THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT RELATED TO FOOD
WITHIN RURAL ELEMENTARY/MIDDLE SCHOOLS IN OREGON

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Purpose/Aims: The purpose of this research was to explore food-related policies and practices, and teacher beliefs and behaviors, within 8 rural elementary/middle schools in Oregon.

Rationale/Conceptual Basis/Background: Childhood obesity is a significant health concern which disproportionately affects rural populations. Unhealthy eating habits are a factor that contributes to the development of obesity. Schools are widely viewed as an important environment for promoting healthy eating habits among children. However, most of the research on school food environments has focused on the foods available in schools. Less is known about social factors, such as policies and practices, as well as teacher beliefs and behaviors, which could also have a powerful effect on the establishment of healthy or unhealthy eating habits among children. Studies exploring these factors within rural schools are especially limited.

Methods: The sample included kindergarten through eighth grade teachers (n=102) and school principals (n=8) from eight rural school districts in northeast Oregon that were participating the Students Now Advocating for Healthy Snacking Zones (SNACZ) study. SNACZ is an intervention trial designed to improve the nutritional quality of children’s snack choices by creating school and community environments that support healthy snacking. Fifty-nine items from the TEENS Teaching Staff Survey were used to construct a questionnaire that was distributed to teachers. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with school principals using an interview guide adapted from the TEENS study. The findings were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

Results: Approximately 76% of teachers reported eating high-fat or high-sugar snacks in the classroom at least once/month; 39% reported drinking sugar-sweetened beverages in the classroom at least once/month; 13% allowed students to drink sugar-sweetened beverages in the classroom; 66% allowed students to eat food items (including candy) in the classroom; and 86% used candy as an incentive or reward for students. In contrast, 98% agreed or strongly agreed that it was important to have a healthy school food environment and 80% agreed or strongly agreed that the school environment (including classroom food rules and foods students see school staff eat) affects students’ food choices. Fewer principals than teachers reported that students were allowed to have food (38%) or beverages (25%) in the classroom, but 88% said that teachers used food as incentives or rewards for students, and 38% said that teachers drank sugar-sweetened drinks in the classroom. Schools had few or no policies that addressed the nutritional quality of foods/beverages permitted in or advertised at the school, and all principals said that candy or high-fat baked goods were used for fund-raising in their schools.

Implications for research and rural health: These findings point to several areas where policy change and staff education could improve the healthfulness of rural school food environments. Studies are needed to develop interventions that are feasible and effective in small rural schools, and to evaluate whether positive environmental changes result in healthier eating behaviors and lower obesity rates among rural children.

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