There is a key role to be played by school nutrition (SN) professionals in school wellness, provided they are committed to modifying the school environment to positively impact student health and believe that they personally play an important role in school wellness initiatives. The likelihood of SN interventions being widely implemented depends in part on how much importance is placed on nutrition education and school foodservice by SN professionals, teachers, and administrators.

The purpose of this study was to identify SN directors’ and managers’ perceptions of their roles in and responsibilities for supporting and contributing to the school wellness environment. Factors conducive to a greater involvement in school wellness initiatives and making positive personal lifestyle changes were also addressed.

**METHOD**

- Six SN professionals, including five SN directors and one state wellness coordinator, participated in a day-and-a-half, expert-panel discussion on
issues related to the role of SN professionals in school wellness.

• A survey instrument was developed based on qualitative data from the expert panel discussion and addressed SN professionals’ opinions of their roles in school wellness.

• Participants were asked to indicate the perceived level of importance of 29 potential roles that SN professionals may play in the school wellness environment (Scale: 1, Not Important to 4, Very Important) and their degree of personal involvement in each of the roles (Scale: 1, Not Involved to 4, Very Involved).

• School nutrition professionals were then asked to rate their level of agreement with 28 statements identifying issues that may promote a greater contribution to the school wellness environment (Scale: 1, Strongly Disagree to 4, Strongly Agree).

• Participants responded to 10 statements related to their opinions of the roles of SN professionals in school wellness (Scale: 1, Strongly Disagree to 4, Strongly Agree).

• A random sample representing 700 school districts in the seven USDA regions was selected.

• A total of 1,400 surveys was distributed. Each SN director received two surveys. One survey was for the SN director to complete, and the other survey was for the director to give to an SN manager in their district to complete.

• Statistical analyses included descriptive statistics and exploratory factor analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

• A total of 462 surveys were returned for a response rate of 33%.

• Participants represented all USDA regions.

• SN professionals indicated a variety of wellness activities had been implemented for SN staff, and include the following:
  • nutrition promotions and programs
  • nutrition education programs or classes
  • health screenings
  • walking/fitness promotions and programs, and
  • available fitness facilities at the work site most often reported.

However, many respondents (30%) indicated that no wellness activities had been implemented for SN staff.

School Nutrition Professionals’ Roles in the School Wellness Environment

• Participants considered almost all roles to be important, with 26 of 29 statements having a mean importance rating of 3.00 or higher.

• Participants rated roles associated with food safety, availability of food choices, and encouraging healthy diets in children, as most important.

• Roles related to modeling personal wellness were also considered important with “improving personal eating habits,” “improving personal physical activity habits,” and “modeling consumption of healthy food choices” having mean ratings greater than 3.50.

• Roles of participants rated as least important included grant writing to fund wellness initiatives and assessing and evaluating wellness initiatives.

• Roles of participants rated as most important were also roles in which participants reported the greatest level of involvement, although participants reported little involvement in many roles.

Issues Contributing to a School Wellness Environment

• Factors perceived by participants as promoting a greater contribution to school wellness included...
those related to financial support, time to devote to wellness activities, support from other involved parties, support for personal wellness, and adequate information and training.

- Statements with the highest levels of agreement were reported for “financial support for school wellness initiatives,” “time to devote to wellness initiatives,” “support from parents,” and “support from school administration and teachers.”

Opinions Regarding Roles in School Wellness

- Participants agreed that “SN professionals play an important role in school wellness” and that “SN professionals have a responsibility to model healthy behaviors to school children.”

- Participants also agreed that “wellness activities designed for SN professionals should be included in school wellness initiatives” and that “local wellness policies and initiatives encourage SN professionals to make positive changes in personal health behaviors.” Participants believed that modeling healthy behaviors and a healthy weight status are important, with behaviors believed to be more important than weight.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Participants believed that SN professionals have an important role to play in school wellness and that they have a personal responsibility to model healthy behaviors to school children. Roles related to food safety, availability of food choices encouraging healthy diets in children, and modeling personal wellness were most important to their professional positions. Healthy behaviors and weight status were perceived to be important, with slightly more importance being assessed to behaviors. However, many participants indicated that no wellness activities had been implemented for SN staff.

In conclusion, SN directors and managers considered all roles related to school wellness important. However, they reported little to no involvement in many roles assessed, suggesting the potential for a much greater role for SN directors and managers in school wellness. Factors promoting a greater contribution to school wellness identified in this study will be helpful in expanding the roles of SN directors and managers in school wellness.

PRACTICAL USE OF THIS INFORMATION

School nutrition professionals have an opportunity to contribute to school wellness initiatives in a variety of roles including:

- Providing healthier food choices;
- Role modeling healthy attitudes and behaviors to students and school staff;
- Contributing time and personnel to wellness activities;
- Engaging SN staff in personal and school wellness activities; and
- Serving as support to school personnel and parents.
For More Information


Please feel free to reproduce and distribute this publication. Copies are also available on our Web site: www.nfsmi.org.

Information about this and other topics may be obtained by contacting the

NATIONAL FOOD SERVICE MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE

The University of Mississippi

Telephone: 800.321.3054

GY 2007 Project 7

Authors — Wendy Bounds Stinson, PhD, RD; Kristi Lofton, PhD, RD; Shellie Hubbard, MA. Dr. Stinson, Dr. Lofton, and Ms. Hubbard are Researcher, Assistant Director, and Research Assistant, respectively, at the Applied Research Division of the National Food Service Management Institute.

This publication has been produced by the National Food Service Management Institute, Applied Research Division, located at The University of Southern Mississippi with headquarters at The University of Mississippi. Funding for the institute has been provided with federal funds from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, to The University of Mississippi. The contents of this publication do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of The University of Mississippi or the U.S. Department of Agriculture; nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.

The information provided in this publication is the result of independent research produced by NFSMI and is not necessarily in accordance with U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) policy. FNS is the federal agency responsible for all federal domestic child nutrition programs including the National School Lunch Program, the Child and Adult Care Food Program, and the Summer Food Service Program. Individuals are encouraged to contact their local child nutrition program sponsor and/or their Child Nutrition State Agency should there appear to be a conflict with the information contained herein, and any state or federal policy that governs the associated Child Nutrition Program. For more information on the federal Child Nutrition Programs, please visit www.fns.usda.gov/cnd.