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Nutrition Education in Vermont Public Schools

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BACKGROUND

An increasing amount of attention has been given to the health of America's youth, specifically middle and high school children. In 2010, Michelle Obama launched the "Let's Move!" campaign, which was built on the idea of getting children to be both active and food conscious.³ In the same year, President Obama passed the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act which gave \$4.5 billion to the USDA to fund programs like: National School Lunch Program, the School Breakfast Program, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) and the Summer Food Service Program.³

Despite such positive changes, childhood obesity, whilst stable, remains fairly prevalent in the United States.¹ Indeed, roughly 17 percent of two to seventeen year olds (12.7 million children) were obese according to CDC data collected from 2011 to 2014 (obesity in youth was defined as a BMI of greater than or equal to the age- and sex-specific 95th percentile of the 2000 CDC growth charts).

It is also important to consider food security, for it and obesity are two sides of the same coin. According to the USDA, 16.6 percent of American households were food-insecure in 2015, meaning that they had limited or uncertain access to enough food for a healthy, active life for all household members. Food-insecure homes with children accounted for 7.8 percent of households.²

The issue of food insecurity plagues Vermont as well. Whilst the state consistently ranks in the top three states for healthy eating, many of its children still go hungry. In 2013, 98 percent of Vermont children had health insurance, but 15 percent lived in poverty; furthermore, 29 percent of their parents lacked secure employment.⁴

With this in mind, we set out to: research the level of nutrition education Vermont elementary schools provide their students, understand teacher perceptions of these programs, and try to recommend ways to fill the gaps.

DESIGN / METHODS

Design: This is a cross-sectional survey.

Materials/Methods: The study is based on a survey of Vermont educators around nutrition education in Vermont. Teachers, administrators, wellness coordinators, and school nurses were the target population

The survey consisted of 17 questions. Five questions pertained to survey population demographic information. Twelve questions pertained to nutrition education.

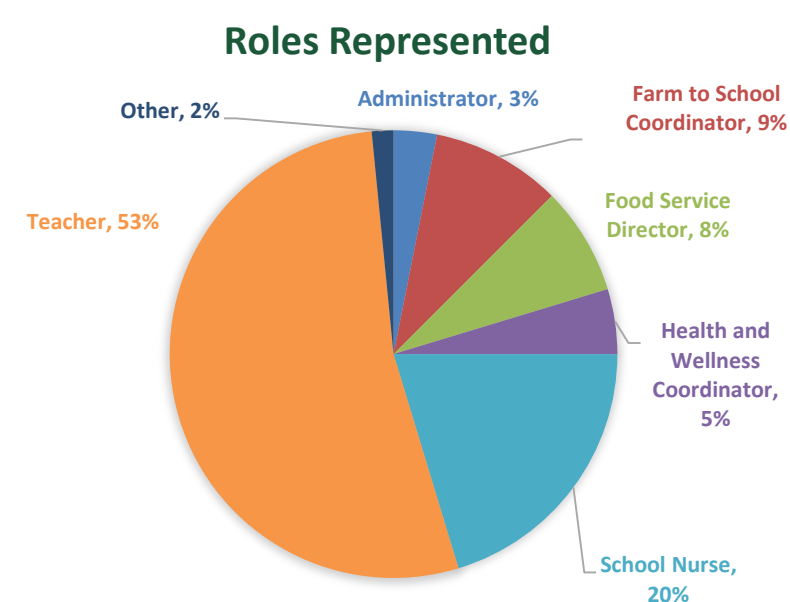
Lime Survey was used as the survey tool. Participants were provided with an introductory email and a link to the survey which could be completed at any time anonymously.

The survey was distributed state wide through newsletters and list-servers. Researchers also directly contacted school principals and administrators for support in recruiting.

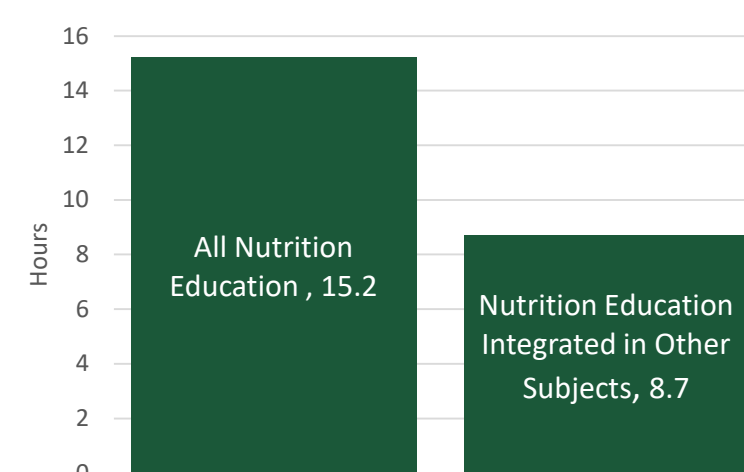
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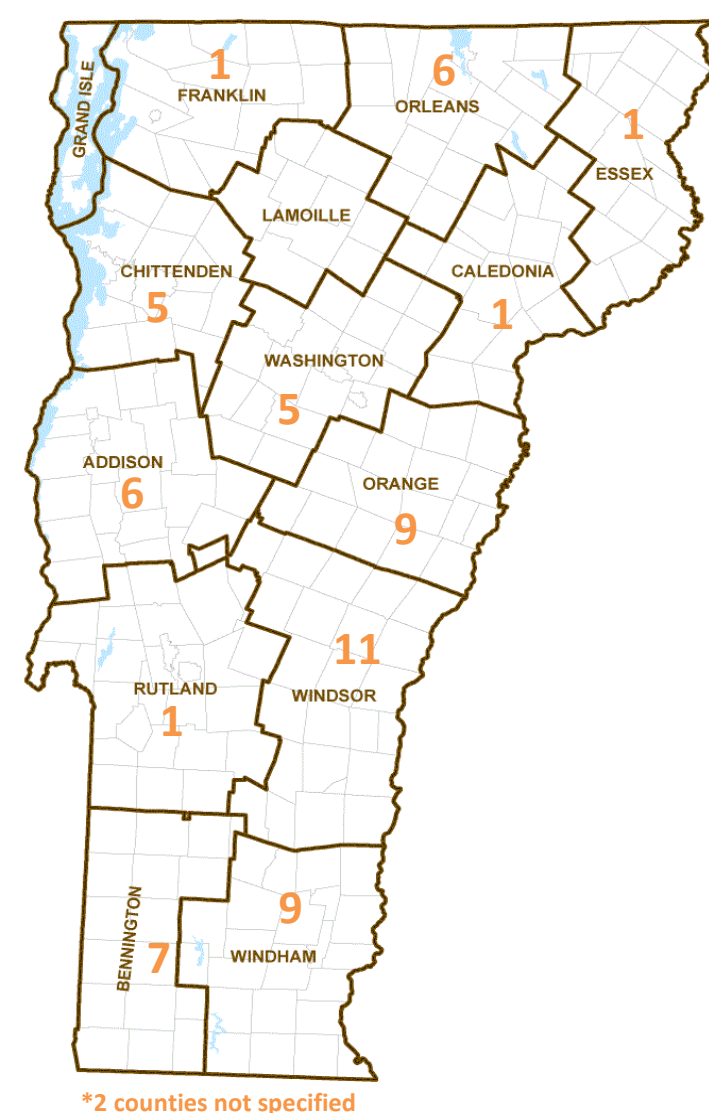
DEMOGRAPHICS



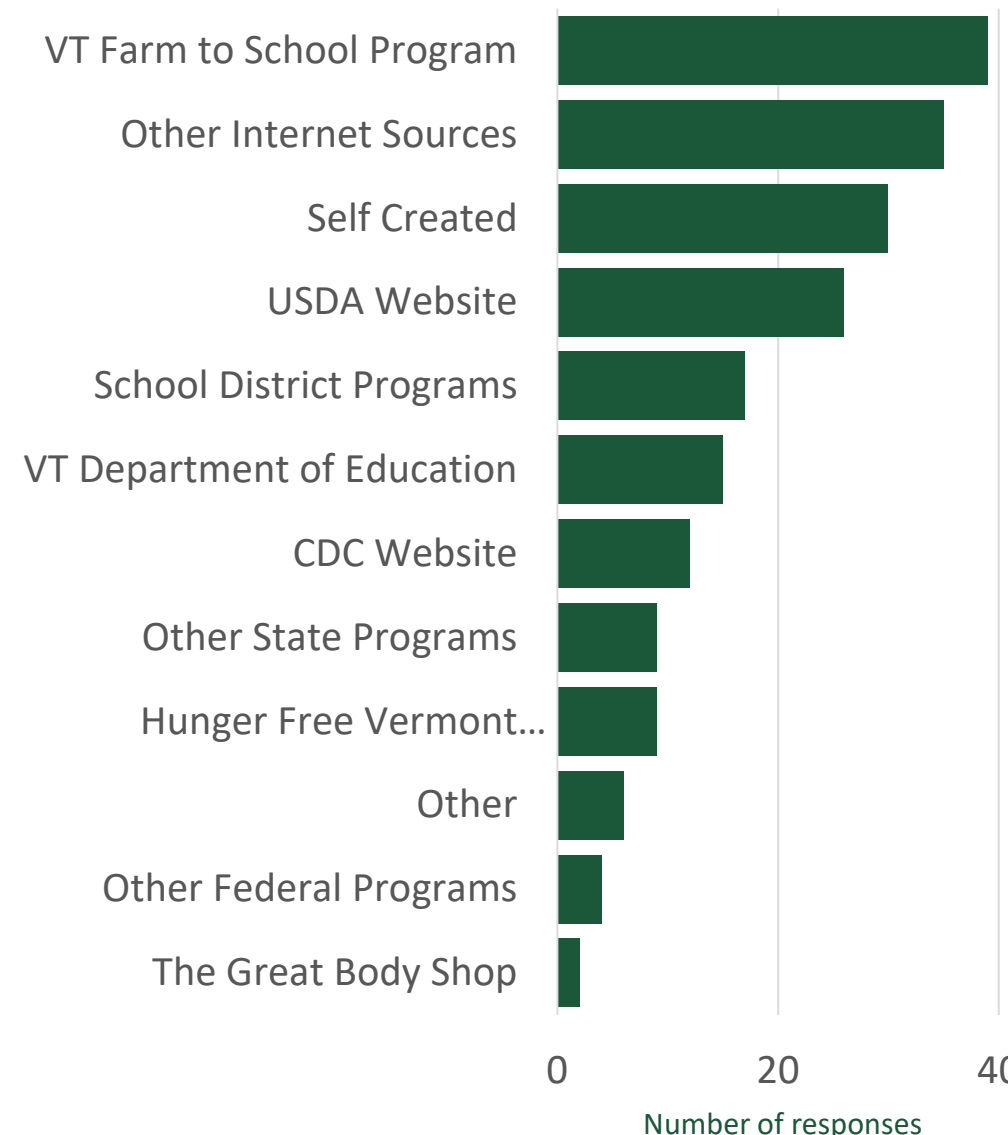
Teaching Hours Per Month - Teachers



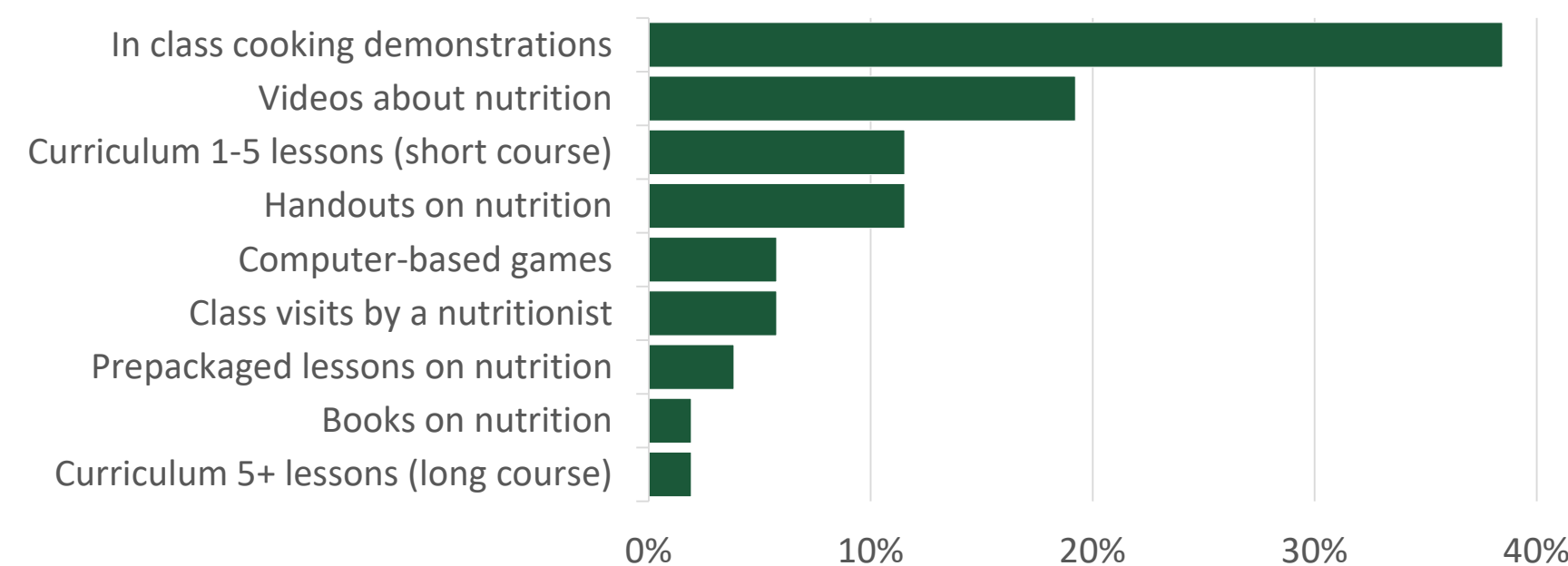
Counties Represented



Educational Resources Utilized



What educational materials do you find most useful in the classroom? (Ranked #1)



RESULTS

"Not enough class time. I only see the students 18 times during the year to teach a whole health curriculum."

-Teacher

- 75 Responses were received; n: 64 (K-6th grade), 11 (7th-12th grade). 11 responses from 7th-12th grade were excluded because they were outside our target population.
- Vermont elementary school (K-6) teachers report a mean satisfaction score of 2.51 out of 5.0 for their schools' current nutrition education programs.
- School nurses reported a satisfaction score of 2.5 out of 5.0. Participants with the highest satisfaction scores included school administrators and health and wellness coordinators, with a satisfaction score of 3.3 out of 5.0.



- When comparing teachers to non-classroom educators (administrators and nutrition educators) the data showed a significant difference between high satisfaction (3-5) and low satisfaction (1-2). (Fischer p = 0.009)

- Overall, Vermont elementary school teachers report a high level of knowledge about nutrition, (4.1 out of 5.0), but a lower level of understanding in their students (2.5 out of 5.0).

"I would love to be able to have free posters to hang throughout my schools. I really feel they look at them while waiting for their lunch."

-School Nurse

DISCUSSION

Given teacher perceptions regarding current school nutrition education programs, development and implementation of a state-wide nutrition education curriculum with dedicated teaching time may be warranted.

The CDC Community Preventive Services Taskforce provides information regarding the effectiveness of currently available school-based nutrition interventions.

Programs recommended by the taskforce include "Eat Well & Get Moving" and "Planet Health," designed by the Harvard School of Public Health.⁵ These interventions could be used as a framework for a comprehensive nutrition education curriculum in Vermont.

Some limitations of the study include; sample size, limited questions around budgets, and response participation (limited to interested individuals).

This project was a great opportunity to work with Hunger Free VT and speak with administrators and state administrators. For future projects we'd like to expand the scope and population size of the survey, as well as, work with legislators on statewide policies.