



Nutrition Education in FNS: A Coordinated Approach for Promoting Healthy Behaviors

A Report to Congress

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Nutrition Education

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Introduction

This report fulfills the request from Congress in the House Appropriations Committee Report (House Report 107-116), which accompanied the Agriculture Appropriations Act for fiscal year 2002. The conference report included the following statement:

“The nutritional status of our young people is a matter of public health. The Committee expects the Department to build upon work already done with the food pyramid, and other innovative national and local efforts. Nutrition information should be carefully reviewed so that a consistent and coordinated message is disseminated. Existing opportunities to convey nutrition messages, including newsletters, static displays in cafeterias, in-school and cable television productions should be used to the maximum extent possible. The committee directs the Department to provide a report regarding the development and implementation of this effort by February 1, 2002.”

The Department of Agriculture (USDA) shares the Committee’s concern about dissemination of coordinated and consistent nutrition education messages, and is pleased to have the opportunity to submit this report.

The Importance of Nutrition

As the relationships among diet, health, and disease prevention have become clearer, nutrition and the promotion of healthy eating behaviors and lifestyles have received increased attention. Dietary recommendations and long-term health objectives¹, including the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* and the Healthy People 2010 Nutrition Objectives², recognize nutrition as an important factor in the prevention of premature deaths from the chronic diseases.

There are some alarming trends that are harming our children's health and their ability to learn and do well in school. Our children are facing a health crisis. Only 2 percent of children actually meet the recommendations of the *Food Guide Pyramid*³ and nearly half of young people ages 12-21 do not engage in physical activity on a regular basis⁴. The rapid increase in childhood overweight in the last 10 years suggests the need for greater emphasis on nutrition education and policy interventions to increase physical activity and encourage healthy eating patterns among children⁵.

FNS nutrition assistance programs touch the lives of one in six Americans each year and represent a significant opportunity to reach participants with nutrition education and healthy lifestyle messages, especially children who participate during their formative years. Consumption of a healthy diet in the early years is essential for normal growth and development, and to prevent a variety of nutrition-related health problems, such as iron-deficiency anemia, compromised cognitive achievement, obesity, dental caries, and chronic diseases such as diabetes.

USDA Nutrition Policy

It is the policy of the Department of Agriculture to promote optimal human health and well being through improved nutrition. The Department recognizes the importance of coordination of its human nutrition-related activities with the agricultural/food industry, other governmental agencies and private or public institutions.

As noted by the Appropriations Committee, the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, including the *Food Guide Pyramid* provide the basis for nutrition education messages throughout

Opportunities to Convey Nutrition Messages

the Federal government. USDA works closely with the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) to integrate the messages of the *Dietary Guidelines* and the *Food Guide Pyramid* into all Federal nutrition education and promotion activities.

To ensure that this occurs effectively and consistently USDA and DHHS have established the Dietary Guidance Working Group (DGWG). This group functions to ensure that dietary guidance is consistent and supportive across Federal agencies, accurately reflects the concepts expressed in the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, is supported by research-based knowledge, and is objective in presentation.

Changing lifestyle behaviors to meet the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* is the primary focus of nutrition education provided by FNS nutrition assistance programs. Research confirms that properly designed and implemented nutrition education interventions, focusing on achieving behavioral change, can be effective at improving diets and nutrition related behaviors⁶.

As noted above, Federal nutrition assistance programs represent a significant opportunity to reach participating children and their caregivers with science-based, behavior-focused nutrition education and promotion strategies. While the Child Nutrition Programs (National School Lunch Program, School Breakfast Program, Summer Food Service Program, Child and Adult Care Food Program) focus almost exclusively on children, other programs also play a critical role; half of all Food Stamp Program (FSP) participants are children, and three-quarters of the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) participants are under the age of 5. These programs provide excellent venues for reaching parents and others in the community to promote practices that support healthy eating for children.

Since Food Stamps and WIC are available to support nutrition education primarily through grants to States, the design and implementation of nutrition education in these programs occurs largely at the State and local level. However, FNS does provide guidance to assist State agencies with the preparation of their nutrition education plans. FNS also undertakes a

number of other important efforts to ensure effectiveness and promote consistency with the *Dietary Guidelines* and the *Food Guide Pyramid*. These include:

- The **Fit WIC Demonstration Grants** are three-year projects to identify ways that WIC policies, practices and operations might be changed to help prevent childhood obesity.
- **Revitalizing Quality Nutrition Services (RQNS)** in WIC is an effort to enhance the effectiveness of nutrition services. This effort involves partners at the Federal, State, and local levels. Key objectives of **RQNS** include revising nutrition services standards, facilitating communication among partners, supporting training, and marketing/promoting effective nutrition education strategies.
- The **FSP is developing educational and promotional materials** to improve access to and utilization of the *Dietary Guidelines* for low literacy and Spanish language groups. Once developed, the materials can be used in all Federal nutrition assistance programs.
- FNS works with States to **identify and promote replication of effective strategies** by disseminating information about state-based initiatives that work. Current areas of interest include strategies that increase consumption of fruits and vegetables, promote healthy weight, support breastfeeding, and encourage cross-program collaborations.
- FNS partners with the Food, Nutrition and Information Center (FNIC) of the National Agricultural Library to develop a number of **web based resources**. These are designed for use by program cooperators and include the Healthy School Meals Resource System, the Child and Adult Care Food Program Resource System, the Team Nutrition Website, the Eat Smart. Play Hard.™ Website, WIC Works Resource System and Nutrition Connections-FSP Website. These websites provide access to information, materials and resources, and provide a forum for program operators to communicate with each other.

In the Child Nutrition Programs, the *School Meals Initiative for Healthy Children (SMI)* recognized the need and importance of nutrition education for children and their caregivers. To address this need, FNS developed Team Nutrition (TN), an integrated, behavior-based, comprehensive vehicle for improving the nutritional health of the nation's school children, and infants and preschoolers in child care centers. Team Nutrition is implemented through three behavior-oriented strategies:

1. providing training and technical assistance for Child Nutrition food service professionals to help them serve meals that look good, taste good and meet nutrition standards.
2. providing multifaceted, integrated nutrition education for children and their parents and
3. providing support for healthy eating and physical activity by involving school administrators and other school and community partners.

All Team Nutrition messages are based on the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, the *Food Guide Pyramid*, and focus on four behavior outcomes for children:

- Eat a variety of foods.
- Eat more fruits, vegetables and grains;
- Eat lower fat foods more often; and
- Be physically active.

As noted in the following examples, current projects are inspired by and fully consistent with the *Dietary Guidelines*, support the Team Nutrition strategies, and are innovative in their approach to promoting healthy lifestyle behaviors:

- Recently, FNS collaborated with 16 organizations to develop *Changing the Scene: Improving the School Nutrition Environment-A Guide to Local Action*. This action kit is used at the State and local levels to educate decision makers about the critical role the total school environment plays in promoting healthy eating and related behaviors.
- **Team Nutrition Training Grants** offer funding, authorized by Congress each year, to State agencies that administer child nutrition programs for the delivery of training programs based on one or more of TN's behavior-oriented strategies.

- **The Team Nutrition Demonstration Project Grants** are three-year projects to assess the steps, time, and resources required by schools to implement and institutionalize comprehensive Team Nutrition.
- ***Nibbles for Health*** is a series of parent education newsletters, in both English and Spanish languages, to be distributed to parents of toddlers in 30,000 child care centers. These materials address a variety of issues and highlight parental role modeling, the importance of good nutrition and routine physical activity for both parents and children.
- ***Healthy Eating for Boys*** is a collaboration between FNS, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and 100 Black Men of America (BMA) to introduce a nutrition and physical activity component in the BMA mentoring program and 4-H Clubs. It targets adolescent boys and aims to convey skills in community action around nutrition and health choices.
- ***Introducing New Foods to Young Children*** is a project for educators to help young children increase their consumption of fruits and vegetables.
- ***Updated Recipes*** for the National School Lunch Program and Child and Adult Care Food Program will provide tasty, kid-friendly recipes that are low in fat, salt and sugar.
- The ***Power of Choice: A Leader's Guide for Afterschool Nutrition Education*** is a healthy lifestyle initiative for pre-adolescents. The project was developed through a cooperative agreement between the FNS and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

Cross-Program Initiatives and Partnerships

FNS is also working to advance the use of integrated approaches to reach beyond program specific efforts and to synergize better delivery of consistent nutrition education messages across all FNS programs. Current initiatives include:

- The **Eat Smart. Play Hard.**[™] Campaign was designed to foster positive changes in eating and physical activity behaviors in order to improve long term health by

encouraging families to adopt behaviors that are consistent with the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* and the *Food Guide Pyramid*. The Campaign is a cross-program initiative that uses a spokescharacter, Power Panther™, as the primary communication tool to deliver nutrition and physical activity messages in an engaging manner, especially to children and their caregivers.

- FNS is working with the Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion (CNPP), along with other USDA agencies, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the National Cancer Institute (NCI) and other agencies that are part of the National 5 A Day Partnership to formulate national strategies and plans to increase the consumption of fruits and vegetables. The scope of this proposed effort is to deliver high quality, effective, evidence-based nutrition interventions to the entire U.S. population, especially those with health disparities.
- FNS participates in the Nutrition and Physical Activity Work Group (NUPAWG), an advisory group to the CDC. NUPAWG members represent key national, state and local public health and education partners working together to improve the nation's dietary and physical activity practices. A key activity of this group over the last year was the publication of *Guidelines for Comprehensive Programs to Promote Healthy Eating and Physical Activity*. Scheduled for release later this year, the document will help state and local health groups create comprehensive nutrition, physical activity and obesity control programs.

Future Actions

USDA has made considerable progress in actively promoting healthy lifestyle behaviors and improving nutrition standards through program-specific and cross-program initiatives. As previously discussed, ongoing efforts are in place to leverage Federal resources to extend the reach of nutrition education through public-private partnerships.

The Department's efforts would be more effective in achieving sustainable behavior change, if policy changes and funding disparities discussed in the 1999 Report to Congress⁷ could be addressed. For example, there is a wide variation in funding available for nutrition education among the various nutrition assistance programs.

In FY 2000, the per year expenditure for school nutrition programs was \$.11 per participant compared with \$31.68 per participant in WIC nutrition education programs and \$5.77 per participant in Food Stamp nutrition education programs. This disparity in nutrition education expenditures between FNS programs demonstrates the critical need to develop a funding mechanism that supports sustained nutrition education for all programs, authorizes funds for cross-program coordination and ensures the ability of State agencies to develop the State/local infrastructure necessary for the delivery of consistent nutrition messages.

FNS target populations cannot reasonably be expected to improve their eating and physical activity behaviors if the trend for the general U.S. population is not also towards significant improvement. As noted in the 1999 Report to Congress, Federal structures, in particular the USDA Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion (CNPP), the USDA Human Nutrition Coordinating Committee and the HHS Nutrition Policy Board, are in place to provide leadership in this effort.

An essential component of an overall strategy that supports healthy eating behaviors for FNS target population groups is adequate Federal funding for nutrition education for the general population. USDA's Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services (FNCS) is developing an initiative to help change consumer's eating behaviors through focused, individualized messages and a multifaceted and long-term education campaign. Funding for such efforts should be provided at a level that can make a real impact in the context of today's food marketplace and other broad environmental influences on nutrition and physical activity.

There are examples of interventions that work such as the multidisciplinary strategy of Team Nutrition that has demonstrated positive impacts on students eating behavior.⁸ However, it is apparent that achieving long-term changes in behavior is complex and requires ongoing efforts to sustain. In order to be successful in making consumer behavior consistent with national nutrition goals, it is necessary to create policies, systems and community environments that support eating and health behaviors that are consistent with these goals.

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