ENGAGING YOUTH AS ADVOCATES FOR “HEALTHY SNACKING ZONES” AROUND RURAL SCHOOLS: YEAR 1 RESULTS

Authors: Nancy E. Findholt; Betty T. Izumi; Jackilen Shannon; Thuan Nguyen; Carole A. Smith

Purpose/Aims: The purpose of this research is to evaluate the effects of a novel intervention that engages 4-H youth participants as advocates for establishing “healthy snacking zones” within 5 rural elementary/middle schools and nearby food stores.

Rationale/Conceptual Basis/Background: Childhood obesity is a serious public health threat which disproportionately affects rural populations. One contributor to obesity may be unhealthy snacking. Snacking has increased among youth of all ages and the snacks that children often choose to eat contribute significantly to their daily energy intake. Children’s snacking habits are strongly influenced by their immediate food environments, including schools and food stores proximal to schools. Thus, interventions are needed to improve these environments.

Methods: Youth were recruited for new 4-H “SNACZ” clubs. Club members participated in a photovoice assessment to raise their awareness of environmental barriers to healthy snacking and planned and implemented community outreach projects to promote healthy snacking among their peers and parents. Process data were collected to document youth participation, intervention activities, implementation barriers and supports, and youth perceptions of the experience. Baseline data were collected on school and food store environments, children’s snack choices, and obesity prevalence. Methods included surveys of teachers and youth, interviews with school principals and food store owners, field observation of schools and food stores, and measurement of student body mass index.

Results: Thirty-two youth participated and implemented several outreach projects, including poster contests and booths at community festivals. Challenges included finding meeting times that did not conflict with other school activities; supports included schools and stores willing to support youth activities. Youth perceptions of the experience were positive. Baseline assessments revealed that school environments did not support healthy snacking; availability of healthy snacks and beverages was low in stores near schools; students infrequently consumed fruits, vegetables, and low-fat/nonfat milk for snacks but had high consumption of soda, candy, and chips; 33% of students in grades K-8 were overweight and 16.3% were obese.

Implications for research and rural health: Interventions that create healthful food environments are a population-focused strategy for improving diets and reducing obesity. SNACZ is one such intervention that is proving to be popular among students, has been supported by school personnel, and holds promise for achieving environmental change.

Acknowledgements: Agriculture and Food Research Initiative Grant # 2012-68001-19702 from the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture, Childhood Obesity Prevention: Integrated Research, Education, and Extension to Prevent Childhood Obesity, A2102.