

Abstract Title

Food for thought: A scan of rural school food environments

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Abstract

INTRODUCTION: Supportive food environments are highly influential in the development and maintenance of healthy habits. In Grey Bruce, only around one in four students consume sufficient fruits and vegetables and 40% have reported eating junk foods more than four times a day(1). Elementary and secondary students consume about one-third of their calories at school(2).

OBJECTIVES: Researchers sought to assess facilitators and barriers to a healthy food environment in Grey County and Bruce County schools. Research questions included "How are schools in Grey Bruce currently supporting healthy food environments in the school and classrooms? Are there examples of innovative or best practice approaches that support a healthy food environment?"

METHODS: A mixed-methods approach was undertaken in this study. Fourteen semi-structured key informant interviews were conducted (n=18) with an adapted environmental scan (Appendix A). Key informants were identified by schools and included principals, faculty, and parent volunteers. An iterative approach and thematic content analysis was used.

RESULTS: School food environments were perceived as healthy or fairly healthy. Contributing factors included compliance with the provincial regulations, participation in meal/snack and milk programs, engagement of parents/parent council, and supportive staff modeling. Perceived barriers included: Foods sent from home, feasibility of healthy fundraising, accessibility of healthy foods, insufficient human, financial and material resources, insufficient allergy awareness and lack of policy support. Eight percent of schools reported no barriers to promoting supportive food environments.

CONCLUSIONS: Recommendations include supporting: efforts to improve food brought from home; policy implementation and evaluation by establishing a healthy schools committee; and healthier fundraising options. Engaging student leadership may be particularly influential in secondary school settings.

SIGNIFICANCE TO DIETETICS: This study adds to literature on the school food environment and its influence on students' well-being. The results revealed needs for: greater support for caregivers; continued support for meal programs; and addressing gaps in evaluation practices.