

LAUSD Nutrition Network Evaluation Project: August 2001-September 2002

In 2001, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) Nutrition Network funded the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) School of Public Health research team to collect data about nutrition and physical activity programs in schools with and without the LAUSD Nutrition Network program. The overall goal of this study was to obtain information on existing nutrition education, physical activity instruction, school garden programs, and student participation patterns in schools participating and not participating in the Nutrition Network programs in order to measure future change and refine future Nutrition Network program activities. In order to achieve this purpose, the research team conducted interviews and observations with school community stakeholders in selected LAUSD schools.

The 2001 study was conducted in LAUSD elementary schools, including those that received funding from the LAUSD Nutrition Network (intervention schools) and those that did not (non-intervention schools).

A total of 361 interviews were conducted with school administrators, teachers, cafeteria managers, nurses, other school staff, parents, and students. The interview questions were based on a list of Nutrition Network study questions related to nutrition education, gardening, and physical education. Additionally, an observation of each school's physical space (such as kitchen, grounds, and gardens) was conducted. Data from 24 schools with LAUSD Nutrition Network funding and 21 non-intervention schools were analyzed for this report.

Summary of Findings

August 2001 – September 2002

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The following lists the key findings:

1. The LAUSD Nutrition Network program activities are responding to the Surgeon General's Call For Action.

The LAUSD Nutrition Network has implemented and sustained numerous activities in LAUSD schools in a short time frame. The Nutrition Network has supported on-going school programs as well as facilitated the implementation of innovative programs within the participating schools. The program fulfills many of the recommended activities outlined in the Surgeon General's Call for Action To Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity (2001). In addition the program is helping to support activities that addresses major health issues of today—that is poor child nutrition, childhood overweight, and obesity.

Recommendation:

Expand and strengthen the Nutrition Network activities to include additional activities outlined in the Surgeon General's Call for Action.

2. LAUSD Nutrition Network Schools provide a variety of nutrition education activities and these activities are integrated into the school curriculum.

Nutrition education is the major program intervention among the LAUSD Nutrition Network schools sampled. In addition, the intervention schools are spending significantly more time on nutrition education than non-intervention schools: over 60% of intervention schools spend more than 30 minutes per week on nutrition education, with half of this group spending more than one hour per week. The majority of the schools with action grants provide many opportunities for students to learn about nutrition. Furthermore, LAUSD schools with Nutrition Network action grants provide nutrition education to students in creative ways. The nutrition education and gardening are integrated into most of the school subjects. Integration of nutrition education into the school subjects not only makes optimal use of limited instructional time, it also presents new information within a familiar context, allowing it to be more meaningful (Richard, 1995; De Vito et al., 1993).

Recommendations:

Conduct additional research to identify the strength and quality of programs supported by the Nutrition Network as well as the impact on student behaviors and health. Continue supporting the development of program activities to meet the needs of the individual school. Continue to advocate for the use of school gardens as a nutrition education tool and as a way to increase fruit and vegetable consumption.

3. The school food program provides more nutritious meals than meals eaten away from school.

The school food program provides high quality, nutritious meals for students. In this study, participants recognized the impact of the school food program with a large percent of participants responding that the school food program has a positive affect on student eating. School meals are a very important part of healthy eating, as over one-third of

students eat school breakfast, over three-fourths eat school lunch, and one-third of daily total calories come from school provided meals. This study found that school-provided meals are overall healthier than meals consumed outside of school. School meals provided twice as much calcium, more protein, less sodium and less fat per calorie compared to meals away from school. The school food service staff should be applauded and the benefits of the school food program should be promoted.

Recommendations:

Support the activities that help increase the availability of healthy foods during school hours such as salad bars, school fundraisers, and snacks during “nutrition”, recess, and after school. Support promotional activities such as Harvest of the Month, salad bars, and healthy snacks that help initiate and sustain healthy eating choices. Increase outreach educational efforts for parents.

4. The promotion by the Nutrition Network of multidisciplinary teams to support program activities is potentially a successful strategy for sustaining change.

The LAUSD Nutrition Network has created an opportunity for collaboration among school community stakeholders. Schools with action grants are largely taking advantage of the expertise offered by the school cafeteria managers, school nurses, and other school staff. This multidisciplinary approach to build capacity within a school to promote a healthy environment is potentially a sustainable strategy for change.

Recommendations:

Document the process for the development of the multidisciplinary team. Promote and facilitate on-going communication among the multidisciplinary team. Provide tools for the action team to communicate their role within their school community. Provide technical assistance to schools to help create and support the action team. Include families and students on any Nutrition Network school committee as they are often not included in school committees.

5. There is an opportunity to increase the visibility of the LAUSD Nutrition Network.

To gain support for and increase participation in the Nutrition Network, the LAUSD Nutrition Network should be sure that all school community stakeholders know of the program. While conducting interviews for the 2001-2002 study, almost 20% of non-intervention school participants had not heard of the Nutrition Network.

There are several opportunities to increase visibility throughout the district and among school community stakeholders. For example, local district nurses meet each month and a Nutrition Network staff could attend these meetings or have a nurse already involved in the Nutrition Network spread the word about the Nutrition Network. Also, each local district has a parent meeting each month. The Nutrition Network has provided workshops for some of these meetings and could increase participation in more. The LAUSD Nutrition Network is a great resource for schools to impact student health. By increasing the visibility to the district and within each school community, the impact could be increased.

Recommendations:

Take advantage of on-going meetings to increase the awareness of the program and its additional educational activities and resources. Publicize and promote in a variety of ways the Nutrition Network resources (including the loan “library” and workshops) available to school community stakeholders.

6. The grant application, tracking, and reporting can be cumbersome for schools with minimal resources.

At the beginning of this study, many participants expressed frustration in the process of spending money, tracking ordered supplies, and dealing with the budgetary matters. Additionally, to identify and describe LAUSD Nutrition Network activities and programs, the lead teacher should understand that the end of the year report is required and schools should identify all Nutrition Network supported activities.

Recommendations:

If such a position does not exist, LAUSD should consider the position of a grant manager or assign current staff to provide technical assistance and grant management to specific schools. Schools would be assigned to a staff person who would assist with the process and provide individual support. If the process has not been revised, it is recommended that a clear, streamlined, step-by-step process describing the grant process, budgetary matters, and spending grant money is implemented and communicated to all Nutrition Network participants.

7. There is much opportunity to increase awareness of and access to community resources.

While schools have accessed state and national resources for nutrition education, fewer are aware of or access local community resources. Community collaboration is particularly important for sustainability, but also to increase the effectiveness of the program (Daniels, 1994; Usinger-Lesquereux, 1994; American Dietetic Association, 1996).

One-fifth to one-quarter of participants did not know if their school was involved with community organizations. This highlights the need for communication among school staff and diffusion of resources and information. These businesses and organizations can provide additional materials, supplies, funding, and speakers to schools for nutrition education. Promoting the use of nutrition-related organizations (such as 5-A-Day Power Play! and EFNEP) could allow schools to use already existing nutrition education curriculum and materials without expending additional resources, which can decrease duplication of services and increase both effectiveness and efficiency (Daniels, 1994; Sims; 1996).

Recommendations:

The LAUSD Nutrition Network staff could create and foster partnerships with community organizations and provide schools with a resource list of common local business or organizations (restaurant, grocery stores, bus, religious org, college, universities) that schools can partner with. LAUSD Nutrition Network could provide training and assistance in creating and maintaining collaborative partnerships.

8. There is much opportunity to increase family involvement in nutrition and physical activity programs.

While the majority of schools provide some nutrition education to families, parent education is listed as a top need for nutrition education. Family involvement is necessary for dietary behavior change and impacting the health of students. Family customs and habits have been identified as a major barrier to eating behavior change for low-income Hispanics/Latinos (Palmeri et al., 1998). Further, family-based prevention strategies have been shown to decrease the prevalence of obesity through weight changes (Glenny et al., 1997). Parent involvement in PE provides a link between home and school that allows parents to serve as role models for their children.

This is an opportunity for families to be involved in school activities, which strengthens the bond to the school and to involve parents and families in the school community and in student health.

Recommendations:

A separate grant could be established for parent groups/centers to provide opportunities for families to be involved. There is much of interest in family involvement but schools may be without the necessary resources to provide such education.

The LAUSD Nutrition Network could identify current staff to specialize in providing technical assistance for parents and parent groups. Through this staff member, the LAUSD Nutrition Network could provide training in how to include families and content based training for specific nutrition and physical activity programs to include families.

While the majority of schools offer nutrition education programs to families few offer physical activity programs. It is recommended that the Nutrition Network encourage continued efforts to include families in nutrition and physical activity programs.

Include families on any school committee/teams related to nutrition and physical education.

9. There is much opportunity to improve the nutritional values of the foods sold for fundraising activities.

With the identification of poor diet as common nutrition problems, schools can address these issues by providing healthy snacks to students, appropriate fundraising, and educating students and parents about nutrition and the consequences of a poor diet.

While sale of junk/unhealthy food and beverages for fundraising complies with current LAUSD policies, SB 19 (effective 1/1/04) allows for the sale of these items for elementary schools only if: students sell these items off-campus or students sell these items at least one-half hour after the end of school. Schools should be encouraged to begin conforming to these new standards. It is important that schools do not send mixed messages to their students regarding healthy eating by selling junk/unhealthy food. This is a key leverage point for concentrated efforts from the Nutrition Network.

The majority of schools, including Nutrition Network funded schools, sell junk food (soft drinks, candy, chips, baked goods) for fundraising. This practice sends a mixed message to students, particularly in schools with Nutrition Network funding that are promoting healthy eating behaviors. Additionally, few schools sell fruit or vegetables for fundraising – giving student fewer options to choose healthy eating.

Recommendations:

Encourage schools to adopt fundraising techniques that do not involve junk/unhealthy food or beverages.

Investigate alternatives for schools that participate in food fundraising such as jog-a-thons and create a resource list with contact information, and descriptions of these alternatives.

The Nutrition Network could create a grant for schools to promote interesting or innovative fundraising ideas or create a group/list of activities that can be shared with schools.

10. There are many opportunities to increase physical activity in schools.

With almost one third of schools not meeting the state mandate of 200 minutes every 10 school days, encourage them to increase the time spent in PE to meet this mandate. Although 20 minutes a day of PE is beneficial, it does not meet the recommendations for children to exercise at least 30 minutes on all or most days (National Institutes of Health, 1997; Consensus Development Panel, 1996) or the Institute of Medicine's recommendation of one hour a day.

The majority of participants responded that PE at their school consisted of non-structured free play. This type of PE does not teach students about the benefits of PE, educate them about the importance of PE to overall health, or guarantee the rigor or vigor of physical activity. Since PE is most often taught by classroom teachers who lack training and time for PE, PE training can be used to expand the definition of PE to more often include education about physical activity and the healthy effects of regular physical activity.

Several additional barriers to PE were identified in this study including the emphasis on standardized testing. Sallis and others found that spending an increased amount of time in PE did not decrease standardized test scores and, on the contrary, may improve student academic achievement (1999). However, due to limited time and numerous mandates, teachers need to be trained in PE in general and specifically how to incorporate physical activity into other class subjects. Another barrier is lack of training. While many participants would like to a dedicated PE teacher, this may not be a reality due to lack of funding. However, to receive funding for teacher training, it may need to be clarified and encouraged that Nutrition Network funds can be used for PE training through programs such as SPARK.

As 16% of participants report that PE is not important, school community members should be educated on the importance of physical activity and its relation to overall health and disease prevention, as well as the national recommendations.

Recommendations:

Expand the definition of PE training to include education about physical activity and the healthy effects of regular physical activity.

Train teachers in providing optimal physical activity for their students.

Educate the school community of the importance of physical activity.

11. There is an opportunity to expand program activities within non-action grant schools.

This report focuses only on Nutrition Network schools with action grants; it does not focus on schools with lower levels of participation. It is clear from the study that schools with action grants are providing many nutrition education opportunities. It is not known what is offered at non-action grant schools. These schools will probably provide greater detail of types of planning the LAUSD Nutrition Network can do to increase the level of participation in these schools.

Recommendations:

Identify the barriers for non-action grant schools in applying for action grants and providing nutrition and physical education to students, families, and the community.

Identify nutrition education and physical activity programs in non action grant schools to distinguish if any differences exist between these schools and action grant schools in the amount or type of programs and activities offered.