The Positive Impact of School Health Environment Changes through the Implementation of School Wellness Grants

Caroline Roffidal-Blanco, MS, RDN, LDN; Rich Shattuck*

*Action for Healthy Kids

Introduction

For many American children, the intertwined epidemics of obesity and hunger produce a dangerous combination that threatens their long-term health while limiting their ability to succeed in school. Findings show that approximately 12.5 million children are obese (CDC, 2013) and 15.9 million children live in food insecure households (Feeding America, 2013). Fortunately, studies also show that schools are a viable option for addressing the problem of childhood obesity, food insecurity, and malnutrition.

Children spend at least 1,200 hours in school each year, not just learning classroom subjects, but discovering how to live in a world that promotes a healthy lifestyle in word but not always in deed. Moreover, more than 90% of students eat lunch in school, approximately 40% have a snack, and close to 20% eat breakfast. School food can make up 40% or more of their daily energy intake, and some schools seek out numerous opportunities to offer access to healthy foods to help kids make healthy choices. Through AFHK grant funding opportunities which include program resources, technical assistance, and school wellness mini-grants, awarded schools have been able to successfully implement school wellness programs in order to improve their overall school health environment and improve students behaviors concerning nutrition.

Objectives

This study examines whether implementing school wellness initiatives such as summer feeding programs, breakfast programs, competitive foods programs, and access to healthy foods programs that are focused primarily on school wellness policies, programs, and practices can lead to increasing students’ access to healthy foods and students’ knowledge, attitude and behaviors concerning nutrition. This study also aims to help to improve the overall school health environment.

Methodology

In the spring of 2012, schools in 20 states (CA, CO, CT, DC/MD/VA, FL, GA, IL, KY, LA, MA, MI, MN, MS, NC, NJ, NY, OH, PA, TX, WA) that participated in the United States Department of Agriculture’s National School Lunch Program with a 50% or greater free and reduced meal eligibility rate could apply for AFHK’s – School Grants for Healthy Kids, in amounts ranging from $1,000 to $5,000, to implement policies, programs, and practices aimed at improving school wellness environments that lead to increasing students’ access to healthy foods and students’ knowledge, attitude and behaviors concerning nutrition. School wellness programs selected included an individual program or combination of programs focused on summer feeding programs (on site or through community partnerships), breakfast programs (including traditional breakfast, alternative breakfast models such as breakfast in the classroom or grab and go-breakfast, and universal breakfast), competitive foods programs (including improvements to la carte items, healthy fundraisers, and healthy classroom celebrations or incentives), and access to healthy foods (including taste testing, school salad bars, and school gardens). Data collection obtained throughout the school grant cycle included key informant interviews, student surveys, school wellness environment pre and post surveys, midterm and final report findings. The collected surveys and reports were analyzed for overall impact of the school health environment and students’ knowledge, attitude and behaviors concerning nutrition.

Results

Over 1,700 schools applied for the school grant opportunity with approximately 400 schools awarded mini-grants in key states, reaching over 276,000 students nationwide. The impact of the school wellness programs, policies and practices are outlined below:

- 80 schools implemented an alternative and/or universal breakfast program and realized an increase in average daily participation by 90%, yielding 2,723,673 new breakfast meals to an additional 15,131 hungry students
- 18 schools implemented enhanced Summer Feeding Programs either providing more children with meals at current sites, or expanding to additional sites, yielding 4,701,750 meals to over 51,560 students
- 20 AFHK – “Get in the Action” community health events held in schools saw over 12,800 students, parents, community members and school representatives in attendance

Student Survey information included:

- 89% of students stated their school made it easier to eat more fruits and vegetables
- 66% of students stated their school made it easier to switch to fat-free or low-fat (1%) milk
- 40% of students stated their school made it easier to drink water instead of soda, sports drinks, energy drinks, sweet tea and sugary drinks
- 39% of students stated their school made it easier to eat breakfast every day

Key informant interviews included effective school wellness interventions:

- Partnering with organizations with existing relationships
- Collaborative School Wellness Team work
- Involvement and buy in from key stakeholders, including principals, teachers, and students
- Incorporating nutrition education into teacher lessons or already existing opportunities
- Conducting taste tests for students and parents
- Recruiting volunteers to assist with any program implementation
- Incorporating more focus and awareness of school wellness policies
- Utilizing grant funds to support school wellness efforts

School Wellness Environmental Surveys showed positive increases in:

- Limiting food sales for fundraising or promoting/requiring healthier options for fundraising
- Setting nutritional guidelines/standards for all foods sold, served, or shared at school
- Increasing and promoting healthy food choices offered for school meals and/or before or after-school programs
- Conducting taste tests to determine food preferences for nutritious items;
- Permitting students to have a water bottle with them during the school day
- Introducing programs to educate families about nutrition and physical activity in the home environment
- Increasing opportunities for physical activity in the classroom
- Limiting food sales for fundraising or promoting/requiring healthier options for fundraising

Discussion

Research focused on school wellness has shown that schools that offer students an increase in healthy food options and more time to be physically active are setting increasing fitness levels, better student behavior, higher test scores, and higher graduation rates. Thus, schools that offer students increased access to healthy food options and also provide increased physical activity result in equipping students for both improved health and academic success. In contrast, students that do not eat nutritiously and participate in regular physical activity are at an academic disadvantage. Child nutrition professionals and school wellness teams can implement innovative initiatives that promote healthy food options and nutrition education that are provided through summer feeding programs, breakfast programs, competitive foods programs, and access to healthy foods programs such as school gardens or school salad bars, which can positively improve the overall school health environment and increase students’ knowledge, attitude, and behaviors concerning nutrition. The implementation or expansion of these school wellness policies, programs, and practices can be supported through grant funds (such as those provided by AFHK) and help to sustain the change of creating a healthier school food environment and equipping students for improved academic achievements.