



The Team Up for School Nutrition Success Workshop Evaluation Study: Three Month Results

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ABSTRACT

Purpose/Objectives

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the *Team Up for School Nutrition Success* pilot initiative, conducted by the Institute of Child Nutrition (ICN), on meeting the objectives of the individual action plans created by school food authorities (SFAs) during the workshop. The action plans could address improving one or more of the following areas: increasing meal participation, financial management, menu planning, and plate waste. This paper presents the results of the three month evaluation.

Methods

Twenty five SFAs participated in telephone interviews about four months after the workshop. The interview script consisted of four sets of questions developed to query the status of action plan goals and outcomes, and barriers encountered. A fifth question obtained comments about the workshop, such as participation in pre- and post-workshop webinars. The transcripts were reviewed and coded, and a spreadsheet was created.

Results

During the interviews, most SFAs reported that they did not finish their action plans at the workshop. Six reported they were too busy after returning from the workshop to continue working on their action plans. Many noted that networking at the workshop and after they returned to their districts was very helpful. The majority thought that a follow up phone call with an ICN scientist and the attendees from their state would help them complete their action plans. Some goals were attained, but many had to be postponed until the following school year due to lack of resources.

Applications to Child Nutrition Professionals

It appears that the concept and general format of the workshop was sound; most reported the workshop was a positive experience. However, it appears that too many topic areas may have been covered during the workshop, with not enough time allocated for participants to engage in peer-to-peer mentoring and the development goals and action plans.

Keywords: Team Up for School Nutrition Success workshop; action plans; goals; mentors; interviews; School Food Authorities

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, school food authorities (SFAs) have implemented the new school breakfast and lunch meal patterns and competitive food rules mandated by the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (HHFKA 2010) (U.S. Department of Agriculture [USDA]- Food and Nutrition Service [FNS], 2012). Challenges have been reported, including reduced student participation, increased food costs, meal planning problems due to limited access or availability of required foods, and lack of adequate or appropriate equipment to store, process, or prepare foods associated with the new requirements (Cornish, Askelson, & Golembiewski, 2016; Pew Charitable Trusts & Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2013, 2016; Thiagarajah, Getty, Johnson, Case, & Herr, 2015; Woo Baidal & Taveras, 2014; Yon, Amin, Taylor, & Johnson, 2016).

To offer a solution for these challenges, the Institute for Child Nutrition (ICN) (formerly the National Food Service Management Institute) partnered with USDA- FNS to present the *Team Up for School Nutrition Success* pilot workshop. The two-day workshop targeted SFAs in one USDA Region and was facilitated in November 2014 at the ICN in Oxford, Mississippi. The goal of the workshop was to provide tailored technical assistance to school nutrition professionals to support them in enhancing their school meal programs while maintaining strong student participation. The *Team Up* workshop used best practice presentations and a peer mentor-based model to cover the following four topics: menu planning, financial management, increasing participation, and plate waste. Each participant was to develop goals with individualized action plans designed to improve their school meal programs when they returned to their respective schools. This paper presents the results of the three month evaluation of the program.

WORKSHOP ORGANIZATION

Four steps were taken to prepare for the workshop. First, state agency directors from the target USDA Region provided a list of potential workshop participants and mentors. Fifty-three SFAs and 28 of the potential mentors agreed to participate.

Second, participants identified potential workshop topic areas from a list developed by ICN and USDA- FNS. Topics included food safety, increasing participation, menu planning, meeting children's special food and nutrition needs, financial management, plate waste, and smart snacks. Menu planning, plate waste, increasing participation, and financial management were ultimately selected. Mentors used this list to denote their professional strengths; results were used to assign panel presenters and breakout session facilitators. Panel presenters developed their presentations based on criteria provided by ICN and USDA- FNS.

Third, each participant was asked to complete a self-assessment survey to help identify target areas for developing goals and action plans. Individuals rated how well their school nutrition (SN) operation had implemented the School Nutrition Association's (SNA's) Keys to Excellence specifically related to the four workshop focus areas (National Food Service Management Institute, 2015; SNA, 2015). A webinar was offered to familiarize participants with developing goals and action plans. The webinar also encouraged participants to talk with their SN staff to help identify target areas for goals and action plans.

Fourth, mentors received face-to-face and webinar training on facilitating the panel presentations, leading the breakout sessions, and utilizing the skilled helper model (Egan, 2014) to support peer-to-peer mentoring for the development of participants' individual goals and action plans. The intent of the Skilled Helper Model was to provide a formal structure to help participants resolve issues facing their operations, by determining the answer to four basic questions: what is going on in my operation, what does a better outcome look like; how do I get to the better outcome; and how do I make it all happen.

During the workshop, participants attended four panel presentations, each consisting of four to five individual presentations by mentors in menu planning, plate waste, increasing participation, and financial management. These were followed by question and answer sessions. In the breakout sessions after each panel presentation, two to three participants were partnered with a mentor and guided in the development of goals and action plans related to the focus area. Presentations were also offered by allied organizations explaining what resources were available to support their HHFKA 2010 regulatory needs.

At the end of the workshop, participants were encouraged to go back to their SN programs, discuss their preliminary goals and action plans with their SN staff, finish developing their goals and action plans based on staff input, and implement their goals and action plans. They were also encouraged to remain in contact with individuals they met at the workshop to support their efforts for complying with HHFKA 2010 regulations. SFAs were invited to attend monthly webinars sponsored by the ICN for support in implementing their action plans.

Participants were asked to take part in an evaluation study that was planned to include three, six, and twelve month evaluations. Participants were provided with information explaining the evaluation process, a letter of support template for their district superintendent approving participation, a consent form, and the mailing address to send the required documentation. To participate, SFAs were required to return a signed consent form, a letter of support from their school district superintendent, and a copy of their action plans to ICN via email. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Baylor College of Medicine.

EVALUATION STUDY

Researchers from Baylor College of Medicine and the ICN collaborated in the evaluation study that included three, six, and twelve month assessments. The goal was to evaluate whether the *Team Up for School Nutrition Success* pilot initiative enabled the SFAs to achieve the objectives of their individual action plans established during the workshop.

Fifty-two workshop participants were eligible for the evaluation study. To improve participation, workshop participants were sent two follow-up emails and contacted once by phone during the four month period following the study.

The three month evaluation consisted of a telephone interview that was audio recorded and transcribed. The interview script included questions developed to query the status of action plan goals for financial management, menu planning, meal participation, and plate waste. Additional questions gathered comments about the workshop, such as participation in the pre- and post-workshop webinars. The transcripts were reviewed and responses for each focus area were identified: 1) each action plan goal, 2) target dates for goal completion, 3) the status of each

action plan goal, and 4) comments about the workshop. A spreadsheet was created with the transcript data. A second person checked the spreadsheet data with the transcripts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Participation and Goal Setting

Thirty SFAs returned letters of support from their district superintendents along with action plans; 25 of those returned signed consent forms. Eight districts were small (< 2000 students), 11 were medium (>2000 and < 5000 students), and 6 were large (\geq 5000 students).

Because of delays in getting the action plans and consent forms from the participants, the three month interviews were delayed one month and occurred in March 2015.

The participants were to set specific goals and develop action plans for one or more of the workshop topic areas (menu planning, plate waste, increasing participation, and financial management). Eleven participants set at least one goal in all four areas, 2 set at least one goal in three areas, 4 set at least one goal in two areas, and 8 set goals in only one area. Eighteen participants set goals for Increasing Participation, 17 set goals for Financial Management, 16 for Menu Planning, and 13 for Plate Waste. The goals were compiled across the four focus areas and are reported in Table 1.

Goal Achievement Findings

During the interviews, most SFAs reported that they did not finish their action plans at the workshop. Six reported they were too busy after returning from the workshop to continue working on their action plans. Other major barriers included the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays, severe weather and school closings from January through early March (7-16 lost days were reported by 6 SFAs), getting ready for an administrative review (2 SFAs), and needing to wait until the fall semester to start new programs (2 SFAs). All of these issues, plus routine work demands from their programs, delayed action plan completion and goal implementation. Not completing their action plans may be one of the reasons that some of the SFAs did not participate in the evaluation study.

There was overlap in the goals and outcomes set by the SFAs across the four areas. For example, increasing student meal participation, revising menus, staff training, and surveying students were goals set in more than one area. In addition, although Increasing Participation was one of the four areas of concern, it was also a goal/outcome listed under Financial Management and Menu Planning.

However, many outcomes were based on data that would not be available until the summer following the Spring 2015 semester. Further, some districts did not plan for their goals to be implemented until the 2015-16 school year (e.g., new menus, assessing change in MPLH, reduced meal costs, standardized recipes). Therefore, many outcomes related to these goals (e.g., student meal participation rates, assessing increased a la carte revenue, reduced meal costs, standardized recipes) could not be assessed until the end of the Fall 2015 semester.

Table 1. Action Plan Goals for Financial Management (FM), Increasing Participation (IP), Menu Planning (MP), and Plate Waste (PW) reported by 25 School Food Authorities

Action Plan Goals	FM	IP	MP	PW	Total
Add local farm fresh food days on menus			1		1
Add sack lunch option to menu	1				1
Attend ICN Financial Management Workshop	1				1
Conduct managers' meetings	1	1	1	1	4
Conduct plate waste study			1	2	3
Conduct staff training (batch cooking, presentation, customer	1	3	5	2	11
Conduct student taste testings		4	1		5
Create district/school budgets	1				1
Create parent/community outreach about school meals		3		1	4
Decrease student wait time in cafeteria lines	1				1
Improve managers knowledge about budgets	9				9
Improve meal costs	1				1
Improve Meals per Labor Hour	4		2		6
Improve menu nutrient analyses			2		2
Improve student whole grain selection/consumption			1	1	2
Implement food promotions	1				1
Implement offer vs serve				2	2
Increase fruit/vegetables selected			1	1	2
Initiate At Risk Supper program	1				1
Initiate 'Breakfast in the Classroom' program		2			2
Initiate Grab n go Breakfast		3			3
Initiate student-created recipe competition				1	1
Increase a la carte sales	1	1	1		3
Increase DOD dollars for fruit/vegetables	1				1
Increase meal participation rates	2	18	6		26
Meet with principals and faculty about meal program	1	1			2
Modify a la carte items			1		1
Reduce costs for cafeteria substitute workers	1				1
Reduce electric bill	1				1
Reduce/control inventory	6				6
Reduce plate waste			1	7	8
Reduce student nonpayment for meals	1				1
Revise/improve menus		11	10	4	25
Serve low energy menu items	1				1
Serve same menu for all grade levels	1				1
Standardize district menus	2		2		4
Survey staff on plate waste				3	3
Survey students- food likes/dislikes/menu items	1	6	4		11
Update handbook				1	1
Totals	41	53	40	26	160

Some goal outcomes were reported to be completed by May 2015. These included attending an ICN Financial management course for Directors, implementing an At Risk Supper program and adding a local fresh produce item to the menu, increasing the amount of money for the Department of Defense produce program for the 2015/16 school year, training the managers on the budget, obtaining the Meals per Labor Hour (MPLH) formula, conducting student surveys and plate waste studies (but not yet analyzing), revising menus, training managers to reduce inventory, reducing student nonpayment of meal charges, buying energy efficient equipment, and developing energy efficient menu items.

However, many outcomes were based on data that would not be available until the summer following the Spring 2015 semester. Further, some districts did not plan for their goals to be implemented until the 2015-16 school year (e.g., new menus, assessing change in MPLH, reduced meal costs, standardized recipes). Therefore, many outcomes related to these goals (e.g., student meal participation rates, assessing increased a la carte revenue, reduced meal costs, standardized recipes) could not be assessed until the end of the Fall 2015 semester.

WORKSHOP COMMENTS

The participants enjoyed the workshop. Overall, the SFAs wanted to see the Team Up for School Nutrition Success pilot workshop and the program made available to all SFAs.

"This was the best workshop I had ever been to."

"I see what NFSMI is trying to come up with and I think it is absolutely awesome."

Thirteen of the 25 participants noted that networking at the workshop and after they returned to their districts was very helpful.

"Coming from a small district, the networking was just awesome."

Nearly two-thirds (n=16) watched the pre-meeting webinar and were positive about the help it provided to get ready for the meeting. However, only 8 watched any of the post webinars. Time constraint was a major barrier.

Slightly over three-fourths of the directors (n=19) reported that a follow up phone call with an ICN scientist and the attendees from their state would help them complete their action plans and begin working on them.

"The follow up call would help us solidify our plans."

"That would have helped. Help keep on track when you get back. When you get back there's all that you plan to do – goes out of your head."

There were a few suggestions for improvement. Three SFAs felt there was too much information and writing involved.

"It was too much writing, in the small group I would prefer to just talk and write your goal and not have to come up with all the other stuff about your goal."

Nine suggested lengthening the workshop.

"I didn't feel like we had enough time with each of the mentors."

"So much information in a day and a half. It was not enough time to process."

"More time in the groups just as soon as we got into the topic the groups would change, and then each group take up more time reintroducing everyone all over again."

“I mean it does need to be longer. There is just so much that needs to be talked about. You just have so little chance to be in a setting like that with that many people.”

Some states had different regulations, posing problems that 4 SFAs noted.

“In the states, each had various allowances so it can be very confusing. So if I’m represented in my state and another state person is speaking, there are variations that they can put into place that I’m not able to.”

Three SFAs felt that other topics should be offered.

“They should offer – like personnel, nutrition patterns, plan menus that are feasible and not just what kids like but the cost. Low cost menus”.

Overall, the workshop appeared to be successful and the participants left with achievable goals and action plans. This quote from a participant provides a heartfelt summary of this goal setting process.

“But what you try to do is to see what is the very best that you can try to get done at that school, so that if anybody else were to walk in that is a problem solver... [they] would look at that and say “you know, there is not a solitary thing more that you can do at that school under those circumstances.”

CONCLUSIONS AND APPLICATION

Overall, the mentoring and support from other Workshop attendees were seen as very important, as were assessing their program and creating action plans for improvement. The USDA did expand the *Team Up for School Nutrition Success* Initiative in 2015 (USDA, 2015). One workshop was conducted in each of the remaining six USDA regions. The format was similar to the pilot. Each was tailored to the specific needs of the region (a concern of the pilot workshop attendees); the peer mentor-based model was used, and each attendee developed an individualized action plan with goals to improve their programs. A monthly *Team Up Thursday* webinar series focused on highly requested topics was made available on the ICN website to broaden the reach of this training (ICN, 2016a, 2016b).

To reach even more SFAs, the next expansion step made customized *Team Up* trainings available at the state level to benefit all SFAs in each state. A consultant orientation and “train the trainer” sessions were held in October and November of 2015 at the ICN (USDA-FNS, 2015). About 40 consultants and 100 state agency representatives received training on how to facilitate a *Team Up* workshop. All state agencies are now able to host local *Team Up for School Nutrition Success* trainings to provide tailored technical assistance, support, and best practices for schools in administering successful meals programs (ICN, 2016b). The ability to provide these programs at the local level should enable more SFAs to attend at a lower cost, and allow even more specific tailoring to SFA needs (a suggestion from the pilot workshop attendees). The monthly webinars on topics similar to what is covered in the trainings are available at the ICN website (<http://theicn.org/teamup>.)

The *Team Up for School Nutrition Success* initiative is an important tool that the USDA now provides to help schools successfully serve meals that meet the HHFKA 2010 nutrition standards and meal patterns. Assessing school meal programs and creating action plans and goals for improvement are steps that can be implemented by SFAs. This study demonstrates that the *Team-Up* model of peer-to-peer mentoring aimed at the development of individualized goals and

action plans for school nutrition directors is an effective grass roots model for supporting local school nutrition programs in making improvements. This model can be used at the state, district, and unit levels to assist all school nutrition professionals in improving their programs.

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BIOGRAPHY

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