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What Do Schools Want? Assessing Elementary School Administrator and Teacher Preferences Related to Nutrition Education Program Scheduling

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Abstract: Extension is positioned to provide school-based nutrition education programs as required by the 2004 Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act. To enhance program acceptance and sustainability, it is important to consider school administrators' and teachers' interests and preferences regarding nutrition education programming. The project described here assessed interest in nutrition education, scheduling, and implementation format preferences among 34 elementary school administrators and 45 elementary school teachers. Among administrators and teachers interested in Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service's county educators providing nutrition education programs, the general trend was for in-school student education, consisting of four weekly programs, 30 minutes in length.

Introduction

Healthful eating habits are important for children's growth and development. Unfortunately, the quality of elementary school children's diets is a concern. In 2003-2004, Healthy Eating Index scores for children ages 6 to 11 years indicated a need to increase fruits, vegetables, and whole grains (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2009). Poor eating behaviors adopted during childhood often carry forward into adulthood and are associated with negative health trends (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2009).

Due to concern over children's dietary behaviors, the 2004 Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Action Act required school districts participating in the USDA school meals program to develop a wellness policy including goals for nutrition education (McDonald & Whitmer, 2007). Extension is positioned to provide school-based nutrition education programs; however, to enhance school acceptance and program sustainability, the scheduling of nutrition education programs must take into consideration school administrator and teacher preferences. The purpose of the project described here was to assess elementary school administrator and teacher interests in an Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service (OCES) elementary school nutrition education program and preferences related to program scheduling and format.

Methods

OCES State Nutrition and Food Specialists developed a formative assessment survey to evaluate elementary school administrator and teacher preferences related to implementation of an OCES nutrition education program. The project was approved by the Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects. Forty OCES county educators asked at least one elementary school administrator and teacher in their county to complete the survey and return it by mail to the OCES state nutrition specialist. Completed surveys from 31 Oklahoma counties were received from 34 administrators (55%) and 45 teachers (73%).

Chi-square analyses were used to calculate response frequencies and evaluate differences in response rates between elementary school administrators and teachers using PC SAS, Version 9.1 for Windows (SAS Institute, Cary, NC). Significance level was set at $p \leq 0.05$.

Results

The majority of administrators (70%) and teachers (89%) indicated interest in OCES county educators providing nutrition education (Table 1). However, 15% of administrators and 11% of teachers indicated only possible interest, while 15% of administrators indicated they were not interested in OCES county educators providing nutrition education. A significant difference in interest of OCES county educators providing nutrition education was observed between administrators and teachers ($p \leq 0.05$), with teachers indicating more interest than administrators (Table 1).

Table 1.
School Administrator and Teacher Interest in Nutrition Education

Question	All n=79 100%		Administrators n=34 43%		Teachers n=45 57%		(Chi-square) p value
	(n)	%	(n)	%	(n)	%	

Interest in OCES County Educators Providing Nutrition Education at School							(7.6160) p ≤ 0.0222
Yes	(64)	81	(24)	70	(40)	89	
Possibly	(10)	13	(5)	15	(5)	11	
No	(5)	6	(5)	15	(0)	0	
Interest in OCES County Educators Providing Nutrition Education to Students							(1.5730) p ≤ 0.2098
Yes	(73)	99	(28)	97	(45)	100	
No	(1)	1	(1)	3	(0)	0	
Interest in OCES County Educators Providing Nutrition Education to Teachers							(4.6547) p ≤ 0.0310
Yes	(16)	22	(10)	34	(6)	13	
No	(58)	78	(19)	66	(39)	87	
Interest in Social Marketing Campaign							(0.9275) p ≤ 0.6289
Yes	(60)	81	(23)	79	(37)	82	
Possibly	(13)	18	(6)	21	(7)	16	
No	(1)	1	(0)	0	(1)	2	

Of administrators and teachers indicating interest or possible interest in OCES county educators providing nutrition education, the majority of administrators (97%) and teachers (100%) indicated interest in education being provided to students, whereas, only 34% of administrators and 13% of teachers indicated interest in education being provided to teachers. A significant difference in interest in OCES county educators providing nutrition education to teachers was observed between administrators and teachers ($p \leq 0.05$), with administrators indicating more interest in teachers receiving nutrition education than teachers themselves (Table 1).

Administrators and teachers had similar program scheduling and format preferences (Table 2). The majority of administrators (93%) and teachers (82%) indicated a preference for education to be provided during school compared to after-school or during the summer. The majority of administrators (66%) and teachers (51%) indicated a preference for four lessons, with eight lessons being second among administrators (24%) and six lessons being second among teachers (20%). Regarding the length of lessons preferred by administrators and teachers, the majority of administrators (55%) and teachers (40%) indicated a preference for 30-minute lessons, with 45-minute lessons being second among administrators (38%) and teachers (33%). In terms of lesson frequency, the majority of administrators (59%) and teachers (42%) indicated a preference for weekly lessons, with monthly lessons being second among administrators (24%) and teachers (31%).

Table 2.
School Administrator and Teacher Preferences Related to Nutrition Education Program Scheduling

Question	All n=79 100%		Administrators n=34 43%		Teachers n=45 57%		(Chi-square) p value
When have Lessons							(4.3043) p ≤ 0.1162
During School	(64)	87	(27)	93	(37)	82	
After-School	(4)	5	(2)	7	(2)	4	
Summer	(6)	8	(0)	0	(6)	13	
Number of Lessons							(5.2328) p ≤ 0.1555
8 Lessons	(15)	20	(7)	24	(8)	18	
6 Lessons	(12)	16	(3)	10	(9)	20	
4 Lessons	(42)	57	(19)	66	(23)	51	
1 Lessons	(5)	7	(0)	0	(5)	11	
Length of Lessons							(6.2316) p ≤ 0.2843
60 Minutes	(6)	8	(2)	7	(4)	9	
45 Minutes	(26)	35	(11)	38	(15)	33	
30 Minutes	(34)	46	(16)	55	(18)	40	
15 Minutes	(6)	8	(0)	0	(6)	13	
10 Minutes	(2)	3	(0)	0	(2)	5	
Frequency of Lessons							(7.4441) p ≤ 0.1142
Daily	(4)	5	(0)	0	(4)	9	
Weekly	(36)	49	(17)	59	(19)	42	
Bi-Weekly	(9)	12	(5)	17	(4)	9	
Monthly	(21)	29	(7)	24	(14)	31	
Quarterly	(4)	5	(0)	0	(4)	9	

Administrators and teachers were also surveyed as to their interest in a social marketing campaign as an alternative nutrition education method. A majority of administrators (79%) and teachers (82%) indicated an interest in social marketing campaigns as a method of presenting nutrition education (Table 1).

Summary and Implications for Extension

Needs assessment is an effective planning tool for making decisions regarding Extension program delivery (Kaplan, Liu, & Radhakrishna, 2003). The results from the formative assessment reported here indicate the importance of taking school administrator and teacher interests, scheduling, and implementation format preferences into consideration, as reflected by the 15% of administrators and 11% of teachers who indicated only possible interest and 15% of administrators who indicated they were not interested in OCES county educators providing nutrition education. Among administrators and teachers interested in OCES county educators providing school nutrition education, the general trend was for in-school student education, consisting of four weekly programs, 30 minutes in length. Designing school-based educational programs taking school administrator and teacher scheduling preferences into consideration is an important step to enhance program acceptance and sustainability as well as help schools establish guidelines to implement their wellness policies.

These results may indicate possible concern from school administrators and teachers regarding competition with other school activities. Time concerns may indicate a need to consider other complementary and coordinated approaches to more traditional in class lessons common among many school-based nutrition educational programs. Inclusion of complementary collateral materials such as morning announcements, posters, and lunch-room prompts that support in-class methods and do not compete for in-class time are important for educators to consider because the majority of administrators and teachers indicated an interest in social marketing campaigns as a method of presenting nutrition education.

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