Going Green in School Nutrition Programs: An Examination of Environmental Conservation Practices in Schools

OBJECTIVES
- To describe green/environmental conservation (GEC) practices in school nutrition (SN) programs and their participation in school-sponsored GEC efforts.
- To identify the roles/responsibilities of SN directors and staff, school administrators, and other school personnel in implementing and sustaining GEC practices.
- To identify GEC benefits and barriers for implementing and sustaining GEC practices.

METHOD
State agency directors were contacted to provide contact information for up to three SN directors in their state involved in GEC approaches in their SN program. Fourteen SN professionals were contacted and agreed to participate in a virtual focus panel and respond via email to two questionnaires related to roles/responsibilities, practices, benefits, and barriers for implementing and sustaining GEC practices. Responses from the expert panel were summarized and related themes were identified and confirmed by the panel as a description of GEC practices in SN programs and their participation in school efforts.

RESULTS
Green/Environmental Conservation Practices
- Recycling/waste management
- Purchase locally grown foods or farm-to-school programs
- Purchase eco-friendly cleaning products, energy and water conservation
- GEC building and renovation
- GEC education and training

Roles and Responsibilities of School Personnel
- **SN Directors**
  - Serve as a leader to SN staff and area schools
  - Model GEC practices to SN staff and other school personnel
  - Educate and train SN and school staff to implement GEC practices
  - Collaborate with school administrators to create, implement, and sustain GEC practices

  "I believe that it is my duty to make every effort to preserve the earth, and to encourage conservation through my purchasing, meal preparations, and waste disposal techniques."

- **School Administrators**
  - Model practices to students and other school personnel
  - Collaborate and participate in GEC activities with teachers, other school staff, and student groups
  - "I know that we are making the environment better for the children and it is so good to see them take part in this too."

- **School Teachers**
  - Educate students and staff about environmental conservation
  - Model practices to other students and school personnel
  - "We want to provide students with the safest learning environment and at the same time meet all of the standards and regulations that we have to meet while using our resources efficiently. It is a challenging task but we know that our students and the environment will benefit from our efforts."

- **School Custodians**
  - Model practices to students and school personnel
  - Conduct GEC practices and ensure that procedures are followed
  - Collaborate with SN staff, school personnel, and school administrators to create, implement, and sustain GEC practices
  - "I love the kids. Being in the cafeteria gives me a chance to take part in the recycling and we make sure that they put their stuff in the right place. It is good to see them take it to the recycling so fast. We learn who kids are and encourage them to recycle."

- **Students**
  - Learn and model GEC practices at school, home, and in the community
  - Develop lifelong GEC practice behaviors
  - "We learn about the environment in our science class and I feel like the stuff we are doing at my school is important and will help save the planet."

BENEFITS OF GEC PRACTICES IN SN PROGRAMS AND SCHOOLS
- Protect the environment
- Provide a safer learning environment for students
- Save funds and other resources over time
- Provide an opportunity to offer more locally grown fruits and vegetables
- Reduce labor
- Save money

BARRIERS TO CREATING AND SUSTAINING GEC PRACTICES IN SN PROGRAMS AND SCHOOLS
- Financial cost to implement and sustain GEC practices
- Resistance from school personnel and students to change
- Time constraints for implementation and sustainability of GEC practices

APPLICATION
The results from the virtual expert panel were used to develop a case study protocol and case study questions to further explore GEC in SN programs and school districts and confirmed the findings from the case study analysis. The data collected from the expert panel and the case studies could be used for future research.