

Implementing School Nutrition Policies

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Schools provide an important venue for promoting healthy eating. In recent years, local and national governments have recognized that school nutrition policies can play an important role in achieving positive health outcomes for students. The New Brunswick Department of Education was at the forefront of action in 1991 when it developed the Food and Nutrition Policy for New Brunswick Schools. The goal of the policy was to encourage students to develop good eating habits. The policy was developed with relative ease, but implementation proved problematic. A case study of the policy process revealed that a number of key issues influenced implementation. Actions by districts and schools to address these issues could provide direction for future action by others. Achieving the aims of nutrition policies that promote healthy eating will require schools to adopt a coordinated approach that emphasizes nutrition education in classrooms, food services, and at home.

- < By promoting healthy eating, schools can help students avoid negative consequences for their learning and health such as inattentiveness and obesity. National and international government agencies support the development of nutrition policies to achieve this goal.
- < School nutrition policies are important because they draw attention to the role of nutrition in schools, an area that is frequently regarded as outside the schools' mandate.
- < When promoting healthy eating, schools must consider a number of issues: the juxtaposition of nutritional objectives with fund-raising goals, the amount of choice to cede to students, the priority given to nutrition relative to other school concerns, the clarity of nutrition policies, and the approach to their implementation. Some schools and districts in New Brunswick have effected changes in these areas and can provide direction for others.
- < More could be done to promote healthy eating through nutrition policies. Schools could capitalize on the educational opportunities school food services provide and coordinate these services with classroom teaching and parental support.

Overview

Learning and health problems associated with poor nutrition among school-aged children are far-reaching. Children who are undernourished score lower on standardized tests, especially tests of language ability and problem-solving. They tend to be more irritable, less able to concentrate, and lacking in energy. Children with poor diets are also prone to infection, dental cavities, and eating disorders, and are at increased risk of obesity, which is considered an epidemic in the United States. Moreover, children who establish poor eating habits during the schooling years are more likely to suffer coronary heart disease, cancer, stroke, diabetes, high blood pressure, osteoporosis, obesity, and other chronic diseases as adults (Centers for Disease Control, 1996; Troccoli, 1993). Sixty percent of New Brunswick's adults are overweight or obese, which is the highest prevalence in the country (Gilmore, 1999).

In recent years, national and international government agencies have recognized that school nutrition policies can be an important mechanism for improving academic and health outcomes for children. The New Brunswick Department of Education demonstrated leadership in this area when it developed the Food and Nutrition Policy for New Brunswick Schools (NB Department of Education, 1991), the first such policy in Canada developed by an education department. However, the policy was largely unsuccessful. The Department funded a case study of the policy in an attempt to gain insight into the issues affecting implementation. Sources of data for the case study included school observations, interviews with 66 key informants, and documents from the Department, schools, and school districts (McKenna, 2000).

The Fate of the Food and Nutrition Policy for New Brunswick Schools

The Department of Education developed its nutrition policy in 1991 in response to concerns about hungry children and the poor nutritional quality of the foods available in schools. The goal was to encourage students to

develop good eating habits by achieving three objectives: organizing school food services to ensure that high quality nutritional foods were available, incorporating nutrition education into the school environment, and ensuring access to food by all students. Although policy development proceeded in a straightforward manner, a number of obstacles impeded implementation. These included concerns about fund-raising, a lack of student choice in the food provided, and the allocation of educational resources to nutrition. Some administrators felt that the policy lacked clarity, and resented the Department for its top-down approach to implementation. Consequently, the policy was widely opposed by people from a broad cross-section of school districts, student councils, and food companies. In the face of this controversy, and because of competing priorities, the Department retreated from its initial efforts to implement the policy. Instead, it focused on one objective – student access to food. It allocated over \$1,000,000 for schools to provide milk at subsidized prices, and to establish or expand food programs. Schools were on their honour to follow the entire policy, but the only change that was widely implemented was the milk program. For the minority of schools that made other changes, there was little recognition; and for those that did not, there were no consequences. By 1995, active implementation had virtually ceased, and the policy was viewed as a good-will policy.

Issues Concerning Policy Implementation

The difficulties associated with implementing the nutrition policy were not due to uncaring school staff who did not value nutrition. Rather, other issues took precedence over nutritional concerns. Nevertheless, some schools and districts were successful in at least partially adopting the policy, as the following examples show:

Fund-raising. One of the most contentious issues regarding policy implementation was fund-raising. Educators, parents, and students were

concerned about where they were going to obtain revenue to support various school programs if they were no longer allowed to sell popular items in school canteens, vending machines, and other school outlets. Secondary school principals and vice principals were unanimous in calling the policy “well-intentioned, but unrealistic”. The position of the Department was that fund-raising was a separate issue from nutrition; however, this did not prove to be the case. Even districts and schools that took steps to implement the policy found they had to address fund-raising. One district no longer kept the commission it received from the district catering company, and instead disbursed it among schools to compensate for revenues lost through menu changes. One school took over the management of the cafeteria, employing staff from the former catering company. The school gradually improved the nutritional quality of the foods available so that deep-fried foods were no longer sold. The student council received all of the profits, which were sufficient to support council activities. Another school removed all vending machines and absorbed the loss of profit.

Student choice. Another controversial aspect of the policy was student choice. Those who disagreed with the policy, including a number of powerful food companies, felt students should have a range of choices and be educated to make wise selections. The Department's position was that students' choices should be among healthy foods. Those who at least partly supported the Department dealt with the choice issue in various ways. One school gathered evidence of the poor choices students made in a cafeteria where the nutritional value of many of the foods was poor, and shared the information with parents. Afterwards, the parents took their concerns to the principal who then successfully intervened with the catering company. One district gathered information regarding the food choices of students at home compared with school. They found that most parents limited their children's food choices at home,

which had a positive effect on eating habits, and therefore the district followed the parents' example.

Priority of Nutrition. The policy also drew attention to the role of nutrition in schools. Nutrition is an area that traditionally receives little attention, not only because it is considered outside the main educational role of schools, but also because it is not an area of widespread public concern. For these reasons, school personnel questioned why funds were allocated to subsidize milk at a time when schools were "crying for book resources". Those who took leadership roles in implementing the policy were supportive of the policy objective because they felt children would benefit, or they regarded implementing the policy as part of their job.

Lack of Policy Clarity. Initially, the Department tried to insist that the policy be implemented as written, but later it allowed the policy to be interpreted as a guideline for action. For example, the policy stated that no deep-fried foods were to be available in schools, which some districts followed to the letter, while others made little or no change. Catering companies were well aware the policy could be interpreted broadly, something that schools often used to justify their inaction regarding implementation. In contrast, a number of districts and schools worked to improve the nutritional quality of foods in several ways. Some increased the number of healthy food options available; for example, they added fruit juice and water to vending machines and canteens, and offered raw vegetables in cafeterias. Some also decreased or eliminated offerings of less healthy options such as french fries and salty snack items. Some catering companies tried to increase the appeal of healthy options by featuring healthy foods, packaging salads attractively, and sponsoring contests.

Approach to Implementation. The Department committee used a top-down approach to implementation, expecting districts to form committees and develop three-year implementation plans. In contrast, in districts and schools where change occurred, the approach tended to

be participative and collaborative. One district based its plan for policy implementation on information collected through focus groups and surveys with parents, school staff, and students. It also partnered with the district's catering company to implement changes, and indicated to schools that to be eligible for funds to enhance student access to food, they had to show improvement in the nutritional quality of foods offered. Another district organized meetings of school clusters where principals, teachers, parents, and students shared information about nutrition and developed one-year plans to promote healthy eating. A district directive about foods prompted the principal of one school to meet with the cafeteria manager. In consultation with school staff and parents, they organized changes to the cafeteria menu and began a breakfast program.

Looking to the Future

The New Brunswick results are instructive to nutrition policy implementation in three key ways. First, they demonstrate that a number of districts and schools are willing to at least partially implement a nutrition policy. Second, they indicate the important role of the implementing agency, in this case, the Department of Education. Such agencies cannot ignore the issues that are important to districts and schools. They must ensure that when faced with competing priorities, they maintain nutrition as a priority, and exert pressure by monitoring the process and outcomes of change and attaching consequences. But pressure from the top is insufficient; it needs to be combined with appropriate support to assist districts and schools throughout the change process. The support can include funding, the provision of nutritional expertise, and working collaboratively with the schools.

Third, the results highlight the marginal status of nutrition within schools, and indicate where opportunities for improvement lie. Although New Brunswick experienced problems with implementation, the findings of the case study do not imply that the policy measures were an inappropriate response

to the problems with school nutrition. For change to occur, schools must attach greater value to nutrition and see it as integral to their educational role. They are more likely to do so if they participate in the change process. This means involving school administrators and staff in recognizing the educational opportunities that school food services could provide. For example, students could complete assignments in which they survey food purchases, analyze the nutritional value of the foods available, develop marketing strategies to promote healthy foods, and provide point-of-purchase nutritional information for their peers. The food services would then become locations where students study the effects of eating environments on food choices and practice making choices that promote healthy eating. As well, parents could be actively encouraged through home-school communication and school parent groups to share responsibility for improving school nutrition.

Conclusion

A generation ago, the food supply was much simpler than it is now. There were fewer foods from which to choose, more foods were prepared from basic ingredients, and there was much less eating out, especially at fast-food restaurants. The clock is not going to turn back. Faced with the challenge to support students' learning and health through good nutrition, and trying in particular to stem the rapid rise of childhood obesity, it is time for parents and school staff to review their practices to ensure that they are helping school-aged children meet today's nutritional challenges. There has been little discussion about the widespread practice of schools' partnerships with fast food restaurants to provide young children with "brand name" foods. Nor has there been a significant effort to support physical education programs and other school activities by means other than the sale of unhealthy food. The successful implementation of a nutrition policy offers the opportunity for all schools to proudly proclaim, as did one food-service manager, "In our school, it is the children who profit".

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