

# “Another partner in the classroom:” The role of nutrition education in the implementation of school nutrition policies

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## Background

In recent years, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has addressed school food environment reform with updated nutrition standards: *Nutrition Standards in the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs* and *Nutrition Standards for All Foods Sold in School* or Smart Snacks. The standards outlined many requirements, including increases in fruits & vegetables, whole grain-rich products, and decreases in sodium, trans and saturated fat.<sup>1-2</sup>

While there is emerging research pointing to the positive impact of school nutrition policies on school and student level outcomes,<sup>3</sup> there is limited literature informing best practices for successful implementation of such policies.

Of the few studies available, the importance of incremental changes, leadership support, and student engagement are noted as key implementation factors;<sup>4</sup> however, a limited number of studies include the voices of students who are a critical stakeholder group.

This qualitative study is one component of the National Wellness Policy Study (NWPS) which examines the implementation and impacts of policies related to the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010.

## Objective

This study examined policy implementation through the frontline experiences of food service directors (FSDs) and high school (HS) students, with a focus on nutrition education (NE) as a key factor in implementation.

## Methods

We conducted key informant interviews with FSDs (n=9) from 8 states (March-April 2015) and focus groups and follow up interviews with HS students (n=15) from 10 states (July-Dec 2015) across the US. Data collection focused on experiences and perceptions of school meals (FSD) and school meals and Smart Snacks standards implementation (HS students).

High school students were affiliated with the Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing (FCYO), a youth social justice organization with a Healthy School Food Program.

Characteristics of Districts where FSDs were Located		n (%)	Characteristics of Schools where Students were Located		n (%)
Region			Region		
	West	2 (22%)		West	10 (67%)
	Northeast	1 (11%)		Northeast	2 (13%)
	South	3 (33%)		South	2 (13%)
	Midwest	3 (33%)		Midwest	0 (0%)
Locale			Locale		
	Suburb	2 (22%)		Suburb	6 (40%)
	Urban	2 (22%)		Urban	9 (60%)
	Rural & Town	5 (56%)		Rural & Town	0 (0%)
Free & reduced price lunch eligibility (tertiles)			Free & reduced price lunch eligibility (tertiles)		
	Low	3 (33%)		Low	0 (0%)
	Medium	2 (22%)		Medium	5 (33%)
	High	4 (44%)		High	10 (67%)

An iteratively developed coding guide was applied to both interviews and focus group transcripts. Coding was conducted in Atlas.ti v7 Qualitative Data Analysis Software. Analysts met continuously to discuss discrepancies in the coding process, followed by iterative revisions. Inter-rater agreement reached 80% before the full set of transcripts were coded.<sup>5</sup> Analysis followed guidelines of constant comparative analysis for theme generation.<sup>6</sup>

'Member checking' was conducted with HS students to ensure that the findings represented students' experiences. Preliminary findings were also presented to USDA Food and Nutrition Service officials for feedback that further deepened the analysis process.

## Findings

Both FSDs and HS students reported the important role of NE in school meals and snacks standards implementation.

**FSD Perspectives:** FSDs described NE in various ways, including classroom instruction and activities such as participation in the Fresh Fruit & Vegetable Program and school gardens. FSDs reported the effectiveness of combining health promotion efforts in classrooms with the updated school meal and snacks standards. NE increased knowledge and familiarity of fruits & vegetables and improved acceptance to school food environment changes.

### Food Service Director Quotations

"It gives another added layer to promoting education and nutrition in healthy eating to our students, too. Outside of the cafeteria. We just kind of developed another partner in the classroom, you know, with the teacher, when the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program was implemented." – MS FSD

"It's something kids see in health or a classroom now, they see also in the school cafeteria where it all matches. It finally comes together and makes sense." – VA FSD

**HS Students Perspectives:** HS students described NE as both formal classroom instruction and communication from the school community. Lack of NE prior to school meals and snacks reform was reported as a missed opportunity to proactively garner buy-in and acceptance from students. Students expressed interest in being engaged with implementation efforts.

### Student Quotation

"I feel like it [school meal changes] would be stronger if they let us know like "hey, we're going to change this food because it does this to your body and it does this to your brain and when you're here for 7 hours or more..." It would help students connect...and more students would act positively to the change, instead of just passing it [the standards] and not knowing why."

"Cause if you just go to school one day, and they're like, 'Here, you're gonna have salad and a piece of grilled chicken, it's healthy with fruit,' but if they don't explain to you why it's good instead of getting chips and a hot dog and fries, then maybe it might not seem positive, but if you explain the benefits of why it's better to eat healthy, than maybe more students would like understand it."

## Conclusion and Implications

FSDs reported employing various NE activities that increased familiarity and acceptance to fruits & vegetables. Their perceptions of cafeteria-as-classroom worked to streamline health promotion messages across campus. HS students asserted that more attention to NE would have facilitated their peers' acceptance of school meal and snacks reform.

The findings are relevant given the current congressional debates about the Child Nutrition Act. NE-related programs and policies, including the Fresh Fruit & Vegetable program, Harvest of the Month, and school gardens provide added-value as they complement health promotion efforts and facilitate the implementation of school meal and snacks standards.

### References

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