

Empowering Teens to Make Better Nutrition Decisions



Unhealthy eating and lack of physical activity are major contributors to adulthood morbidity and mortality in the United States.¹ These habits are prevalent among youth also. By the time children graduate from high school, more than 70% do not eat enough fruits and vegetables, 84% eat too much fat, and nearly one-third do not engage in regular vigorous physical activity.² Fast food is increasingly more common in high schools³ and fast food advertising is prevalent.⁴ These elements contribute to the fact that nearly 25% of young people are considered overweight. The incidence of obesity has significant public health implications today and for years to come.

“Food on the Run” recognized the importance of empowering teens to make better decisions about their diet, activity, and health. The project was borne out of a collaboration between 10 California communities that recognized the lack of nutrition education materials and programs for high school students.

Participating communities worked with California Project LEAN, a program of the Public Health Institute and the California Department of Health Services, to develop the framework for “Food on the Run.”

FOOD ON THE RUN

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

“Food on the Run” sought to improve the health of high school students through the promotion of accurate nutrition information in the classroom and increased availability of healthy food options on campus. Its primary objectives were:

- To create a high school youth advocacy model that motivates students to advocate for more healthy food and physical activity options in their communities

- To advance locally identified policy and environmental changes that increase the number and promotion of healthy food items and physical activity options on participating school campuses
- To motivate students to make healthier food choices and to become more physically active

TARGET AUDIENCE

Program participants were low-income students in high schools where at least 40% of the students were eligible for free and reduced-price meals. During the 1998-99 school year, the 28 “Food on the Run” schools reached 11% of California’s low-income high school students.

RATIONALE FOR THE INTERVENTION

In general, high school students need to improve their eating habits and level of physical activity. It is believed that these students will be more motivated to change if they play an integral role in the formulation of health program strategies and messages.

“Food on the Run” uses the spectrum of prevention as a basis for its intervention.⁵ This framework states that the following components are necessary to effect change at the individual and community levels:

- Strengthening individual knowledge and skills
- Promoting community education
- Educating providers
- Fostering coalitions and networks
- Changing organizational practices
- Influencing policy and legislation



METHODOLOGY

Each “Food on the Run” school, in conjunction with students, set its own nutrition and physical activity policy agenda. During the 1998-99 school year, each school worked with a coalition of local organizations, health providers, and private industry to build its program. Components included the recruitment and training of 10-20 high school student advocates, the execution of at least seven school-based activities, and the execution of at least two activities to increase parent awareness and involvement. Specific activities included taste tests of low-fat foods, presentations to school boards, setting up of a sports equipment check-out table at lunch, initiation of a cafeteria salad bar, and a change from reduced fat (2%) to low-fat (1%) milk in school cafeterias.

California Project LEAN supported “Food on the Run” communities with training, resources, media tools, research, and development of food and physical activity messages.

RESULTS

Program success was evaluated with student surveys and an assessment of the school environment. The environment assessment described the eating and physical activity environment at participating high schools using pre- and post-test measures. During the 1998-99 school year, statistically significant increases (p=.05) were observed for physical activity knowledge (6%) and attitude (4%); nutrition knowledge (5%), attitude (5%), and behavior (9%), healthy eating options (5.7 out of a possible 11 points), healthy eating promotional efforts on school campuses (2.3 out of a possible 5 points); and physical activity options available to students at the schools (3.3 out of a possible 6 points).

LESSONS LEARNED

“Contrary to popular belief, high school students want opportunities to eat healthfully and be more physically active. Student involvement is the key to offering healthy foods that sell and physical activity classes that are full. When high school students are involved in the formulation of nutrition and physical activity messages and policy strategies, behavior change can occur.”

— Amanda Purcell, M.P.H.
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Program now published and available at the following website: www.caprojectlean.org



QUESTIONS

1. **What percentage of high school graduates in the US eat too much fat?**
 - a. 55%
 - b. 67%
 - c. 79%
 - d. 84%
2. **The goal of “Food on the Run” was to:**
 - a. Improve the health of high school students through the promotion of accurate nutrition information in the classroom and increased availability of healthy food options in the cafeteria
 - b. Improve the health of high school students through the promotion of healthy snacks for students on the track and field team
 - c. Improve the health of high school students through the promotion of healthy choices from fast-food outlets on campuses
 - d. improve the health of high school students through the promotion of better snacking habits among teens
3. **Which is not a component of the spectrum of prevention framework?**
 - a. Strengthening individual knowledge and skills
 - b. Promoting community education
 - c. Preventing harmful behaviors
 - d. Fostering coalitions and networks
4. **How did California Project LEAN help support “Food on the Run?”**
 - a. Provided training, resources, and research
 - b. Subsidized food costs
 - c. Trained teen and community leaders
 - d. Provided education materials at a community marathon
5. **How did “Food on the Run” evaluate its success?**
 - a. Through in-depth surveys
 - b. By monitoring plate waste in the cafeteria
 - c. With student surveys and an assessment of the school environment
 - d. By surveying parents about the eating habits of their children

ANSWERS:
1.d 2.a 3.c 4.a 5.c

REFERENCES

- 1 McGinnis, JM and WH Foegen. Actual Causes of Death in the United States. *Journal of the American Medical Association* 1993; 270:2207-2212.
- 2 *Physical Activity and Good Nutrition: Essential Elements for Good Health.* Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 1999.
- 3 *ASFSA 1999 School Lunch Trend Survey.* The American School Food Service Association 1999.
- 4 *California High School Fast Food Survey: Findings & Recommendations.* Berkeley, CA: The Public Health Institute, February 2000.
- 5 Cohen L, Swift S. The Spectrum of Prevention: Developing a Comprehensive Approach to Injury Prevention. *Injury Prevention* 1999;5:203-7.