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Albert Lea Area Schools School Audit Report

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May 2009

Overview

An important indicator of the health of a community is the health of its children. Nationally, we know that our children are at greater risk for obesity and type 2 diabetes than they have ever been, and that our children do not consume recommended amounts of fruits, vegetables, calcium, and Vitamin D, while they over consume soft drinks and fast foods. We also know that, nationally, few of our children meet the recommendations for physical activity, and that the hours that youth spend in screen time (including watching television, playing video games, and interacting with the Internet) have skyrocketed in the last several decades. We are left with a nation of children in which one in three is overweight and one in four will develop diabetes in his or her lifetime. In addition, it is speculated that the current generation of children will be the first in many to have a shorter life expectancy than their parents.

Children spend the majority of their time in their homes, in their schools, and in other community venues, such as recreation and religious settings. In those places they interact with adults and peers, learning behaviors that are reinforced (including foods to eat and ways to spend their time),

and they are exposed to foods and activity options that limit the healthy choices they can make.

Purpose of the Audit

School is the most influential public venue that children are exposed to. Not only is it the place where health education is taught, but it is also where children spend a great deal of time. During the school day, a child's eating and activity options are limited to what is available and permitted in the school. In addition, the policies and practices that a school adopts, either formally through written and enforced policy, or informally through "This is the way that we do things" practices, influence a child's learning about preferred, accepted, and reinforced eating and activity choices.

In an effort to better understand the school environment available at the Albert Lea Area School District and to provide guidance with regard to ways that schools might be healthier, I, as co-director of the AARP/Blue Zones Vitality Project, planned and conducted a school audit.

The audit began in January 2009 and included the following activities: 1) an analysis of the district wellness policy; 2) collection of policy and practice surveys submitted by principals in each school in the district; and 3) observations in the school and interviews with school stakeholders.

Key Findings

Access to foods and beverages during the school day: All of the elementary schools reported that food is allowed in the classroom. The middle school, high school, and Alternative Learning Center (ALC) reported that food is not allowed in the classroom. However, all but the middle school allow beverages in the classroom. Food and beverages are not generally allowed in the hallway. Only the ALC allows both food and beverage in the hallways, and the high school also allows beverages in the hallway.

A particularly interesting finding was that all three of the elementary schools reported that students are permitted to bring (or have brought in) food from local fast food restaurants into the cafeteria. The ALC also

reported that this is an acceptable practice. Neither the middle nor high school permits the practice.

Recommendation: Create and enforce a policy that prohibits all foods and beverages other than water in classrooms and hallways. Create and enforce a policy that prohibits students, parents, and school staff from bringing fast food into the school.

Use of food as incentives and rewards: All of the schools (six out of six) reported that teachers or school staff use foods as incentives or rewards. In addition, one elementary school, the middle school, and the ALC reported that food coupons are used as rewards or incentives for students.

Recommendation: Create and enforce a policy that eliminates the practice of using foods as incentives and rewards.

Use of foods as fundraisers: All but the ALC reported some kind of fundraising that involved chocolate, candy, and high-fat baked goods. Classroom fundraising was reported by one elementary school and the high school. All three elementary schools reported that the school sponsored the fundraising, and two elementary schools, the middle school, and high school reported fundraising by sports teams or clubs.

Recommendation: Create and enforce a policy that eliminates the practice of using unhealthy foods as fundraisers by all school stakeholders, including booster clubs, service clubs, teachers, and the school.

Vending: District-wide, the vending is operated by sources other than the food service department. Only the middle, high, and ALC schools have vending. The middle school has five vending machines and school clubs receive funds from the sales. The machines are not operated during the school day and are not located near the cafeteria. The high school has six vending machines; the athletic department and school clubs receive funds from sales. They are not located near the cafeteria. The ALC has two vending machines and the student council receives funds from the sales.

The content of beverage vending is primarily sports drinks, flavored waters, and plain waters. Some fruit juices are also offered. Snack vending offers primarily lower-fat choices such as granola bars, animal crackers,

and Pop-Tarts. No vending machines offer less-processed foods, such as fresh fruit, low-fat yogurt, low-fat milk, string cheese, or nuts.

Recommendation: Eliminate the sports drinks from beverage vending. Move toward more water that is unflavored. Add some less-processed foods to snack vending, such as fresh fruit, low-fat yogurt, low-fat milk, string cheese, and nuts. Continue the positive practices of not having vending in elementary schools and having vending turned off during the school day in the middle school.

Foods available in the school cafeteria: The Albert Lea Area School District participates in the USDA National School Lunch Program and meets all of the requirements of that program. Whole-grain breads and rolls are offered routinely. Milk options include skim, 1 percent, 2 percent, and low-fat flavored milk. There are no à la carte lines in any of the schools except for the high school. The high school cafeteria offers several options, including the traditional school lunch, a grill with burgers and fries, a salad, and single items, including yogurt and coffee drinks. After all students have gone through the main lunch line during a lunch period, an à la carte line is rolled out and students may come back and purchase additional items. These items are similar to the items available in the snack vending, which tend to be lower-fat but highly processed foods.

Recommendations: Increase the offering of fresh fruits and vegetables on all cafeteria lines. Consider reducing students' access to flavored low-fat milk; for example, offer the flavored low-fat milk on Fridays only. Re-examine foods available in the options lines and à la carte in high school. As possible, move toward less-processed foods and more fresh fruit and vegetable options. Consider allowing the à la carte items to be purchased on a cash-only basis. Continue the positive practices of not offering à la carte in the elementary and middle school, and of offering whole-grain breads.

Support for a positive physical activity experience outside of PE class: All of the schools except the middle school reported that indoor, outdoor, and school equipment was available to students for recreation purposed outside of the regular school day. All of the schools reported that they provided individualized physical activity plans for students or provided opportunities for students to participate in community-level physical activity. One school (the middle school)

reported that physical activity is occasionally used as a punishment strategy (for example, requiring a student to run laps to punish some bad behavior). Two elementary schools reported that PE class may be withheld from a student as a form of punishment.

Recommendation: Create and enforce a policy that prohibits the use of physical activity as a punishment strategy or withholding PE class to punish students. In addition, train classroom teachers in methods to increase active time in the classroom, including stretch breaks and movement, as part of a learning strategy.

Active transport to school: The survey asked principals to estimate the proportion of students who regularly walk or bike to school. The principals of three schools (the high school, middle school, and Lakeview Elementary) estimated that between 1–9 percent of students regularly walked or biked to school. The ALC reported that 10–19 percent of students used active transport, while Sibley and Hawthorne reported 20–29 percent and 50–59 percent, respectively. The survey also asked the principals to indicate, using a list, the barriers to active transport. Weather received the most votes (6), followed by distance (4), traffic (3), fear for personal safety (2), and lack of sidewalks (1). No principal checked that the lack of a secure place for bicycles was a perceived barrier to active transport.

Recommendation: Increasing the proportion of students who walk or bike to school could have a significant impact on student activity levels. The “walking school bus” is one approach being tested in Albert Lea elementary schools that may prove to be effective. Weather and distance are barriers that may be more perceptual and normative than important. Promotion of walking and biking to school through campaigns and incentives may help change these perceptions. The barriers that relate to the physical environment of the town, specifically lack of sidewalks, safety, and traffic patterns, may be remedied through other Vitality Project walkability efforts.

Health and wellness councils at schools: Five of six principals completing the survey indicated that there was no health or wellness advisory council. Only the high school principal indicated that there was both a district wellness council and a wellness council at the school level.

Recommendation: According to data from the school health policy and programs study (2001), approximately 89 percent of schools across the county have district- and/or school-level groups that develop school policies or address school-wide health issues. In many cases, these councils were created in response to the USDA Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004, which required a school wellness policy. Research is beginning to document that active school health and wellness councils are related to schools that maintain more supportive activity environments and have less junk food available. My recommendation is to assemble and maintain a district wellness council that includes stakeholders from the following groups: school administration, school food service, physical education specialists, health teachers, other classroom teachers, school nurse, parents, students.

Quality of the district wellness policy: As part of the USDA Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004, every school district receiving funds for the USDA School Breakfast Program or National School Lunch Program was required to formulate a local wellness policy. These policies were to stipulate goals and guidelines for healthful options in seven areas, including nutrition education, standards for nutrition programs and school meals, nutrition standards for competitive foods, physical education, physical activity, communication and promotion, and ways to evaluate school wellness efforts.

Using published criteria and a scoring system developed for the purpose of evaluating school policies (Swartz et. al., 2009), we evaluated two aspects of the Albert Lea district wellness policy: comprehensiveness (assessing the breadth of the areas covered) and strength of the policies (assessing the degree to which policy included specific and firm language).

Out of a possible 100 points, the Albert Lea district wellness policy scored 52 percent for comprehensiveness, compared with an average score of 45 percent for other schools in the state. Out of a possible 100 points, the Albert Lea wellness policy scored 7 percent for strength, compared with an average score of 17 percent for other schools in the state.

As is the case with most of the other district wellness policies evaluated in the state, the policy is weak both in terms of comprehensiveness and in

strength. In particular, the policy is weak with regard to information on physical education and activity, and in communication and promotion and evaluation.

Recommendation: The findings related to the written policy, as well as feedback from school stakeholders on how the policy was developed, suggest that the intent and rationale of the federal requirement for written policies was not clear when the policy was prepared. Weak scores across the country suggest that districts created policies to meet the federal requirement but did not have a strong belief in the benefits of written policies or how the policies were to be evaluated or monitored to assess their utility and impact on school wellness. My recommendation is that the policy be revised and strengthened based on the findings of this school audit. The policy should be revised with input from a school wellness committee that would be formed to write an improved policy and would meet regularly to assess how the policy was being enforced, as well as modifying as necessary. I would recommend that the district policy become a document that has utility in describing the expected school environment, is useful as a policy document that provides rationale for enforcing rules and standards of practice, and is reviewed frequently by engaged school stakeholders to ensure its relevance. It will be important to present the new policy to teachers and school staff during the staff orientation period prior to the start of the 2009-2010 school year.

Conclusion

The process of convening a group of individuals to help revise and further develop stronger school policies and practices that will create healthier environments in which students will learn and school staff will work will require the active participation of school administration, school staff, parents, students, and other school and community stakeholders. Resources exist to help find ways to create incentives for students to excel that do not include the use of foods and options for fundraisers that do not consist of unhealthy foods, but do offer healthier options for vending and snacks, and ways to incorporate activity into classroom activities. The Vitality Project staff will help identify those sources and will make them available for consideration.