SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS’ POLICY
DECISION-MAKING SOCIAL MARKETING PLAN

A Report to:
California Project LEAN of the California Department of Health Services and the Public Health Institute

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EXECUTIVE OVERVIEW

Project and Process Overview

The purpose of this project is to better understand California school board members and the factors that influence their policy decision-making, as well as, other decision-makers such as superintendents. The study was undertaken through collaboration among California Project LEAN (Leaders Encouraging Activity and Nutrition) (CPL), 10 California communities, and the University of South Florida (USF), College of Public Health. All members formed the Community Research Collaborative. These members have a strong history of conducting community-based health communications research.

The broad, long-term goals of the project include (a) determining policymakers’ attitudes, perceptions and motivations related to the enactment of policies that support healthy eating in high schools; (b) mitigating barriers to the adoption of school policies that support healthy eating; and (c) reducing cancer-related risk factors, particularly inadequate diet.

Research Overview

Purpose/Objectives

The literature review, key informant interviews and information from a solicitation survey contributed to the development of the 41-item survey administered to a stratified (by school district) random sample of 404 school board members in California. A modified survey was sent to 100 school superintendents in California. The survey was conducted to gain insight into school board members and superintendents and their beliefs about nutrition-related school health practices, as both groups play a critical role in decision-making within the school district.

Overall objectives are to:

- Review and document successful prevention program models that have used policy strategies to impact population-based behavior change, especially in the area of nutrition.
- Examine the economic and policy issues associated with unhealthy foods and beverages at schools.
- Determine which policymakers have the most influence and are the most likely to make policy changes in the school community.
- Determine the health communication strategies that have the most potential to influence policymakers to enact school policies that support healthy eating for low-income teens.

Research objectives of the survey are to identify:

- The factors that motivate California school board members and superintendents to develop and/or implement healthy food policies in their school district;
- The factors that deter California school board members and superintendents from developing and/or implementing healthy food choice policies in their school district;
- Effective information channels and spokespersons for California school board members and superintendents regarding healthy food policies; and effective strategies for increasing school board members’ and superintendents’ interest in healthy food policies in schools.
Methodology

A literature review of school-based health policies and school board members was first conducted. Very little information regarding school board members and their decision-making process regarding nutrition-related school health policies was found (McCormack Brown & Pitt, 2001). Fifty-seven key informant interviews were conducted with school board members and other key stakeholders (e.g., superintendents, state and national school health leaders) to gain an in-depth understanding of how nutrition-related school health policy decisions are made (McCormack Brown, Henry, & Pitt, 2001a). These key informant interviews provided a rich context in understanding school board members and nutrition-related school health policies and provided a foundation for the development of the school board survey.

A draft survey was developed from reviewing the literature of similar surveys regarding school board members and nutrition-related issues. Using social marketing as a framework, survey questions were developed focusing on product, price, place and promotion. The final survey consisted of 41 questions (McCormack Brown, Henry, & Pitt, 2001b). The format of the questions varied according to subject matter. Some domains employed Likert scale-type items, closed options responses, or “select from the following.” When content decisions were concluded, the survey was re-formatted into a booklet-style survey (Dillman, 2000).

A media analysis was conducted on newspaper coverage in California’s major newspapers to evaluate how the media covers adolescent nutrition policies (Berkeley Media Studies Group, 2001).

The 2000 California High School Fast Food Survey describes the prevalence of fast foods on California high school campuses and student access to health foods at school (Public Health Institute, 2000). These data are useful for school board members when making decisions about fast food sales on high school campuses.

A qualitative analysis of the prevalence and specifics of contracts with soda companies in California’s 25 largest school district was conducted (Public Health Institute, 2001). Like other California specific reports, this report provides compelling evidence that beverage companies maintain a strong and visible presence in the schools.
Research Findings

This section summarizes the factors associated with nutrition-related policy decision-making among school board members and superintendents. One hundred seventy-four surveys were used for data analysis.

School Board Members

School Board Member Characteristics (n=174)

- One-third (33%) reported having a nutrition-related policy in their school district.
- One-third (32%) reported that beverage vendors had an exclusive contract with their school district.
- Almost one half (48%) reported beverage vendors having an exclusive contract with any school in their district.
- One in four (26%) agreed with the practice of exclusive beverage vendors.
- The majority believed school board policies supporting good nutrition on school campuses can contribute to the reduction of student cancer and heart disease risks in the future and reduction of the number of overweight or obese students.

Factors that Influence School Nutrition-Related Policy Decision-Making

- Those who considered themselves to be adequately prepared to develop sound nutrition-related policies, provide community leadership, and monitor, review and revise nutrition-related policies also considered themselves to be more effective in influencing nutrition-related school health decisions/policies.
- Having nutrition-related issues on the school board agenda increases awareness of other school nutrition-related issues and increases likelihood of supporting other positive nutrition-related school health issues.
- Community and family are salient issues for school board members when addressing nutrition-related issues, especially, community mobilization, student preferences, cultural issues, and personal or family issues.
- Parent issues such as apathy among parents, lack of policy education among parents and uninformed parents were key factors in school board members’ policy decision-making.
• School staff, in particular food service, were useful in the nutrition-related decision-making among school board members.

**Professional Development and Training**

• More than one half believed they were inadequately prepared to develop sound nutrition-related policies, provide community leadership in communicating and supporting nutrition-related policies, and monitor, review and revise school nutrition-related policies.

• Six out of 10 school board members (64%) would like to receive training on nutrition-related school health issues.

• Internet, e-mail, school board publications, and school board conferences were methods school board members would like to use to learn more about nutrition-related school health issues.

**Promoting Nutrition-Related School Health Issues**

• Community members/community organization, parents/parent organization, and/or mandate from the state were likely to bring a nutrition-related school issue to the attention of the school board.

**A Majority (over 50%) Supported:**

• Providing healthy food options in public schools
• Establishing minimum nutritional standards for fast foods sold in school
• Limiting and monitoring food and soda ads in schools
• Restricting hours of a-la-carte food availability
• Placing soda vending machines in locations not heavily trafficked
• Banning fast food sales in elementary schools
• Banning food and soda advertisements in schools

**A Majority (over 50%) Did NOT Support:**

• Banning a-la-carte food sales
• Banning fast food sales
• Banning a-la-carte food sales in elementary schools
• Manipulating vending machine prices so that unhealthy foods cost more than healthy foods

**Spokespersons**

• Opinions of food service staff and superintendents, and budget considerations were very influential with respect to nutrition-related school health decision-making.
• Advice from a health expert, demonstration of the link between nutrition and academic performance and improved attendance, practical benefits to students, and support of parents/parent organizations were very important when considering nutrition-related school health issues.

Superintendents

Superintendent Characteristics (n=39)

• More than 1/3 (39%) reported having a nutrition-related policy in their school district.
• 4 in 10 (41%) reported that beverage vendors had an exclusive contract with their school district.
• Almost 2/3 (64%) reported beverage vendors having an exclusive contract with any school in their district.
• Almost ½ (44%) agreed with the practice of exclusive beverage vendors.
• The majority believed school board policies supporting good nutrition on school campuses can contribute to the reduction of student cancer and heart disease risks in the future and reduction of the number of overweight or obese students.

Factors that Influence School Nutrition-Related Decision-Making

• Community and family are salient issues for superintendents when addressing nutrition-related issues, especially, community mobilization, and personal or family issues.

• Parent issues such as apathy among parents, lack of policy education among parents and uninformed parents were key factors in superintendents’ policy decision-making.

• School issues, such as pressure from state leaders to focus on other matters, lack of a food service coordinator and school nurse, and nutrition not being considered as a priority, were considered significant factors when addressing nutrition-related issues.

Professional Development and Training

• Over ½ of the superintendents (56%) would like to receive training on nutrition-related school health issues.

• Internet, e-mail, school board publications, and school board conferences were methods school board members would like to use to learn more about nutrition-related school health issues.
A Majority (over 50%) Supported:

- Providing healthy food choice options
- Establishing minimum nutritional standards for fast foods sold in school
- Limiting and monitoring food and soda ads in schools
- Restricting hours of a-la-carte food availability
- Banning fast food sales in elementary schools
- Manipulating vending machine prices so that unhealthy foods cost more and healthy foods cost less
- Placing soda vending machines in locations not heavily trafficked

A Majority (over 50%) Did NOT Support:

- Banning a-la-carte food sales
- Banning fast food sales
- Banning a-la-carte food sales in elementary schools
- Banning food and soda advertisements in school

Spokespersons

- Opinions of food service staff, California School Boards Association, budget considerations, and opinions of parents/parent organizations, and school principal were very influential with respect to nutrition-related school health decision-making.

- Advice from a health expert, demonstration of the link between nutrition and academic performance and improved attendance, practical benefits to students, support of parents/parent organizations and community members/community organizations, and mandate from the state were very important when considering nutrition-related school health issues.
SOCIAL MARKETING STRATEGIES

Following the completion of data collection and analysis, the Community Collaborative Research workgroup, including California Project LEAN staff, Food on the Run Regional Coordinators and USF staff developed a guide to facilitate discussions at the strategy sessions attended by school board members and key stakeholders (e.g., state organization leaders, superintendents). Comments emanating from the strategy sessions and the formative research (both qualitative and quantitative) provide the basis for the communication strategies suggested below.

**Project Goal.** Increase the number of school districts that have enacted school policies that support healthy eating for high school students, in which at least 50% or more are eligible for free and reduced price meals.

**Primary Audience.** California school board members in rural and urban high school districts in which at least 50% or more students are eligible for free and/or reduced price meals.

**Behavior (Product).**

1. School board members bring forward school nutrition-related issues on the school board agenda.
2. School board members establish policies that support healthy eating.

**Behavioral Benefits.**

- Link between nutrition and academic achievement
- Link between nutrition and improved attendance
- Practical benefit to students, both short (feeling better daily) and long term (potentially decrease obesity, cancer and other lifestyle chronic illnesses)

**Price (Costs to Lower).** The following factors need to be addressed to increase school board member’s ability to enact school policies that support healthy eating for high school students:

- Nutrition not a priority within school district and among parents and community members
- Inadequate preparation in developing nutrition-related school policies
- Budget considerations
Place. School board members will best receive school nutrition-related policy information on the Internet, via tailored electronic mail messages (email), school board publications, and school board conferences.

School board members are also receptive to receiving training on nutrition-related school health issues.

Promotion.

Introduction

School district nutrition policies and programs are influenced by many factors: finances, student food preferences, tradition, and politics. One of the most powerful venues for improving nutrition in schools in California is through school board initiatives.

While school board members are the primary audience of this project there are significant indirect influences that can impact how board members implement the desired behavior of introducing school nutrition items to board meeting agendas. Among those reported by school board members as having significant influence is the opinion(s) of Parent/Parent Organizations. Parent organizations can advocate for strong nutrition programs that create an environment that supports healthy eating, influence how school board members perceive school nutrition issues, and influence how school board members work to implement healthy food policies.

Message, design, and creative elements should be consistent throughout all promotional materials to insure continuity of program awareness among target audience groups. The use of the same colors, type fonts, layout approaches, and other creative elements will create an easily recognized campaign. Although some materials may be designed to target specific groups, a unifying appearance will enable each message to reinforce other messages used in the campaign and avoid having them compete with each other for the public's attention. All materials will be designed to appeal to the various school board and school district audience groups including rural, urban, and suburban school districts of small and large size.

Target Audiences

Primary Audience: California school board members in rural and urban high school districts in which at least 50% or more students are eligible for free and/or reduced price meals.

Secondary Audiences: Voters/Parents
Purpose:

1) Improve the frequency of nutrition related items being placed on and addressed in school board meeting agendas.
2) Increase number of school districts that enact and enforce school policies that support healthy eating for high school students and other students.

Primary Audience: School Board Members

Materials Required:

1 - Nutrition Policy Promotional Brochure
1 - School Board Nutrition Policy Handbook
4 - Promotional/Informational Advertising Print Slicks

Fact sheets for school board members and parents:

1) Nutrition, physical activity health statistics of adolescents
2) Link between nutrition physical activity, health, and learning
3) Fund raiser ideas that do not rely on the sales of unhealthy foods
4) Nutrition related policies that school board members can pursue.

Message Content

Primary message cue: Nutrition programs increase student performance, attendance, and well being. Your actions can improve the lives of countless students in your school district.

Call to Action:

- Include a school nutrition policy item on the school board agenda once each quarter of the year.
- Secondary: adopt a healthy nutrition related policy.

Tone:

- Technical
- Respectful
- Straightforward

Appeals:

Use an intellectual appeal that focuses attention on school board members’ use of current information to make decisions that are in the best interests of the students in their school districts.
Manner:

- Scholarly
- Authoritative

Spokesperson:

A three-person, “spokes group” using the three primary school board member influencers: health expert, school food service staff, and school district superintendent.

School board members report food service staff, school district superintendents, and health experts as important resources or “champions” to whom they are most likely to listen regarding school nutrition policy. Factors likely to enhance the perception of the spokesperson as an effective “champion” are demonstrating that school nutrition is a personal agenda and that the individual is dedicated to and committed to this issue.

Conceptual Recommendations

Use technical, practical approaches to communication. School board members are well versed in decision-making. What they lack is data based information on the value, for students, of improved school district nutrition. The relationship between “ready to learn” or improved performance and attendance by students, and enhanced nutrition programs are important “hooks” for communication. School board members value messages framed in “bottom-line” terms. The use of case studies and scholarly research are important influencers.

Emphasize school board members’ knowledge of and influence in the community and how fostering improved school nutrition is a direct manifestation of their respective interests in service to the community, and the health, education, and wellbeing of students in their respective school districts.

Secondary Audience: Voters/Parents

School board members report that parent organizations’ opinions are an important influence on school board initiatives regarding nutrition. Board members are public servants who live political as well as service oriented lives. Voters, particularly parents of school age children, can influence how school board members handle school nutrition initiatives.

The general public perceives television, radio and a variety of other mass media channels as credible sources of information on preventive health issues. The use of mass media or direct mail communication channels will allow for easy and credible dissemination of the message.
Materials Required:

- Mass media (television, radio, outdoor advertising, release of surveys, letters to editors, articles in local newspapers, and parent newsletters, PTS news, etc.)
- Utility bill, and payroll check envelop advertising “stuffers”
- Send letter from superintendent in back of school packets to parents
- Attend parents meetings
- Hold town hall meetings

Message Content

**Primary Message Cue:** Healthy nutrition practices in schools protect your children. Your involvement as a parent and a voter can influence the health and wellbeing of your child and contribute to their future success.

**Call to Action:**

- Bring forth nutrition issues to the PTA meeting agenda.
- Attend one school board meeting a year when nutrition issues are on the agenda.
- Send letter to school board and superintendent about nutrition related concerns and policy recommendations.
- Speak at meetings on nutrition issues.

**Tone:**

- Respectful
- Congratulatory

**Appeals:**

Use an emotional appeal that focuses on parents’ commitment to assuring a good future for their children.

**Manner:**

Empowered parents, voters, and communities who successfully advocate on behalf of children.

**Spokesperson:**

Head of a Statewide parent organization
Conceptual Recommendations:

- Use strong imagery, depicting parents as powerful members of the community whose opinions and votes are heeded by School Districts.
- Emphasize how parents can work cooperatively through existing local parent organizations to advocate for their children’s well being.
- Show parents as knowledgeable, responsible, and caring.

Placement Considerations

School Board Member Informational Materials

Placement issues for these materials focus primarily on networking with school districts and school boards to gain acceptance of and logistical support for dissemination of the Nutrition Policy Promotional Brochure and the School Board Nutrition Policy Handbook. The primary distribution activity takes place during the first month of the school year, each year. An introductory letter should accompany distributed materials from the designated spokesperson/"champion" for the informational campaign, can be sent at the beginning of school year (2003).

Activities include:

- Initial distribution of the Nutrition Policy Promotional Brochure to all school board members, school district superintendents, food service supervisors, and PTA.

- Annual distribution/redistribution of the School Board Nutrition Policy Handbook and promo brochure to school board members, school district superintendents, and food service supervisors who are new in their positions.

Promotional/Informational Advertising

Media placement must be carefully coordinated with the distribution of informational resources to school board members. Placement of advertising in:

- Professional trade publications - ACFSA,CASO,ACSA,FTA, local incentive awardees
- Annual CSBA conference
- County office of education meetings
- During election years, local newspapers.
- Release fact sheets quarterly to keep issue alive, e.g., fund raising, recommend policy.
Public Relations

Public relations activities can help sustain the impact of health education and health promotion initiatives by enhancing awareness of the program, building a good program image, and building good relations with community partners. Messages delivered through paid advertising, consumer outreach, and a coordinated public relations program can reinforce messages directed to primary audience groups. Public relations can also build a solid foundation upon which to build legislative support. In this case, because of the potential impact that politics can have on the successful implementation of program objectives, public relations can garner important support from influential media organizations, advocacy groups, and local political and community leaders.

Target Audience Groups:

- News organizations;
- Public information departments of radio and television stations;
- Local corporations/businesses;
- Church and religious organizations.

Primary Message Cues:

The public relations initiatives should be structured around six points:

1. Data based school nutrition programs improve student performance and attendance.
2. Improved student performance will enhance funding for local school districts.
3. Students who perform better in school have enhanced job skills and performance as adults.
4. School board members have direct impact on implementing successful school nutrition programs that can improve academic performance and attendance of students.
5. California Project LEAN Food On The Run, supports improved nutrition and health among school children through implementation of social marketing initiatives and policy development.
6. California School Board Association (CSBA) supports improved nutrition and health among school children.

Recommended Activities:

- Hold a “Kick-off” media event to announce the start of the campaign. Invite community, state, and national leaders such as the State health officer, political leaders, governor, and

Comment: What do you mean?
other dignitaries as a way to increase press attention and encourage greater support from the leadership community throughout the state.

- Vocalize press release for regional partners to garner local news coverage.

- Train school board members in the issues surrounding school nutrition programs and how to effectively develop school nutrition policies.

- Develop a Public Relations Kit for school districts. The Kit should include:
  - Sample press releases that can be localized;
  - Fact sheets on nutrition and “ready to learn” issues;
  - Recommended nutrition policies to consider;
  - “Testimonials” from district superintendents regarding the importance of school nutrition programs and how they were able to maintain budget;
  - Samples of campaign materials,
  - Sample letters to the editor to focus editorial attention on the issue at selected times of the year (elections, beginning of school year, budget writing)
PROJECT COORDINATION

Central to social marketing is a comprehensive, multifaceted strategy. The multifaceted community approach needs to successfully promote positive school nutrition-related policies and requires careful coordination of local activities. Careful timing of promotional efforts to coincide with interventions or activities is critically important. Coordination will also ensure certain activities will be implemented while decreasing the possibility of duplication of efforts that will compete with one another.

A wide variety of individuals and organizations are needed to implement a social marketing campaign successfully. Content experts (e.g., school and nutrition), program partners, creative and production teams, instruction design and education specialists, researchers, and public relations agencies may all be involved at some point in the implementation phase.

The designated coordinator for this project is the Marketing Manager of California Project LEAN’s Food on the Run program, Vicki Berends. As the coordinator of this project, Ms. Berends will work closely with a variety of state education agencies, community organizations, both for-profit and not-for-profit, to facilitate continuity of thematic and design elements throughout all facets of the campaign. This coordination will ensure that:

- Production and design teams accurately interpret research findings and translate those into appropriate materials and activities;
- All campaign materials are carefully pretested and revised to meet the needs of the intended audiences, and an ongoing review of the campaign is conducted to identify any needed adjustments during its implementation.
- Contracting agencies maintain a consistent campaign approach, and optimal intervention among the various components occurs; and
- Unneeded duplication of activities does not occur.

The Community Research Collaborative will provide guidance to the Marketing Manager and the academic partners during the implementation phase, as it has throughout the previous phases. Individually, the private and public organizations represented on the committee, can play a lead role in implementation of particular components of the plan that fit within their organization’s mission and/or their particular interest.

As part of the coordination efforts, the Community Research Collaborative will continue to meet regularly through variety of meeting and conference calls and the Marketing Coordinator will continue to meet with agencies throughout the state to discuss the plan, the activities and interventions it recommends.
REFERENCES


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