



Insight

A Publication for Child Nutrition Professionals from the National Food Service Management Institute

Perceptions of School Nutrition Professionals Regarding Their Roles in School Wellness

O There is a key role to be played by school
V nutrition (SN) professionals in school
E wellness, provided they are committed
R to modifying the school environment to
V positively impact student health and believe
I that they personally play an important role in
E school wellness initiatives. The likelihood of
W 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.

School Nutrition Professionals Believe That...

They play an important role in school wellness.

They have a responsibility to model healthy behaviors to school children.

They need wellness activities designed for them to include in school wellness initiatives.

Modeling healthy behaviors and weight statuses are equally important.

Modeling healthy behaviors is more important than weight status.

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

Key Initiatives That Promote a School Wellness Environment Should...

- Address food safety issues.**
- Make healthier menu choices available.**
- Encourage students to make healthy food choices.**
- Encourage students to try new foods.**
- Limit availability of unhealthy food choices at school.**

Five Top-Rated Issues That Contribute to School Wellness

- Financial support for school wellness initiatives**
- Time to devote to wellness initiatives**
- Support from parents**
- Support from school administration and teachers**
- Employment benefits and incentives for personal wellness**

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

Child Nutrition and Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Reauthorization Act of 2004, Section 204 of Pub. L. No. 108-265, 42 U.S.C. § 1751 et seq.

Levine, E., Olander, C., Lefebvre, C., Cusick, P., Biesiadecki, L., & McGoldrick, D. (2002). The Team Nutrition pilot study: lessons learned from implementing comprehensive school-based intervention. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, 34, 109-116.

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