshop (3 four-hour sessions delivered over three days) was delivered four times to different groups of Managers.

- The extent to which the Institute of Child Nutrition (ICN) instructor was “on script” relative to the Instructor’s Manual.
- Group size.
- Training approaches/activities used.
- Whether or not Managers were engaged with their Mentor during the training.
- Whether or not questions were posed by participants and answered by instructors.

During the structured but unscripted portion of the training (day 3), we used a running record approach to characterize its content and characteristics in five-minute intervals. Every five minutes, the observer coded the following characteristics of the training activity for the previous five minutes:

- Topic covered.
- Instructional group size.
- Primary training approach.
- Whether Managers engaged with their Mentor.

If the observer saw multiple characteristics in a category during the five-minute interval, they coded the interval as having the characteristic that was present for most of the interval. For example, if participants were in a small group for part of the interval and then reconvened as a whole group, the observer coded the group size that was used for the majority of that five minutes.

Two observers attended all four Workshop occasions and coded each session. Observers collected data to describe each Workshop lesson using an observation form. Modules often included a mix of whole-group and small-group content. Observers were assigned to one of the breakout groups when they occurred. Therefore, both observers coded what happened in the whole-group portion and they each attended and coded what happened in their assigned breakout session.

Afterward, observers met to compare and discuss their observation forms for the whole-group sessions and came to a consensus about any codes that differed across their forms. For mutually exclusive codes, such as what content was covered, observers discussed their rationale for the code they chose, revisited their notes, and came to agreement on which code best reflected the activity as delivered. When the observation form called for observers to select multiple codes from a list, observers discussed their rationale for selecting codes and again came to consensus about which set of codes best reflected the activity as delivered.

When observers attended different breakout groups, each set of codes was retained. Observers then created a single master observation form for days 1 and 2 that included the codes both observers agreed best reflected the whole group and the breakouts. Because day 3 primarily consisted of separate breakouts, we retained each observer's form separately.

A.2.3 Manager and Mentor Interviews

In early March 2022, we sent Managers and Mentors an email for year 1 data collection, and in early March 2023 for year 2 data collection, inviting them to participate in a 45-minute interview. We told prospective Manager respondents they would be asked questions about their experience participating in the E-STAR training Workshop, VILTs, Mentor Sessions, and Action Plan implementation. We told prospective Mentor respondents they would be asked about their experiences as an E-STAR Mentor, including the E-STAR Mentor Sessions, how the sessions worked, and what made it easier or harder to provide effective mentoring to Manager mentees. We told all potential respondents they would receive a \$25 thank you gift card and that their responses would be kept confidential. We sent Mentors and Managers who did not respond to the initial invitation email a second one approximately two weeks after the first. Those

who still did not respond received a phone call approximately every other day until we were able either to schedule their interview or to determine with MDE input whether to stop recruitment attempts.

Two Abt staff members, an experienced interviewer and a note taker, conducted interviews following semi-structured interview guides, one focused on Manager experiences and the other focused on Mentor experiences. Data collection for year 1 and year 2 lasted until the end of May 2022 and May 2023, respectively. Response rates were 84 percent and 85 percent for Managers in year 1 and year 2, respectively, and 100 percent for Mentors. Once an interview was complete, we sent the Manager or Mentor a thank you note and the gift card.

In years 1 and 2, Manager interviews lasted 36 minutes on average and ranged from approximately 18 minutes to 62 minutes. In year 1, Mentor interviews lasted an average of 54 minutes and ranged from approximately 40 to 62 minutes. In year 2, Mentor interviews lasted an average of 41 minutes and ranged from approximately 35 to 48 minutes. Interviews were audio recorded and the recordings professionally transcribed.

A.2.4 Mentor Focus Groups

Abt emailed all eight Mentors in early July 2021 to collect scheduling information for focus groups. We told Mentors they would be asked questions about their experience participating in the Mentor Orientation and training Workshop, as well as their thoughts on mentoring. We told them respondents would receive a \$20 thank you gift card and that their responses would be kept confidential. Once dates and times were selected, we sent a scheduling confirmation email with the WebEx information and then a reminder email the day before the focus group occurred.

We conducted two Mentor focus groups virtually using WebEx, one in late July 2021 and the other in early August 2021. All eight Mentors participated, with three participating in one focus group and five in the other focus group. Focus groups were conducted by two Abt staff members, a lead facilitator and a note taker, following semi-structured guides. The facilitator used best practices including setting ground rules, asking open-ended questions with probes when needed, using active listening, redirecting the discussion when it strayed too far off topic, and not allowing one or two people to dominate the discussion.

Focus groups were approximately 30 minutes long and were not recorded. The note taker aimed to take verbatim notes, identifying the speakers. Once a focus group was complete, we sent each Mentor a thank you note and the gift card.

A.2.5 MDE and Local Evaluator Interviews

We conducted three one-time interviews, which ranged in length from 60 to 92 minutes in June and July 2023 via Teams, with the MDE Project Director, MDE Project Manager, and MPHI local evaluator. Interviews were conducted by two or three Abt staff members, an experienced interviewer and one or two note takers, following semi-structured interview guides. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

A.2.6 Satisfaction Survey Data

At the end of each day of the Summer 2021 Workshop,⁹ ICN administered a satisfaction survey to participating Managers. This survey included a series of Likert-scale questions asking participants the extent to which they agreed with various statements about the Workshop and their attendee status and soliciting

⁹ The Workshop (3 four-hour sessions delivered over three days) was delivered four times to different groups of Managers.

other feedback on the Workshop. The survey also included Abt-developed questions about facilitators of and barriers to respondents' participating in the Workshop. We also asked about their perceptions of supervisor support for their E-STAR program participation and of their own preparedness to implement the Action Plans developed in the Workshop.

ICN administered the satisfaction surveys anonymously; therefore, we cannot confirm the identities of the respondents or link the survey data to other data sources.

A.2.7 E-STAR Program Participation Data from Partners

Abt received data from MPHI and from MDE throughout the first year of the E-STAR program. To allow us to conduct focus groups with Mentors in Summer 2021, MPHI provided their names and contact information in July 2021. In August 2021, MDE sent us aggregated counts of Managers who attended each of the Summer 2021 Workshops, though not Manager-level attendance information.

We received data from MPHI, exported from MPHI's REDCap database, about Managers' participation status and schools, districts, and contact information for Managers and Mentors in January, February, and July 2022 for year 1 E-STAR participation data. We received data again in January and August 2023 for year 2 E-STAR participation data. In these same data pulls, MPHI also provided Manager-level information on Managers' participation for each E-STAR activity that had occurred up to that time point. We used the data from the January and February 2022 data pulls to identify the Managers eligible for year 1 interviews of Managers and Mentors in Spring 2022 and to pre-populate year 1 interview protocols. We used the January 2023 data pull in a similar manner for our year 2 interview data collection. We categorized individual Managers into the

participation groups (Active, Withdrawn, and Late-Joining) described in [Chapter 2](#). Participation and Engagement in the E-STAR Program, using information on Managers' participation in specific E-STAR activities and their participation status based on the January 2022, February 2022, July 2022, January 2023, and August 2023 data pulls. We also used these participation data to analyze Managers' participation in specific E-STAR activities.

In addition, we received from MPHI responses from baseline surveys that MDE administered to Managers at the time of their enrollment in the E-STAR program. We used baseline survey data on Manager characteristics for our analysis of differences in participation by these characteristics. Table A-3 shows the minimum, median, and maximum for several Manager characteristics. MPHI also provided aggregate statistics — such as school size, rural status, and percentage of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch — about each of the schools at which Managers planned to implement the E-STAR program.

TABLE A-3. MANAGER CHARACTERISTICS

CHARACTERISTIC	MINIMUM	MEDIAN	MAXIMUM
Education level	High school diploma//GED	Associate degree	More than a bachelor's degree
Years working in school nutrition (start of E-STAR)	6 months or less	3-5 years	More than 10 years
Years working as manager at current school (start of E-STAR)	6 months or less	3-5 years	More than 10 years
Number of frontline staff managed	1	4	25

Table Notes: For "Years working" responses, Managers could choose from: <6 months (mo), 7 mo-2 years (y), 3-5y, 6-10y, >10y

A.2.8 E-STAR Action Plan Data

Abt also received data from MPHI with Managers' Action Plans for year 1. In July and August 2021, MPHI first provided us with copies of the draft Action Plans that Managers completed during the Summer 2021 Workshop.

After their Workshop, Managers needed to submit year 1 Action Plans for approval to their supervisors. MPHI provided us with data on Managers' approved year 1 Action Plans in November 2021, February 2022, and April 2022. We used these approved Action Plans for our year 1 analysis, analyzing the first approved Action Plan for each school in year 1. Under this approach, for year 1, we analyzed Actions Plans from 39 schools from the November 2021 data, four schools from the February 2022 data, and two schools from the April 2022 data, amounting to a total of 45 schools with year 1 Action Plans.

For year 2, Managers completed a separate set of Action Plans, either in June 2022 or in Fall 2022. As with year 1, Abt analyzed each school's first approved Action Plan for year 2. MPHI provided us with the year 2 Action Plans for 35 schools in December 2022 and for an additional school in January 2023, amounting to a total of 36 schools with year 2 Action Plans.

A.3 DATA ANALYSIS

A.3.1 Quantitative

Abt calculated Manager participation in the E-STAR program and its activities overall and by Manager characteristics.

Overall Participation in E-STAR

As noted in Section A.1.1, we looked at Managers' participation in the E-STAR program for three groups: Active, Withdrawn, and Late-Joining. To calculate

participation by Managers in a given E-STAR activity, we divided the number of Managers who participated in the activity within that group by the total number of Managers in that group.

Moreover, as noted in Section A.1.2, we also examined Managers' participation in a specific activity among Managers who would be expected to participate in that activity. To do this, we divided the number of Managers who participated in the activity by the total number of Managers who would be expected to participate in that activity.

Difference in Participation by Manager Characteristics

We also looked at whether Manager participation differed by Manager characteristics. We selected the following Manager characteristics that might be expected to affect a Manager's participation: having less than two years of experience as a Manager or not and having fewer than three frontline staff or not.

For each E-STAR activity, we compared the participation rates for schools on those two characteristics: years of Manager experience and number of frontline staff to train. We first calculated the participation rate for each subgroup, and then calculated the difference between the participation rates in each pair of subgroups. We also conducted a t-test to test the statistical significance of the difference in participation rates.

Satisfaction with the Workshop

Finally, to analyze responses from the anonymous Workshop satisfaction survey, we tabulated respondents' answers to each question. For multiple-choice questions, we computed the percentage of respondents to that question who answered with each option. In addition, we created a composite for each respondent across the 15 Likert scale agreement questions (with a scale of

1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree) by computing the mean of the respondent's answers to those 15 questions. After computing each respondent's composite mean, we calculated the composite mean across all respondents.

We similarly computed, across all respondents, the mean of respondents' answers to the question about how prepared they felt after the Workshop, and the mean of respondents' answers to the question about how supportive they perceived their supervisor to be about their E-STAR program participation.

A.3.2 Qualitative Analysis

Abt had the audio recordings of the Manager and Mentor interviews transcribed verbatim into Microsoft Word by a professional transcription company, then imported into NVivo Version 12 qualitative analysis software. We also imported into NVivo the Mentor focus group notes and open-ended responses to the ICN Workshop satisfaction survey. We extracted quotes illustrating key themes from the transcripts and focus group notes, edited slightly for readability in this report.

For the interview and focus group data, we developed a codebook a priori based on the research questions. The codebook contained codes as well as the code definitions, to ensure consistency among multiple coders. We tested and established inter-rater reliability by ensuring at least 85 percent agreement between coders. All coders coded the first transcript. After we established reliability, coders also double-coded a subset of the transcripts (eight Manager interviews and two Mentor interviews each year) to ensure continued reliability. The coding team reviewed and discussed any coding with less than 85 percent agreement and determined the appropriate code. After reliability was established, coders coded the remaining transcripts to the deductive nodes in the codebook. Coders then reviewed all data coded to each of the deductive nodes and employed an open coding, inductive, approach to identify key themes and develop thematic nodes.

The team identified and compared the most frequently occurring and/or significant codes across deductive nodes, submitting memos analyzing the meaning of these codes as they related to the research questions. We then grouped related codes to capture broad themes discussed by respondents. We used matrix coding to assess theme prevalence by respondent type and year. A second coder reviewed all references coded to thematic nodes to ensure reliability. Once all references were captured by and coded to a thematic node, we wrote thematic node summaries to synthesize the findings in the data. These summaries were reviewed to ensure clarity and consistency across the research team. The summaries were the basis for the qualitative data findings shared in this report.

The three MDE and local evaluator interview transcripts were each summarized by an experienced coder. They were not coded in NVivo.

Abt also conducted an exploratory analysis to investigate thematic prevalence by four attributes obtained from the MPHI baseline survey: (1) formal training and credentials, (2) years of managerial experience, (3) years of school nutrition experience, and (4) current role in district. We used NVivo to run a series of queries to identify patterns in the data, focusing on facilitators of and barriers to Action Plan implementation, most and least useful components of the E-STAR program, and School Nutrition Manager engagement facilitators and barriers. Findings from this analysis were limited but did indicate some differences in facilitators and barriers to implementation and engagement based on factors related to current role and experience; that is, formal training and credentials, years of managerial experience, and years of school nutrition experience. These findings are discussed throughout the report.

Appendix B: Framework for Reporting Frequencies

Throughout the report, use of the following terms corresponds to the number and percentage of Managers or Mentors shown in the table below.

TABLE B-1. FRAMEWORK FOR REPORTING FREQUENCIES

Term	SCHOOL NUTRITION MANAGERS YEAR 1		SCHOOL NUTRITION MANAGERS YEAR 2		SCHOOL NUTRITION MANAGERS OVERALL		MENTORS YEAR 1, YEAR 2, AND OVERALL	
	(#)	(%)	(#)	(%)	(#)	(%)	(#)	(%)
All	36	100%	29	100%	41	100%	8	100%
Almost all / Most	30–35	83–97%	24–28	83–97%	34–40	83–98%	7	88%
A majority	19–28	52–81%	16–23	55–79%	22–33	54–80%	5–6	63–75%
Half	18	50%	14–15	48–51%	20–21	48–51%	4	50%
Some / Several / A minority	5–17	14%–47%	5–13	17–45%	5–19	12–46%	3	38%
A few / A small number	2–4	6%–11%	2–4	7–14%	2–4	5–10%	2	25%
Only one	1	3%	1	3%	1	2%	1	12%
None	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%

Appendix C: Framework for Action Plans: Goals, Strategies, and Activities

As designed, the E-STAR Training Program requires every Action Plan to have two goals, one for improving meal quality and one for improving student perception of meal quality. Managers' goals are expected to be "SMART": Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound. To facilitate the development of SMART goals, the E-STAR Workshop training materials include a suggested list of strategies and activities that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound. For each goal, Managers were offered a list of three strategies, each with three associated activities. Managers also could come up with their own activities. Table C-1 shows the strategies and associated activities for each goal, along with the percentage of Action Plans that included each strategy and activity combination. All activities outside of the suggested combinations are counted under "Other."

TABLE C-1. FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION PLANS: GOALS, STRATEGIES, AND ACTIVITIES

STRATEGY	ACTIVITY	NUMBER OF ACTION PLANS	PERCENTAGE (N=81)
Meal Quality Goal			
Increase Menu Variety and Choices for Students	Provide at least 1 (2 or 3) cultural menu options a week (month).	16	20%
	Use food bars or salad bars to provide students with menu variety and choices of at least 2 (3, 4, 5) fruit and/or vegetable offerings served each day (week).	10	12%
	Make fruit available daily at all points of sale.	6	7%
	Other	6	7%
Enhance Visual Appeal of Meals at Breakfast and Lunch	The staff will use garnishes to add color and eye appeal to dishes served daily (weekly).	7	9%
	The Manager will use quality scorecards daily (weekly) to identify acceptable quality products of each meal prepared to ensure meals meet a set of quality standards.	13	16%
	The Manager will ensure the staff does not serve brown, bruised, or otherwise damaged produce on serving lines or salad bars daily.	1	1%
	Other	4	5%
Enhance Culinary Preparation Techniques	The Manager will incorporate batch cooking within the operation based on the menu offerings to ensure the best appearance, temperature, and texture of food are provided to maintain meal quality.	8	10%
	The staff will prepare menu items using a different culinary technique (i.e., roasting, steaming, sautéing, etc.) each month (semester, etc.).	2	2%
	The staff will incorporate the use of at least 1 (2, 3) herb(s) and spice(s) to enhance flavor each week to a menu item.	5	6%
	Other	3	4%
Total for Meal Quality Goal		81	100%

STRATEGY	ACTIVITY	NUMBER OF ACTION PLANS	PERCENTAGE (N=81)
Student Perception Goal			
Strategies Related to School Environment	The staff will maintain a pleasant, safe, and clean physical environment daily in the school cafeteria to encourage student participation.	1	1%
	The staff will display posters and signs in the cafeteria each year to promote healthy eating among students.	22	27%
	The staff will upgrade one aspect within the cafeteria environment (i.e., freshly painted walls, seating arrangements, serving dishes, baskets for displays, updated signs, etc.) each year.	6	7%
	Other	5	6%
Strategies Related to Nutrition Education	The staff will provide students with nutrition education each month (semester).	7	9%
	The staff will work with the school/classes to incorporate food from classroom themes/lessons on the menus each month (semester).	3	4%
	The staff will provide nutrition education messages on the website or on menus each week.	3	4%
	Other	9	11%
Strategies Related to Marketing Efforts	The staff will provide teachers with promotional materials each month (semester).	2	2%
	The Manager will develop a student advisory committee each year.	12	15%
	The staff will host a student recipe competition each year.	4	5%
	Other	7	9%
Total for Student Perception Goal		81	100%

Note: This table reflects the strategy and activity selections of Managers within the prescribed framework. Any activities outside of this framework are counted under "Other."

Appendix D: Action Plan Strategies, Activities, and Corresponding Manager's Corner Lessons

TABLE D-1. ACTION PLAN STRATEGIES, ACTIVITIES, AND CORRESPONDING MANAGER'S CORNER LESSONS

ACTIVITIES	MANAGER'S CORNER LESSONS	ADDITIONAL RESOURCES
Meal Quality Improvement Strategies		
Strategy 1: Increase Menu Variety and Choices for Students		
<p>Activity 1: Provide at least 1 (2 or 3) cultural menu option(s) a week (month).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cycle Menus — Identify the benefits of a cycle menu. • Food Bars — Determine best practices when including food bars as a meal service option for reimbursable meals. • Knowing Your Customer — Identify who your customers are and how to determine their needs and expectations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ICN's Basics at a Glance Poster • ICN's Child Nutrition Recipe Box (CNRB) https://theicn.org/cnrb/ • ICN's MyPlate Poster/Cling • ICN's Spice Poster • USDA's Team Nutrition Healthy Food Heritages: Investigating Nutrition Across Cultures https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/TNevents_healthyheritages.pdf
<p>Activity 2: Use food bars or salad bars to provide students with menu variety and choices of at least 2 (3, 4, or 5) fruit and/or vegetable offerings served each day (week).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dark Green Vegetables in Schools — Identify food sources, nutrients, health benefits, and menu suggestions for dark green vegetables. • Food Bars — Determine best practices when including food bars as a meal service option for reimbursable meals. • Other Vegetables Subgroup in School Meals — Identify food sources, nutrient considerations, health benefits, and menu suggestions for vegetables in the other vegetables subgroup. • Red/Orange Vegetables Subgroup in School Meals — Identify food sources, nutrient considerations, health benefits, and menu suggestions for red/orange vegetables. • School Meals Fruit Component Requirement — Identify the fruit component requirements for a reimbursable school lunch and breakfast. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ICN's Basics at a Glance Poster • ICN's Best Practices Handling Produce Handout • ICN's Food Safety Mini Poster • ICN's Glove Use Poster • ICN's Handwashing Poster • ICN's Produce Safety Booklet

ACTIVITIES	MANAGER'S CORNER LESSONS	ADDITIONAL RESOURCES
Meal Quality Improvement Strategies		
Strategy 1: Increase Menu Variety and Choices for Students		
Activity 3: Make fruit available daily at all points of sale.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quality Score Card — Identify standards for a quality product using a quality score card. • School Meals Fruit Component Requirement — Identify the fruit component requirements for a reimbursable school lunch and breakfast. • Storing Produce for Optimal Quality — Identify best practices for storing produce to ensure optimal quality. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ICN's Best Practices for Handling Produce Handout • ICN's Food Safety Mini Posters • ICN's Glove Use Poster • ICN's Handwashing Poster • ICN's MyPlate Poster/Cling • ICN's Produce Safety Booklet • ICN's Quality Score Cards
Strategy 2: Enhance Visual Appeal of Meals at Breakfast and Lunch		
Activity 1: The staff will use garnishes to add color and eye appeal to dishes served daily (weekly).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Food Presentation — Identify principles of good food presentation to increase students' selection of a reimbursable meal. • Meal Quality and Acceptability — Identify the visual characteristics of quality foods and prepare foods that meet the program's meal quality standards. • Quality Score Card — Identify standards for a quality product using a quality score card. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ICN's Quality Score Cards • ICN's Spice Poster
Activity 2: The Manager will utilize quality scorecards daily (weekly) to identify acceptable quality products of each meal prepared to ensure meals meet a set of quality standards.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meal Quality and Acceptability — Identify the visual characteristics of quality foods and prepare foods that meet the program's meal quality standards. • Quality Score Card — Identify standards for a quality product using a quality score card. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ICN's Quality Score Cards
Activity 3: The Manager will ensure the staff does not serve brown, bruised, or otherwise damaged produce on serving lines or salad bars daily.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Food Presentation — Identify principles of good food presentation to increase students' selection of a reimbursable meal. • Meal Service Options — Identify meal service options for a reimbursable lunch and breakfast. • Quality Score Card — Identify standards for a quality product using a quality score card. • Storing Produce for Optimal Quality — Identify best practices for storing produce to ensure optimal quality. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ICN's Best Practices Handling Produce Handout • ICN's Food Safety Mini Poster • ICN's Glove Use Poster • ICN's Handwashing Poster • ICN's Produce Safety Booklet • ICN's Quality Score Cards

ACTIVITIES	MANAGER'S CORNER LESSONS	ADDITIONAL RESOURCES
Meal Quality Improvement Strategies		
Strategy 3: Enhance Culinary Preparation Techniques		
<p>Activity 1: The Manager will incorporate batch cooking within the operation based on the menu offerings to ensure the best appearance, temperature, and texture of food are provided to maintain meal quality.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Batch Cooking — Identify the benefits of batch cooking. • Meal Quality and Acceptability — Identify the visual characteristics of quality foods and prepare foods that meet the program's meal quality standards. • Quality Score Card — Identify standards for a quality product using a quality score card. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ICN's Basics at a Glance Poster • ICN's Best Practices Handling Produce Handout • ICN's Produce Safety Booklet • ICN's Quality Score Cards
<p>Activity 2: The staff will prepare menu items using a different culinary technique (i.e., roasting, steaming, sautéing, etc.) each month (semester, etc.).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Batch Cooking — Identify the benefits of batch cooking. • Common Large Cooking Equipment — Identify common large cooking equipment and the uses for each piece of equipment. • Knife Skills: Types of Knives — Discuss the types of knives most commonly used in school kitchens. • Knife Skills: Safety — Describe good knife safety practices and demonstrate how to carry a knife properly. • Mise en Place — Identify the importance of mise en place to the success of a school nutrition operation. • Quality Score Card — Identify standards for a quality product using a quality score card. • Roasting Vegetables — Apply the basic principles of roasting to recipes for roasted vegetables. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ICN's Basics at a Glance Poster • ICN's Managing Food Allergies in Schools Booklet • ICN's Produce Safety Booklet • ICN's Quality Score Cards • ICN's Spice Poster
<p>Activity 3: The staff will incorporate the use of at least 1 (2 or 3) herb(s) and spice(s) to enhance flavor each week to a menu item.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Batch Cooking — Identify the benefits of batch cooking. • Meal Quality and Acceptability — Identify the visual characteristics of quality foods and prepare foods that meet the program's meal quality standards. • Roasting Vegetables — Apply the basic principles of roasting to recipes for roasted vegetables. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ICN's Basics at a Glance Poster • ICN's Spice Poster

ACTIVITIES	MANAGER'S CORNER LESSONS	ADDITIONAL RESOURCES
Student Perception of Meal Quality		
Strategy 1: School Environment		
<p>Activity 1: The staff will maintain a pleasant, safe, and clean physical environment daily in the school cafeteria to encourage student participation.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a Positive Customer Experience — Describe ways that the school nutrition staff can create a positive customer experience in the cafeteria. • Customer Service and Communication — Discuss customer service and communication and explain how they work together in the school nutrition program. • Food Presentation — Identify principles of good food presentation to increase students' selection of a reimbursable meal. • Knowing Your Customer — Identify who your customers are and how to determine their needs and expectations. • Serving Line Presentation — Identify methods for displaying and presenting foods in an attractive manner. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ICN's Food Safety Mini Posters • ICN's Gloves Poster • ICN's Handwashing Poster • ICN's Managing Food Allergies in Schools Booklet • USDA's Team Nutrition Handwashing and Cleaning Resources
<p>Activity 2: The staff will display posters and signs in the cafeteria each year to promote healthy eating among students.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a Positive Customer Experience — Describe ways that the school nutrition staff can create a positive customer experience in the cafeteria. • Nutrition Education — Identify ways to incorporate nutrition education messages into the school curriculum. • Serving Line Presentation — Identify methods for displaying and presenting foods in an attractive manner. • School Breakfast Program Promotion — Identify ways to promote the benefits of the school breakfast program. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ICN's MyPlate Poster/Cling • USDA's Team Nutrition Elementary School Posters https://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/team-nutrition-elementary-school-posters • USDA's Team Nutrition Posters https://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/posters • USDA's Team Nutrition Graphic Library https://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/graphics-library
<p>Activity 3: The staff will upgrade one aspect within the cafeteria environment (i.e., painting walls, seating arrangements, serving dishes, baskets for displays, updated signs, etc.) each year.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a Positive Customer Experience — Describe ways that the school nutrition staff can create a positive customer experience in the cafeteria. • Serving Line Presentation — Identify methods for displaying and presenting foods in an attractive manner. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ICN's MyPlate Poster/Cling

ACTIVITIES	MANAGER'S CORNER LESSONS	ADDITIONAL RESOURCES
Student Perception of Meal Quality		
Strategy 2: Nutrition Education		
<p>Activity 1: The staff will provide students with nutrition education each month (semester).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nutrition Education — Identify ways to incorporate nutrition education messages into the school curriculum. • Promoting Milk Intake in School Meals — Identify ways to promote nutrition education by encouraging students to drink more milk at school meals. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • USDA's Team Nutrition Serving Up My Plate https://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/serving-myplate-yummy-curriculum • USDA's Team Nutrition Discover MyPlate https://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/discover-myplate-nutrition-education-kindergarten • USDA's Team Nutrition Fueling My Healthy Life https://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/fueling-my-healthy-life
<p>Activity 2: The staff will work with the school/classes to incorporate food from classroom themes/ lessons on the menus each month (semester).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nutrition Education — Identify ways to incorporate nutrition education messages into the school curriculum. • School Breakfast Program Promotion — Identify ways to promote the benefits of the school breakfast program. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • USDA's Team Nutrition: Nutrition Education Materials at https://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/nutrition-education-materials • USDA's Team Nutrition Launch Your Day With Breakfast: Fuel Up To Help Your Day Take Off at https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/TNevents_launch.pdf
<p>Activity 3: The staff will provide nutrition education messages on the website or on menus each week.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nutrition Education — Identify ways to incorporate nutrition education messages into the school curriculum. • School Breakfast Program Promotion — Identify ways to promote the benefits of the school breakfast program. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • USDA's Team Nutrition: Nutrition Education Materials at https://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/nutrition-education-materials • USDA's Team Nutrition Launch Your Day With Breakfast: Fuel Up To Help Your Day Take Off at https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/TNevents_launch.pdf

ACTIVITIES	MANAGER'S CORNER LESSONS	ADDITIONAL RESOURCES
Student Perception of Meal Quality		
Strategy 3: Marketing Efforts		
<p>Activity 1: The staff will provide teachers with promotional materials each month (semester).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Getting Buy-In from School Administration and Staff —Identify tips and techniques for getting buy-in from school administration and staff. • Nutrition Education — Identify ways to incorporate nutrition education messages into the school curriculum. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • USDA's Team Nutrition Unravel Clues in the Cafeteria https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/gd_lesson6.pdf • USDA's Team Nutrition School Wellness Policy Outreach Kit https://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/local-school-wellness-policy-outreach-toolkit • USDA's Team Nutrition Events Through the Year https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/TNevents_through.pdf • USDA's Team Nutrition What You Can Do To Help Prevent Wasted Food https://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/what-you-can-do-help-prevent-wasted-food • USDA's Team Nutrition Schools Network https://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/schools • USDA's Team Nutrition MyPlate Guide to School Breakfast https://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/myplate-guide-school-breakfast • USDA's Team Nutrition MyPlate Guide to School Lunch https://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/myplate-guide-school-lunch

ACTIVITIES	MANAGER'S CORNER LESSONS	ADDITIONAL RESOURCES
Student Perception of Meal Quality		
Strategy 3: Marketing Efforts		
<p>Activity 2: The Manager will develop a student advisory committee each year.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a Positive Customer Experience — Describe ways that the school nutrition staff can create a positive customer experience in the cafeteria. • Customer Service and Communication — Discuss customer service and communication and explain how they work together in the school nutrition program. • Identify Customers and Their Needs — Identify customers and their needs. • Knowing Your Customer — Identify who your customers are and how to determine their needs and expectations. • School Breakfast Program Promotion — Identify ways to promote the benefits of the school breakfast program. • Student Taste Testing-Breakfast — Promote the School Breakfast Program by hosting a taste test of breakfast foods. • Student Taste Testing-Lunch — Promote the National School Lunch Program by hosting a taste testing of lunch foods. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • USDA's Team Nutrition You Control the School Menu: Vote for Your Favorite https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/TNevents_control.pdf • USDA's Team Nutrition Be A Food Champion: Stand Up For Your Favorites https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/TNevents_foodchampion.pdf
<p>Activity 3: The staff will host a student recipe competition each year.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a Positive Customer Experience — Describe ways that the school nutrition staff can create a positive customer experience in the cafeteria. • Identify Customers and Their Needs — Identify customers and their needs. • Knowing Your Customer — Identify who your customers are and how to determine their needs and expectations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • USDA's Team Nutrition Team Nutrition Cooks https://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/cooks • USDA's Team Nutrition The Chef in You: A Cooking Competition https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/tn/TNevents_chefinyou.pdf

ADDITIONAL MANAGER'S CORNER LESSONS	
Buy American	Objective: Identify the importance of the Buy American provision and ensuring the domestic products ordered are the same ones received.
Communication on the Serving Line: Substitutions	Objective: Identify effective communication methods regarding menu substitutions on the serving line.
Dietary Fiber	Objective: Define dietary fiber and identify food sources and nutrition benefits of dietary fiber.
Eight Major Allergens	Objective: Recognize the eight major allergens – eggs, fish, milk, peanuts, shellfish, soy, tree nuts, and wheat – and possible food sources.
Forecasting: The Role of School Nutrition Staff	Objective: Identify the role of school nutrition staff in the accurate forecasting of foods, goods, works, and services.
Ingredient Calculations	Objective: Identify how to adjust ingredient quantities for production needs.
Legumes in School Meals	Objective: Identify food sources, nutrient considerations, health benefits, and menu suggestions for legumes.
Menu Substitutions for Vegetables	Objective: Identify menu substitutions for the vegetable component that meet meal pattern requirements.
Preventing Excess Waste in Storage Areas	Objective: Identify inventory management techniques to help prevent having too much product on hand.
Production Records	Objective: Identify the required information and the benefits of production records.
School Meals Grain Component Requirements	Objective: Identify daily and weekly grain requirements in school meals.
School Meals Meat/Meat Alternates Component Requirements	Objective: Identify meats/meat alternates (M/MA) component requirements for a reimbursable school lunch.

Source: Hall-Campbell (2021a)

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