

Issue Brief

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Nutrition Education in Schools

Background

Nutrition education is more than providing information about food. The USDA defines it as “fostering changes in dietary behavior.” Behavior change, however, requires prolonged exposure to nutrition messages.¹ Therefore, schools are the best vehicle for fostering behavior change among youth because most children spend the majority of their waking hours in the classroom. When nutrition education is interwoven throughout the curriculum, students are more likely to demonstrate changes in their dietary behavior.²

Best Practice

Nutrition education is an essential part of the academic experience and needs to be a part of every school’s federally mandated school wellness policy. Researchers have determined that successful nutrition education programs have common characteristics. These include a program that is:

- Based on theoretical models
- The result of school-wide policies that ensure nutrition education will be taught
- Interactive and skills-based for youth
- Integrated within the schools’ curricula
- Designed to encourage family involvement
- Coordinated with the school cafeteria

Action Steps

- Work with school Wellness Policy teams to ensure that district policies include nutrition education as an essential part of the curriculum
- Use existing nutrition education programs that are based on theoretical models and have been proven to foster change in dietary behavior (see examples on next page)
- Design nutrition education components that include family involvement (i.e. food-related projects at home)
- Collaborate with the school cafeteria to ensure that consistent nutrition education messaging is displayed and reinforced throughout the school and provide access to healthy food choices

Additional information is available in the report

Shaping Youth Behavior: *Impact of School Environments on Physical Activity and Food Choices* at:

www.maine-nutrition.org

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Examples of Successful Nutrition Education Programs for School-aged Children

Nutrition Program	Ages	Theoretical Model
CATCH (Coordinated Approach to Child Health)	Grades 3-6	· Behavioral-Epidemiological · Health Belief
Cookshop® Program	Elementary school	· Social Cognitive
Planet Health	Middle school	· Behavioral choice · Social cognitive
Nutrition in the Garden	Elementary school	· Socio-ecological · Experiential learning
TEENS (Teens Eating for Energy and Nutrition at School)	Middle/high school	· Social Cognitive

Resources

- **USDA Food and Nutrition Service** – The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) provides children and needy families better access to food and a more healthful diet through its food assistance programs and comprehensive nutrition education efforts. Nutrition education is a top priority in all its programs. <http://www.fns.usda.gov/fns/nutrition.htm>
- **Team Nutrition** – USDA Food and Nutrition Service provides training grants for school and community support for healthy eating and physical activity. <http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/>
- **Nutrition Explorations** –The National Dairy Council sponsors a nutrition education program, Nutrition Explorations, through its website. This website also contains advice on how to coordinate the classroom and school cafeteria. <http://www.nutritionexplorations.org/educators/main.asp>
- **Action For Healthy Kids** – Action for Healthy Kids (AFHK) is a non-profit organization of more than 50 national organizations and government agencies representing education, health, fitness and nutrition. AFHK addresses the epidemic of overweight, sedentary, and undernourished youth by focusing on changes in schools to improve nutrition and increase physical activity. <http://www.actionforhealthykids.org/index.php>
- **Maine-ly Nutrition** – Maine-ly Nutrition is a program that provides nutrition education resources to classroom teachers and school nurses who teach nutrition in low-income schools. <http://www.maine-nutrition.org/Projects/MainelyNutrition.htm>

References

1. Food and Consumer Service (USDA). 1994. "A Nutrition Education for School-Aged Children: A Review of Research" Alexandria, Virginia: Lytle, Leslie A.
2. Canadian Cancer Society Manitoba Division "Effective School-Based Interventions in Nutrition 2005-2007" Retrieved June 20, 2007 from http://www.cancer.ca/vgn/images/portal/cit_86751114/8/24/567321674mb_children-schoolnutrition_en.pdf.