
Symposium Report

Nutrition at School: Preparing for the Future

The Thirteenth Annual Nutrition Symposium, sponsored by the Department of Health and Human Services, was held on March 9, 1994, in Washington, DC. This report on the symposium was prepared by staff of the Department of Health and Human Services Nutrition Policy Board.

Tearsheet requests to National Health Information Center, P.O. Box 1133, Washington, DC 20013-1133.

Synopsis

Two of the best ways to improve the quality of childhood nutrition are (a) more collaboration at the national, State, and local levels and (b) adoption of innovative and multimedia learning methods, according to the leaders of nutrition education. These themes were discussed at the 13th Annual Nutrition Symposium, which was held March 9, 1994, in Washington, DC.

In recognition of National Nutrition Month, a collaborative effort of the Public Health Service's

Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the meeting was attended by more than 300 public and private sector nutrition educators and public health professionals. Their assignment was to analyze school-based nutrition education programs and the research being conducted on nutrition.

Keynote speaker Surgeon General M. Joycelyn Elders, MD, issued the challenge for all Federal and State agencies to work with schools and nutrition education professionals to overcome limited resources and children's current eating habits to improve the nutritional status of children. Responding to that challenge, speakers from the Department of Health and Human Services, the agency sponsoring the meeting, the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Education, as well as from the Congress, business, and public schools addressed several initiatives.

According to the leaders in the field of nutrition education, two of the best ways to improve the quantity and quality of childhood nutrition education are (a) more collaboration at the national, State, and local levels and (b) adoption of innovative and multimedia learning methods. These themes were struck at the 13th Annual Nutrition Symposium in recognition of National Nutrition Month, a collaborative effort of the Public Health Service's Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The meeting was attended by more than 300 public and private sector nutrition educators and public health professionals.

Speakers came from the Federal Departments of Health and Human Services (HHS), Agriculture, and Education as well as from business, public schools, and Congress to analyze school-based nutrition education and the research being conducted to assess those programs (see box).

The Challenge

Keynote speaker U.S. Surgeon General M. Joycelyn Elders, MD, stated that the challenge is for

all Federal and State agencies to work with schools and nutrition education professionals to overcome limited resources and children's current eating habits to improve the nutritional status of children. Although Dr. Elders emphasized that schools are "laboratories" which provide a tremendous opportunity to reach large numbers of children with messages about good health and nutrition, she questioned whether we are taking full advantage of this opportunity.

Today more than 92,000 schools across the country feed lunch to 25 million children, but this number represents only 56 percent of those students who are eligible to participate. Only 20 percent of those who are eligible for a school breakfast participate. Further, only 5 percent of the schools in the United States have a comprehensive health education program from kindergarten through 12th grade.

Dr. Elders stressed that to bring attention and resources to meet this challenge, public health professionals need to talk about the connection between nutrition education, disease prevention, and the cost savings in health care delivery. The cost of health care can be reduced if we start early to teach children to eat a healthful diet and to train food service personnel. Since Americans are concerned about the cost of health care, child nutrition education

can be sold as one of the relatively small costs of prevention.

Responding to the Challenge

Dr. Thomas W. Payzant, Assistant Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education at the U.S. Department of Education, stressed these four initiatives to help meet the challenge:

- *National education goals.* These goals are now part of the legislation being discussed in Congress. At present the United States is the only industrialized nation without an articulated policy for a child's first 5 years. However, President Clinton's major education initiative, Goals 2000: Educate America Act, has passed both the House and Senate and articulates our national education goals.

The bill (recently signed by President Clinton) targets preschool and the first 5 years of a child's life. It articulates the goals that every child will come to school ready to learn, and that schools should be safe and drug free.

- *Curriculum and teacher development and training.* Although the Federal Government cannot set curriculums, it can allocate grant money to State and local level programs and be involved in the debate.

- *Interagency collaboration.* No one group can solve the problem alone. To improve the process, all groups at the local, State, and national levels must actively seek new ways to collaborate.

- *Legislative initiatives.* Federal agencies can work together on mutual goals. Currently the Departments of Education and the HHS are working together on the reauthorization of Head Start, the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and on health care reform legislation to provide money for comprehensive school health education and health services.

Ron Wyden, member of the U.S. House of Representatives from Oregon, spoke in more detail about the congressional perspective. He proposed that the Federal Trade Commission perform a one-time survey of food advertising directed to children so that the Government can monitor and quantify the nutritionally sensitive food messages. He also proposed that the National Institutes of Health conduct additional research on childhood obesity. He further suggested that the Health Security Act (President Clinton's health care reform measure) by allowing for spending small amounts of money on children would save money down the line on health care.

Ellen Haas, Assistant Secretary for Food and

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Consumer Services at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), agreed that agencies need creative solutions involving new collaborations. In addition, she emphasized some key issues that have arisen from USDA initiatives:

- Children need to know how to read the new food label.
- The dietary guidelines, developed jointly by HHS and USDA, need to be integrated into the curriculum as well as into the cafeteria menu. These guidelines are part of the national health policy in nutrition, and they set standards for school meal programs.
- Proposed reorganization of the USDA makes nutrition one of the department's priority missions.
- Children need to be educated about nutrition so that they will eat the healthful foods offered in the school lunch programs.

Dr. Walter Dowdle, Deputy Director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, explained that CDC is completing work with USDA on "Guidelines for Nutrition Education in Comprehensive School Health Programs" scheduled for release later in 1994 (1). In addition, the CDC has been involved in several activities that impact nutrition education efforts:

- CDC initiated the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System in 1989 to assist the States in monitoring six health risk behaviors, including dietary intake and exercise. The surveys were conducted in 43 States and have verified the eating habits of young people. For example, they found that only 13 percent of the students participating had five or more servings of fruits and vegetables the day before the survey.
- In 1990, the CDC collaborated with Pennsylvania State University to study the status of school-based nutrition education in States, including the status of State-mandated nutrition education.
- Following the 1990 survey, the CDC held a series of meetings of nutrition experts. The following concerns were raised:

Participants

M. Joycelyn Elders, MD
Surgeon General
Public Health Service

Thomas W. Payzant, EdD
Assistant Secretary for Elementary and
Secondary Education
Department of Education

Ron Wyden
House of Representatives

Ellen Haas
Assistant Secretary for Food and Con-
sumer Services
Department of Agriculture

Walter Dowdle, PhD
Deputy Director
Centers for Disease Control and
Prevention

Amanda Dew Manning, MS, MPA
(Moderator)
Acting Chief, Special Projects Branch
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Health
Centers for Disease Control and
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Elaine J. Stone, PhD, MPH
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Child and Adolescent Trial for Car-
diovascular Health (CATCH) Study
National Heart, Lung, and Blood
Institute

Lorelei DiSogra, EdD, RD
Director of Nutrition and Health
5 A Day Adventures
Dole Food Company, Inc.

Roberta Richey, MEd
Nutrition Specialist
Nutrition Education and Training (NET)
Program
Jefferson City, MO

Segrid Sevillian
Kindergarten teacher
Stone Mountain Elementary School
Stone Mountain, GA

Heather Borra O'Donnell
Seventh grader
Lake Braddock Secondary School
Fairfax County, VA

J. Michael McGinnis, MD (closing
remarks)
Deputy Assistant Secretary for Health
(Disease Prevention and Health
Promotion)
Department of Health and Human
Services

'Prepared for grades 3, 4, and 5, the CATCH Study targets three behaviors: healthful eating, regular exercise, and not smoking. Methods include development of a strong school policy on tobacco use and improvements in the health and physical education curriculums and in school food service.'

1. The need for State mandates for teacher education in nutrition.

2. The need for school-based nutrition education guidelines. (As a result, the CDC worked with USDA and other Federal agencies and national organizations to develop the guidelines which are expected to be released later this year [1].)

3. The need to monitor students' eating behaviors. (A new group, the School-Based Nutrition Monitoring Group, composed of members from the HHS and USDA, will be piloting a program later in 1994.)

Strategies for Action

Existing initiatives at the State and local level have developed new strategies to enhance school nutrition programs.

Dr. Elaine Stone, Project Administrator, spoke about the Child and Adolescent Trial for Cardiovascular Health (CATCH) Study conducted by the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute. Prepared for grades 3, 4, and 5, the CATCH Study targets three behaviors: healthful eating, regular exercise, and not smoking. Methods include development of a strong school policy on tobacco use and improvements in the health and physical education curriculums and in school food service. In addition, a family component is designed to lead to a reduction in fat and sodium consumption. The integrated program can be used in schools around the country; it is accompanied by a rigorous evaluation process. Other aspects of the CATCH Study include Eat Smart—a school nutrition program for school food service providers—Smart Choices—a tobacco policy for schools—and Take Home Packages for Family Fun nights.

Dr. Lorelei DiSogra, Director of Nutrition and Health at Dole Food Company, described the interactive multimedia "5 A Day Adventures" program which is available on a CD-ROM computer disk. The program was recently developed by Dole in partnership with the Society for Nutrition Education to teach third grade students the importance of eating five servings a day of fruits and vegetables. After successful pilot testing in five cities, the program is now available free to elementary schools around the country through the Dole Food Company, Inc., 155

Bovet Rd., San Mateo, CA 94402. Requests for 5 A Day Adventures CD-ROM programs must be made in writing on school letterhead and must specify the number of disks and version desired (MacIntosh or Windows).

Nutrition Specialist Roberta Richey described the NET (Nutrition Education and Training) Program in Jefferson City, MO, and highlighted the 10 goals of USDA's NET Strategic Plan. Established by Congress in 1977, NET was designed to serve as the nutrition education component of the National School Breakfast and National School Lunch Programs. It links nutrition education in the classroom with foods offered in the cafeteria by recognizing the cafeteria as the primary "learning laboratory" where information taught in the classroom is applied and reinforced. NET is administered by USDA's Food and Nutrition Service which allocates grants to States to help teachers learn about nutrition, to provide training opportunities for food service personnel, to support learning experiences for children, to involve parents, and to develop educational materials.

Conference Themes

Comments from participants, including Segrid Sevillian, a kindergarten teacher from Stone Mountain, GA, and Heather O'Donnell, a seventh grader at Lake Braddock Secondary School, Fairfax, VA, established some common themes and needs:

- *Cross curriculums.* Because funds to teach nutrition are limited, use nutrition principles in teaching other subjects such as math (using the new food labels to calculate nutrient values) or geography (learning where pineapples come from). Train teachers so that they can present the principles of nutrition.
- *Discovery learning.* Stress discovery learning in which the child directs the learning process instead of the traditional knowledge-based learning approach.
- *Innovative partnerships.* Share resources among different groups and organizations working to improve school nutrition programs. Practice this sharing and collaboration at the national level among HHS, USDA, and the Department of Education, at the State agencies, and at the local level among parents, teachers, and children. One example cited was a PTA nutrition program in which children dress up as food items and present principles of good nutrition to the PTA.
- *Consistent messages.* Parents, school food service programs, and classroom materials should send consistent and reinforcing messages about what constitutes a healthful diet.

- *Food decisions.* Latch-key children need to be able to make their own healthful food choices early in life and form patterns that will continue into adulthood.
- *Multimedia.* Innovative teaching methods can engage children and encourage them to develop lifelong healthful eating habits.

Conclusion

Speakers, panelists, and participants agreed that a collaborative approach is critical to unite business, appropriate Federal agencies, State agencies, schools, and parents in creating strong nutrition awareness through comprehensive and innovative learning experiences.

Reference.....

1. Public Health Service: Guidelines for nutrition education in comprehensive school health programs. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, GA. In press.