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# State of Nutrition Education & Promotion for Children & Adolescents 2009 Report

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Promoting and teaching healthy eating is essential to addressing childhood obesity and other diet-related health problems. Recognizing the important role that a coordinated nutrition education and promotion effort can play in establishing life-long healthy eating habits, Congress authorized USDA's Team Nutrition Networks (TNN) in the 2004 Child Nutrition Reauthorization. However, adequate funds to carry out the provisions of the Act were never fully appropriated. The upcoming Child Nutrition Reauthorization provides an opportunity to strengthen and enhance the role of nutrition education and promotion in reducing childhood obesity and preventing the development of chronic diseases, such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease.

The goal of this report is to provide Congress and other policymakers specific recommendations about how to provide a consolidated and comprehensive TNN that is coordinated at the national level, administered at the State level, and implemented at the local level. In addition, SNE has outlined a strong rationale for the recommendations by: (1) highlighting critical gaps in pre-kindergarten through twelve grade nutrition education and promotion at the local, State, Tribal, and Federal levels; and (2) explaining the evidence-base emphasizing the need for effective nutrition education and promotion for children and adolescents.

### Team Nutrition Networks

A well-funded TNN can strengthen nutrition education and promotion efforts in Child Nutrition programs and within schools and communities across the country by:

- Supporting a strong nutrition education program in every State
  - This program would include: training and technical assistance to local school districts; implementation and evaluation curricula; better utilization and dissemination of existing materials; improved coordination among nutrition education providers and programs; and enhanced communication within the State and among other States.
- Providing financial stability

- Resources would go to State agencies to support nutrition education in schools and further integration of materials and training from USDA nutrition programs.
- Enabling efficient and effective collaboration in building multidisciplinary, integrated nutrition and health promotion partnerships
  - System would facilitate schools working with other schools within district, local childcare centers, communities, and other nutrition programs and settings.
- Allowing States and districts to address their own unique nutrition education needs.
- Funding qualified professionals to lead nutrition education and promotion efforts
  - Activities would take place in Child Nutrition programs across each State, including the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), the School Breakfast Program (SBP), the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), and the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP).
- Ensuring local wellness policies are implemented and evaluated.

### **Critical Gaps in Pre-Kindergarten through Twelve Grade Nutrition Education and Promotion at the Local, State, Tribal, and Federal Levels**

The long-term lack of sufficient funding for nutrition education and promotion in Child Nutrition programs has resulted in a fragmented system making it difficult for innovative, evidence-based approaches to be developed and implemented using a comprehensive, sustainable approach. As a result:

- Nutrition education and promotion efforts are insufficient relative to the impact of nutrition on health.
  - Schools in most States are required to offer nutrition and physical activity instruction, but health teachers reported spending only 4-5 hours per year covering each topic.<sup>1</sup>
  - Among elementary classes in which nutrition and dietary behavior were taught, the median number of hours of required instruction that teachers provided on nutrition and dietary behavior decreased from 4.6 in 2000 to 3.4 in 2006.<sup>2</sup>
- Many Child Nutrition programs include some nutrition education components; between the programs, however, there is limited or no coordination.
  - A 2004 GAO study recommended identifying ways to improve coordination efforts and to strengthen the linkages among nutrition education efforts.<sup>3</sup>
  - This GAO study also found that the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) lack a formal administrative structure to systematically deliver nutrition education, to disseminate the nutrition education materials created by Team Nutrition,

and to coordinate among the various nutrition and health programs across the State.

- Schools do not have adequate resources or necessary knowledge to prioritize nutrition education throughout the school environment.
  - Only 65% of school districts provide funding for or offer staff development on nutrition and dietary behavior.<sup>2</sup>

### **Nutrition Education & Promotion has a Solid Evidence-Base**

Considerable research has been conducted in recent years to find effective strategies to improve the nutritional health of children and reduce the risk of chronic disease and obesity. Evidence<sup>4-8</sup> indicates that nutrition education interventions are more likely to be effective in impacting behaviors if they do the following:

- Target specific behaviors or practices
- Focus on the interests and motivations of targeted youth
- Devote sufficient time and intensity
- Deliver coherent and clearly focused curricula
- Involve multiple components using a social ecological approach
- Provide professional development to staff

In order to be effective, nutrition education and promotion must include multiple components such as: environmental change, policy change, integrated initiatives, social marketing, as well as classroom nutrition education standards supporting sequential instruction emphasizing skill building and family involvement. Furthermore, Congress addressed the importance of establishing healthy habits through behavior change and the need for a multi-pronged approach, as part of the 2008 Farm Bill discussion.<sup>9</sup> Specifically, Congress stated that:

*Expert organizations, such as the Institute of Medicine, indicate that dietary and physical activity behavior change is more likely to result from the combined application of public health approaches and education than from education alone.*

Joint Explanatory Statement of the Committee of Conference, 2008 Farm Bill

Effective nutrition education and promotion efforts, delivered through a well-funded TNN initiative, go hand-in-hand with delivering nutritious foods and beverages through school meal and other nutrition assistance programs. While it is critical for all youth to have access to nutritious meals, for schools and other Child Nutrition programs to limit access to unhealthy foods and beverages, and for physical education and activity programs to be promoted, it is equally critical to provide learning opportunities that teach youth—in ways that instill life-long healthy behavior changes and habits—the importance of a nutritious diet, and to have the messages and initiatives coordinated and targeted, based on State and community needs.

## References

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- <sup>5</sup>Shaya FT, Flores D, Gbarayor CM, Wang J. School-based obesity interventions: A literature review. *J Sch Health*. 2008;Apr;78(4):189-196.
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- <sup>9</sup>Joint Explanatory Statement of the Committee of Conference, 2008 Farm Bill. Available at: [http://agriculture.house.gov/inside/Legislation/110/FB/Conf/statement\\_of\\_managers.pdf](http://agriculture.house.gov/inside/Legislation/110/FB/Conf/statement_of_managers.pdf). Accessed June 15, 2009.

## Report Provided by SNE Advisory Council on Public Policy (ACPP) Child Nutrition Reauthorization (CNR) Subcommittee

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