

SHIP School Nutrition Initiative

Final evaluation report

Prepared for CJRR as part of their SHIP grant evaluation

Cottonwood, Jackson, Redwood, and Renville (CJRR) counties are working with schools in their service area to improve nutrition among students. The overall objective is to increase access to high quality nutritious foods by implementing comprehensive nutrition policies including breakfast promotion, school gardens, Farm-to-School initiatives, and healthy lunches and snacks (which include classroom celebrations, incentives, fundraising, concessions, and vending). The project is part of a larger effort by CJRR, which is funded by the Minnesota Department of Health's Statewide Health Improvement Program (SHIP).

This report provides a snapshot of the overall impact of this initiative, with emphasis on reporting for the most recent evaluation period (January 2011 through July 2011). This report was prepared by Wilder Research. CJRR SHIP compiled existing data and collected original data as a part of this evaluation, using tools developed by Wilder Research as well as other existing tools. This report includes data gathered from:

- Progress reports submitted by each district
- School Health Index (SHI) assessment results
- School Wellness Council surveys and focus groups

Schools participated in as many as eight different strategies as part of this initiative. The information in this report summarizes policy, systems, and environment changes at each school or district participating in this initiative. The 2010 Minnesota Student Survey yielded information regarding baseline health behavior data including weight status according to Body Mass Index (BMI) and the number of servings of fruits and vegetables consumed by students. This data is presented in this report.

Reach

There are a total of 8,015 school-age children who live in Cottonwood, Jackson, Redwood, and Renville counties. CJRR SHIP is working with the four school districts outlined below. This initiative has impacted a total of 3,687 students, which is 46 percent of the total school-age population in the four counties. The following chart identifies the activities of each school or district.

1. Areas school is working on

School	Student population	Farm-to-School	A la carte and other meal issues	Snacks	School gardens	Celebrations	Concessions	Vending	Fund-raising
Jackson County Central (JCC) Schools	1,119	X	X					X	
Redwood Area Schools	1,277	X	X	X	X				
Westbrook-Walnut Grove (W-WG) Schools	301	X		X		X	X		
Windom Area Schools	990	X					X		
Totals	3,687								

Activities

Farm-to-School

Farm-to-School programs connect schools with local farms to serve healthy meals, provide agriculture and nutrition educational opportunities, and support local farmers. All four districts participated in Farm-to-School related activities.

- JCC Schools purchased and served locally grown food such as fruits, vegetables, and honey from several farms and distributors. Although there were no formal policy changes made, guidelines will be incorporated into their current school wellness policies to support the farm-to-school program. Local farms also provided produce such as watermelon, apples, and carrots for JCC's taste testing events in fall 2010. The Future Farmers of America provided information about agriculture to students in the elementary schools.
- Redwood Area Schools purchased and served fruit and vegetables from local farms and distributors throughout the 2010-2011 school year. In October 2010, K-4 students participated in a math-related event after a 75-lb watermelon was donated by a local farmer. Kindergarten students also took a field trip to an apple orchard in October. In April 2011, the district served grass fed beef to students in the cafeteria and school staff spoke to the students about the beef. The school made an effort to use fresh produce from local farmers whenever possible.
- W-WG elementary schools participated in Farm-to-School during the 2010-2011 school year. W-WG Schools purchased fruits and vegetables from several farms and distributors such as apples, squash, and potatoes and served them to students. In March 2011, the schools held a white and wild rice tasting event. In May 2011, each elementary student was given a tomato plant after listening to information from the W-WG High School Nursery Program. A University of Minnesota Extension educator also visited W-WG Elementary School once a month when the Farm-to-School item was being featured to speak with students about the fruit or vegetable. The district has applied for a Fresh Fruit and Veggie Grant from the Department of Education to expand their Farm-to-School program.
- Windom K-3 classes participated in Farm-to-School in the 2010-2011 school year, and the program will be expanded to K-12 in 2011-2012. Locally grown food was purchased from several farms and distributors, including sweet potatoes, wild rice, and honey. Classroom presentations were held to educate students on how food is grown and how bees make honey. Farm-to-School guidelines were presented to the school board in late June 2011. Funding for Farm-to-School in the 2011-2012 school year has been secured.

A la carte and other meal issues

A la carte and other meal issues include meal or menu issues that are not Farm-to-School specific. Two districts participated in a la carte-related activities.

- JCC Schools worked on improving their menus to incorporate healthier choices. Rosemary Deiderichs, Director of Food Services at Minneapolis Public Schools, held two food service trainings for staff on the link between nutrition and academics and new proposed food standards. JCC Schools also formed Catalyst groups to gain student input and support to move forward with the suggested menu improvements. Catalyst is a statewide movement of young people based in Minnesota who are working on healthy eating issues using hands-on activism and advocacy. Students will continue to meet in fall 2011.
- Redwood Area Schools added baked potato skins and sweet potato fries to their a la carte menu, and reduced their fried menu items from four days per week to two days per week.

Snacks

This area includes programs such as snack carts, classroom or school-based snacks, as well as snacks students bring from home. Two districts participated in snack-related activities.

- Redwood Area Schools provide students with fruits, vegetables, milk, water, and 100% fruit or vegetable juice in the cafeteria before school and in classrooms during non-meal times. Although the district does not currently have a policy regarding snacks that students bring from home, they are planning to implement one.
- W-WG Schools provide students fruits, vegetables, and 1% or skim milk in the cafeteria and for specific after school activities. The district does have a policy regarding snacks that students bring from home, although they report that some parents still provide students with sugary snacks. A list of healthy choices was sent home with parents.

School gardens

One district created school gardens to provide healthy food options and educational opportunities for students.

- The Food Service Director for the Redwood Area Schools worked in collaboration with a Future Farmers of America advisor to use produce from the school garden for the Farm-to-School program. Broccoli, peppers, and cucumbers grown in the garden were served to students, and excess produce was donated to community members.

Celebrations

One district addressed issues related to food brought in for celebrations, including classroom, program/activity/sport specific activities, and school-wide celebrations.

- Policy changes were made at W-WG regarding food brought in for celebrations. Only healthy snacks are allowed to be served, and candy is forbidden. In fall 2010, healthy options such as apples, crackers, cheese, and 100% juice boxes were brought in to celebrate holidays and special events.

Concessions

Concessions include school stores and other concessions for school events or programs. Two districts are working on these activities.

- In fall 2010, W-WG Schools added baked chips and pretzels to their concessions menu.
- In the 2010-2011 school year, Windom Area Schools added several healthy options to school concessions such as fresh fruit, string cheese, frozen juice bars, baked chips, sunflower seeds, milk, and low fat snack mixes. They have removed some chocolate candies high in calories and fat, as well as some regular sodas. They included concession guidelines to their school wellness policy, and provided a list of all foods that are in accordance that can be sold individually outside reimbursable school meal programs.

Vending

One school district is working on nutrition issues related to vending machines available for students.

- The Catalyst group at JCC Schools is working on improving healthy vending options. They hope to include additional healthy and affordable choices in their vending machines, such as fresh fruits and vegetables. The student group is working with the vending machine company on this issue.

Fundraising

No schools are addressing issues related to food items sold for fundraising.

Other activities

School districts also engaged in other activities to improve student health and inform parents about the initiative. These include:

- Holding taste testing events to expose students to different foods and to assess interest in placing certain items on school lunch menus.

- Hosting a Farm-to-School Meet and Greet for local growers at JCC Schools.
- Hosting Maggi Adamek from Terra Soma/Fourth Sector Consulting at the beginning of the 2010-2011 school year to speak with Redwood Area School teachers and staff on the importance and impact of school nutrition on student's health, academic performance, and behavior. She also hoped to increase awareness of current efforts within the district to improve the school food environment.
- Requiring food service staff to attend trainings on child obesity prevention, food sodium, food borne illness, and dietary guidelines.
- Including information about SHIP and the School Nutrition Initiative on school websites, newsletters, and letters sent home to parents.
- Forming a Catalyst student group at JCC and Windom Area Schools to work with food service staff and School Wellness Councils to improve healthy a la carte and menu options. Additionally, six students from the two schools attended the statewide Catalyst Summit, where they learned key nutrition strategies they can use in their schools and communities.
- Hosting Jenny Breen, a chef and educator who promotes using local and sustainable foods, to speak with students at Redwood Valley High School. She discussed obesity and other food related illnesses, lifestyle choices and illness prevention, food systems and food justice issues, and farm-to-school programs that support local farmers and economies.
- Purchasing a computer software package, Nutrikids, to plan and analyze school menus to meet USDA guidelines. Nutrikids also helps schools keep track of food production records. JCC Schools purchased the full software package and Windom Area Schools updated their software.

School Wellness Councils

The School Wellness Councils were instrumental in leading the nutrition improvement efforts in each school district. School Wellness Councils at each district had not routinely met prior to SHIP, so each Council was reestablished to provide input on the activities. They assisted with assessments such as the School Health Index, identified action priorities, and developed, implemented, communicated, and evaluated an action plan for each district.

A follow-up survey of School Wellness Council members was conducted to assess their overall satisfaction with the initiative and the help they received from SHIP staff. Thirty-one school administrators, food service staff, and parents responded to the survey.

Results found that:

- All respondents were familiar with the overall activities and goals of CJRR SHIP and found the assistance they received from SHIP staff to be helpful. All School Wellness Council members felt that SHIP staff were helpful with providing suggestions and resources for creating guidelines or revising school wellness policies, as well as reviewing their existing school nutrition policies and environment.
- Most respondents felt that their School Wellness Council was successful with most of their goals and objectives, such as creating guidelines or revising policies to serve healthier foods in school cafeterias and vending, introducing new programs or initiatives that brought locally produced food to students such as the Farm-to-School program, and getting students involved as catalysts in the School Nutrition Initiative.
- Respondents felt they were the least successful with creating guidelines or revising policies to eliminate unhealthy foods from classroom celebrations and school events.
- All but one respondent were satisfied with the amount of progress the School Wellness Council has made in terms of promoting school nutrition within their school or district.

School Wellness Council members from each district also participated in a focus group to understand their biggest successes and challenges, as well as what assets their school or district has that will enhance the sustainability of their activities. Result show:

- School Wellness Council members felt that they are making a difference in student wellness and nutrition, and students are now more aware of actions they can take to improve their health. Community involvement also made a difference in motivating one school to learn more about healthy eating options.
- Respondents felt that they were able to increase the availability of fresh fruits and vegetables from local growers, encouraged healthy activities for students, and provided healthy food choices for school events.
- The biggest challenge School Wellness Council members faced in terms of creating sustainable improvements to school policies, systems, and environments include resistance to change from teachers, food service staff, and students.
- Each district noted that they have the support of multiple advocates, such as school administrators, food service directors, and local groups such as the Future Farmers of America.

School Health Index

All four participating school districts completed the School Health Index (SHI), which is a nationally-recognized self-assessment and planning tool that enables schools to identify

the strengths and weaknesses of their policies and programs that promote health and safety; develop an action plan to improve student health and safety; and involve teachers, parents, students, and the community to improve school policies, programs, and services. Schools or districts should continue to complete the SHI annually (or every two years) to evaluate progress on their activities.

School district	SHI assessment results
JCC Schools	SHI score increases at each participating school range from 2 percent to 5 percent. They now indicate more collaboration between food service staff and teachers.
Redwood Area Schools	They improved their SHI scores by 19 percent, and now indicate that their a la carte offerings include appealing low fat items and that they have increased collaboration between food service staff and teachers.
W-WG Schools	They had a SHI score increase from baseline to follow-up by 21 percent, and show greatest improvements in sites outside the cafeteria offering appealing, low fat items, collaboration between food service staff and teachers, and preparedness for food emergencies.
Windom Area Schools	SHI score increases at each participating Windom Area School range from 13 percent to 16 percent. They are now purchasing and preparing food to reduce fat content and are promoting healthy food and beverage choices.

Policy, systems, and environments

One of the goals of SHIP is to change policies, systems, and environments to make the healthy choice the easy choice and to ensure sustainability beyond the end of any one particular program or funding stream. In the case of this School Nutrition Initiative, it means specifically changing policies, systems, and environments to create opportunities for healthier eating and learning about nutrition among students, parents, and school staff.

Policy, systems, and environment changes that have occurred as a result of this initiative include:

- Farm-To-School initiatives at each of the four districts have connected schools and growers in providing more nutritious school lunch options.
- W-WG Schools made changes to their snacks and celebrations policies, and have provided parents with a list of healthier options.
- In order to further support their Farm-to-School program, Windom Area Schools are incorporating guidelines to their school wellness policy.

- JCC Schools are further engaging in practices that meet the proposed USDA guidelines, such as serving 1% or skim milk rather than 2%.
- Windom Area Schools have created Farm-to-School and concessions guidelines that support their wellness policy. They provided a list of foods and beverages that students are encouraged to select when purchased individually outside of reimbursable school meal programs.
- School garden projects have expanded the classroom to the outdoors and have created opportunities for new methods of teaching about healthy fruits and vegetables. These gardens also provide fresh produce that can be served in the cafeteria and donated to community members.
- New school lunch menu items, as well as snack and concessions items, have increased opportunities for students to select healthier options.
- Providing taste testing in school lunch rooms has introduced a fun way to encourage students to try new foods, and has provided a positive choice for students to consider in the present and future.
- Through continued educational opportunities, school food service personnel have made system changes, such as adding healthier items to school menus, which will have a positive impact on students and be sustainable.

At each of the four school districts, **a practice has changed without a formal policy being adopted.** Windom Area Schools are the only district that formally presented guidelines to their school board. The work of each of the districts is **somewhat sustainable – some work may be sustained, but additional efforts are need to ensure implementation.** The Minnesota School Boards Association will continue to work with the Public Health Law Center to monitor the food standards that are adopted at the federal level in order to assist the districts with rewriting school wellness policies in the future.

Longer-term impact

According to the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, children age 4 and older should consume between one and three cups of fruits and vegetables per day. The 2010 Minnesota Student Survey found that one-third of students in Cottonwood, Jackson, Redwood, and Renville counties are overweight or obese based on their Body Mass Index. Sixty percent of students drank pop or soda the previous day, and only 18 percent of CJRR students eat five or more fruits and vegetables a day. The current generation of children is the first in two centuries that is projected to have a shorter life expectancy than their parents because of risk factors for chronic disease including obesity. School nutrition initiatives are one way to address the issue of childhood obesity.

As a result of this initiative, many of the schools have met or partially met their projected short-term outcomes, including:

- Implementation of nutrition and wellness policies that result in students having decreased access to energy-dense foods, and students having increased access to high quality nutritious foods through school gardens, Farm-to-School initiatives, and healthy lunch and snacks
- Students and parents have increased access to information about the nutritional value of foods served at school
- School and community stakeholders have increased knowledge and awareness about nutrition
- Social norms and the school environment support healthy nutrition

These results are an indication of the potential to meet intermediate and long-term outcomes of increasing fruit and vegetable consumption by students, decreasing the consumption of high energy-dense food, decreasing the incidence of obesity and increasing the proportion of students who are a healthy weight. This will ultimately improve the health of students and reduce the incidence of chronic disease in Cottonwood, Jackson, Redwood, and Renville counties.



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Information. Insight. Impact.

451 Lexington Parkway North
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55104
651-280-2700

www.wilderresearch.org



For more information

For more information, contact Nicole MartinRogers at Wilder Research, 651-280-2682

or

Michelle Breidenbach at Redwood-Renville County Public Health Services, 320-523-3784 and Bonnie Frederickson at Cottonwood-Jackson Community Health Services, 507-831-1987

Author: Natalie Alizaga
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