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Nutrition for Health



CONSIDERATIONS IN LOW-INCOME COMMUNITIES

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Schools should be a "healthy place" for students in low income communities. Students have an opportunity to eat at least two meals and participate in physical activity each day at school. Healthy eating and activity can positively affect the overall well-being of the students and the school environment. The health learning that takes place in schools also reaches out to influence families and even communities.

School Meals

The National School Breakfast and Lunch programs were created to provide healthy meals for low income families, but all school children benefit. Adequately nourished children concentrate and learn better in school. During the 2006-07 school year, about 30 million children participated in the National School Lunch Program in the US. About 59% received free or reduced price lunches. Attractive menus, food presentation and marketing, clean and inviting cafeterias, and adequate meal service periods are methods to increase and maintain lunch participation.

Participation in the School Breakfast Program is much lower. During the 2006-07 school year, only about 45 children received free or reduced price school breakfast for every 100 who received free or reduced price school lunch, although this varied among the states from 33 to 66 per 100. Research shows that universal free school breakfast programs dramatically increase student participation in school, in part because they reduce the stigma children may feel about participating in a program "for poor kids." Participation can also be improved when breakfast becomes part of the school day, offers foods that appeal to students, and is convenient for all, no matter how or when students arrive at school. Schools that have at least 65-70% of the school population eligible for free or reduced price meals can probably serve breakfast free to all students and meet costs with increased revenue from the reimbursable meals.

Physical Activity

Physical education in schools should provide opportunities for every student to gain both the knowledge and skills for a lifetime of physical activities. Schools also provide a safe environment for activity. The time for moderate to vigorous physical activity in physical education classes should be maximized, with instruction in both personal fitness and team sports when possible. Intramural sports teams provide opportunities for those students who do not play on school sponsored teams to have fun and participate in activity.

Dr. Cullen is an expert in health promotion and education, specifically student lunch selection and food sales in schools. She currently is evaluating the effect of Texas school food policy changes on food selection in middle schools.

References:

Food Research and Action Center (FRAC). *Child Nutrition Fact Sheet. National School Lunch Program*, <http://www.frac.org/pdf/cnnsfp.PDF>

Food Research and Action Center (FRAC). *School Breakfast Scorecard 2007*, http://www.frac.org/pdf/ISBP_2007.pdf

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