

Society for Nutrition Education's Recommendations for Improving Children's Nutrition Education 2009 Child Nutrition Reauthorization

Summary: Based on a national, strategic vision for improving the health and nutritional status of children and their caregivers, mandatory, consistent funding is essential to achieve an integrated and comprehensive nutrition education and promotion program. Team Nutrition Networks (TNN), within and across USDA Child Nutrition (CN) programs shall be coordinated at the national level within USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), administered at the state level to meet unique state needs, and implemented at the local level based on prioritized community needs.

Society for Nutrition Education (SNE) thanks the USDA for the opportunity to comment on the 2009 Child Nutrition Reauthorization. SNE believes that the following recommendations will not only develop a seamless and comprehensive Team Nutrition Network (TNN) but also provide program stability through mandatory funding. Specifically, SNE proposes that as part of the process Congress eliminate Section 5 of the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act (NSLA), Nutrition Promotion, and revise some of the language in Section 19 of the Child Nutrition Act of 1966 (CNA), TNN.

This change is critical and urgent, because Congress supported nutrition promotion and education by authorizing nutrition promotion and TNN in the Child Nutrition and Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Reauthorization Act of 2004. Yet, the authorized funds have not been appropriated for the activities required by the legislation. Consequently, in the four years since the passage of this legislation, Congress' vision for nutrition education and promotion has not been implemented. Making these revisions will also clarify and refocus actions to improve nutrition education and promotion.

Under Section 19 of the 2004 Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act, states should continue to submit a state plan in order to qualify for TNN program funding.

A consolidated, comprehensive TNN should include funding for:

- 1. A state-based TNN Coordinator in each state to serve as a central point of contact at the state level;**
- 2. Resources to allow the TNN Coordinator to administer and conduct nutrition promotion and education activities, to disseminate funds to local agencies, promote partnerships, and provide communication links from federal to local agencies, including the dissemination of and technical assistance for Team Nutrition materials and other effective initiatives;**
- 3. USDA-FNS to develop materials, provide technical assistance, coordinate evaluation, and oversee all state activities; and**
- 4. Research on TNN materials and program effectiveness, including the role and impact of the nutrition education specialist.**

Further Explanation and recommended funding levels for each of the four proposed components follows:

- 1. State-based TNN Coordinator Position (\$14 million):** As the central point of contact at the state level, the TNN Coordinator, is critical to the ability to deliver effective, ongoing nutrition education and promotion.

The coordinator would:

- Administer and coordinate a statewide multidisciplinary nutrition education and promotion effort to enhance networking within and between states;
- Serve as a central point of contact within the state on matters relating to nutrition education and promotion in CN programs; and
- Coordinate with other school health efforts in the state (such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Coordinated School Health Program, agencies within USDA and DHHS including the Indian Health Services, US Department of Education, and other relevant state and national initiatives).

Sufficient funding will be necessary to fund a position in each state. A minimum of \$250,000 is necessary for each state, including territories, to equal about \$14 million. This would provide minimum funding for establishing a network of State Coordinators nationwide. This funding would be provided to the state agency that oversees the child nutrition programs.

- 2. TNN Program Funds (\$50 million):** Funding the TNN program is necessary and would be used by the TNN coordinators to disseminate funds to local agencies, promote partnerships, and provide communication links from federal to local agencies, including the dissemination and technical assistance for use of Team Nutrition and other effective materials. Program funds would be allocated to states based on the number of meals served in the state (2 years prior). Activities may include:

- Conducting on-going needs assessments of target audiences in CN programs;
- Developing a state plan to address the needs of program participants and coordination with other health education efforts;
- Monitoring of statewide data relating to children’s health and nutrition;
- Evaluating program impact;
- Disseminating nutrition education and promotion materials, including Team Nutrition resources;
- Providing grants for local agencies, including development of models and innovations to improve children’s health and nutrition, dissemination of successful programs, technical assistance to initiate and maintain local programming, and collaboration with program partners;
- Coordinating professional development and training for teachers, child nutrition program personnel, and other staff;
- Developing resources, implementing programs, and conducting outcome evaluations related to school wellness policies;

- Organizing and conducting training for school food service operators on enhancements to meals and snacks served in child nutrition programs;
- Promoting parent involvement and developing materials and education programs, and;
- Increasing the use of National Food Service Management Institute (NFSMI) materials and other resources available for training food service personnel.

3. Team Nutrition Materials Development, Coordination, Oversight, and Dissemination at the Federal Level (\$3.5 million): Federal level funding is necessary to allow FNS to administer and coordinate TNN and provide administrative support to and oversight of state TNN initiatives. Funding would be used:

- For materials development and dissemination;
- To support cross-communication among states for sharing of information, resources, and best practices;
- To convene training and educational sessions for TNN coordinators and other TNN operatives; and
- By FNS to coordinate a task force group with appropriate representatives to establish minimum education and experience requirements/standards for the state-level TNN Coordinator.

4. Research on TNN materials and program effectiveness, including the role and impact of the nutrition education specialist (\$2.3 million): Funding would enable the USDA Undersecretary for Research, Education, and Economics (REE) to establish an evidence base of effective methods of nutrition education and promotion as implemented by the nutrition education specialists in schools, childcare agencies, and related communities. This research should examine the impact of a nutrition education specialist in nutrition programs.

Funding would be one cent per lunch served in the NSLP (National School Lunch Program), the CACFP (Child and Adult Care Food Program), and the SFSP (Summer Food Service Program), for a total of approximately \$69.8 million per year.

Summary of Funding Proposal, \$69.8 million:

| Component | Funding |
|--|----------------|
| State Team Nutrition Coordinator Positions | \$14 million |
| State and Local Team Nutrition Network (TNN) Program Funds | \$50 million |
| Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) TNN Activities at the federal level | \$3.5 million |
| USDA Research, Education, and Economics (REE) Nutrition Education Research | \$2.3 million |

The proposed funding levels will not supplant current Team Nutrition program funding as part of the USDA FNS administrative budget allocation.

Summary of Rationale: The childhood obesity epidemic, along with increased rates of chronic diseases in children and skyrocketing healthcare costs, demonstrate the need for a more comprehensive and science-based nutrition education and promotion program, coordinated within and across child nutrition programs (NSLP, SBP, CACFP, and SFSP). Children and families must learn the skills necessary to make healthy choices in order to reverse the current trends. Numerous state health care reform reports urge more education for individuals and families to allow them to take responsibility for their health and incorporate preventive health risk practices into their lifestyle.

Under the current competitive grant structure, states continue to have minimal or no funding for nutrition education and promotion. The School Nutrition Dietary Assessment III report (SNDA III) highlighted the need for a more comprehensive, coordinated Team Nutrition program across all states and urged that a more effective infrastructure at the national, state, and local levels be implemented to promote nutrition and nutrition education within Child Nutrition Programs.¹

This proposal responds to the study recommendations. While the current Team Nutrition state-based grant program has been effective in helping states in federally-specified content areas, consistent and reliable funding is critically needed to respond to community and state priorities to improve children's nutrition and health.^{2,3} Currently, because of limited resources, states compete for grant awards that are designed for specific USDA-specified areas related to the Team Nutrition initiative; USDA funds are too limited to allow a sustained focus on priority target population nutrition education needs in all states administering school and child care nutrition programs.⁴⁻⁶ The need for innovative nutrition education and promotion efforts is ongoing and essential to the health of all children, regardless of where they live. The proposed state-level infrastructure is necessary to develop and deliver effective nutrition education programs and activities in schools, child care centers, and summer feeding programs nationwide, in a consistent and coordinated manner.

At the state and national level, a central mechanism is not available to facilitate sharing of information between states regarding best practices and innovations. Evidence-based education programs and materials that have been developed at the federal level and in states are not effectively disseminated or utilized. A state-based Team Nutrition Network Coordinator will provide the infrastructure necessary to ensure that existing and newly developed materials are utilized more effectively and efficiently, in addition to development and duplication of efforts are minimized.

At the local/community level, as nutrition education has evolved from being solely classroom-based and didactic to a more comprehensive approach, coordination and training by nutrition education professionals is critically needed. Nutrition education includes multiple components such as environmental changes, integrated initiatives, social marketing, and classroom nutrition education standards supporting sequential instruction emphasizing skill building and family involvement. The proposed Team Nutrition Network is a comprehensive nutrition education and promotion effort that will enable more effective utilization, coordination, and evaluation of comprehensive, behavior-based nutrition education by qualified professionals.

This approach to TNN will:

- Fund qualified professionals to lead nutrition education and promotion efforts across the state in CN programs including: NSLP, SBP, SFSP, and CACFP.
- Enable the efficient and effective collaboration among schools, childcare centers, other child nutrition settings, and communities in building multidisciplinary, integrated, nutrition and health promoting partnerships.
- Provide financial stability to state agencies to promote nutrition education integrated with USDA nutrition assistance programs; yet tailored to meet the unique nutrition education and promotion needs within a state.
- Establish a TNN or state level infrastructure in every state to provide training and technical assistance, better utilize and disseminate existing materials, coordinate education implementation and evaluation, and collaborate within the state and with other states.
- Enhance and strengthen the federally mandated local wellness policies by funding technical assistance and resources that can be managed at the state level and provided to local districts to help in their ongoing local wellness policy efforts.

Nutrition education and promotion has been chronically under funded, and now the 2009 Child Nutrition Reauthorization provides an opportunity to reduce childhood obesity and improve children's near and long term health by fully funding nutrition education at the levels authorized by the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004 (PL 108-265).

References:

1. School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study-III, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Research, Nutrition, and Analysis, November 2007.
2. Nutrition Education in FNS: A Coordinated Approach for Promoting Healthy Behaviors A Report to Congress, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Research, Nutrition, and Analysis, February 2002.
3. GAO Nutrition Education Highlights, Report to the Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry, US Senate, April, 2004.
4. Promoting Healthy Eating: An Investment in the Future: A report to Congress. Washington D.C.: Food and Nutrition Service; 1999:23.

5. Nutrition Education: USDA Provides Services through Multiple Programs, but Stronger Linkages among Efforts Are Needed. Washington, D.C.: U. S. General Accounting Office; 2004:51.
6. Team Nutrition Training Grant RFA. Washington D.C.: Food and Nutrition Service; 2008:19.



The Society for Nutrition Education (SNE) is composed of nutrition education professionals sharing a vision of healthy people in healthy communities, through the promotion of healthful food choices and lifestyle behaviors at the individual, community, and policy levels. Our members conduct research in education, behavior, and communication; develop and disseminate innovative nutrition education strategies; and communicate information on food, nutrition, and health issues to students, professionals, policy makers, and the public. Publications describing this work can be found in the SNE peer-reviewed *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, the leading research periodical devoted to behavioral nutrition and nutrition education research, and policy.