

West Virginia Targets School Breakfast Participation to Improve Child Health

2.3 Create supportive nutrition environments in schools

I. Problem

For years, West Virginia has struggled with some of the highest rates of overweight and obesity in the nation, an issue that can be greatly impacted by childhood nutrition and weight status. According to 2013 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS) data, 15.5% of the surveyed high school students were obese, and 15.5% were overweight. Furthermore, there is a recognized link between lower socioeconomic status (SES) and overweight and obesity¹ and food insecurity is also associated with weight status². *Feeding America* 2013 estimated that the Child Food-Insecurity Rate was 23.3%, representing about 89,880 children living in a food-insecure household³. West Virginia School breakfast programs (SBP) lag behind participation in school lunch programs (NSLP) by students eligible for free or reduced-price meals; during the 2011-2012 school year in WV, only 65% of eligible low-income students participated in the SBP. School-provided meals are an important equalizer for food-insecure students. One way to improve child nutrition is to develop and implement school policies and practices that promote healthy food nutrition environments, such as offering healthy meals. Furthermore, by focusing on bettering the quality of nutrition for students at school, research has shown that this could potentially lead to increased standardized test scores, improved attendance, reduced tardiness, and improved academic functioning.⁴

"Research shows that school breakfast leads to improved diet, reduced food insecurity, better test scores, improved student health, and fewer distractions in the classroom, especially for our most vulnerable students,"

-West Virginia Superintendent of Schools, Steven L. Paine, Ed.D.

II. Intervention

Recognition of the importance of school breakfasts, coupled with the reality of the state's inadequate school breakfast participation, prompted the WV Division of Health Promotion and Chronic Disease (HPCD) and its partner, the WV Department of Education (WVDE) to target school breakfast participation as a strategy to improve child health and prevent chronic disease. Fortunately, in April 2013, the WV Legislature passed Senate Bill Number 663 creating the *WV Feed to Achieve Act*, with the goal of improving the nutrition and health of the state's children. Over a five-year period, HPCD utilized funds from the CDC to **create supportive nutrition environments in schools** and conducted the following activities:

- **Partnered** with the WVDE with the inception of the CDC 1305 funding to facilitate infrastructure that supports training for healthy nutrition environment in schools.
- **Provided support** to maintain a network Regional Wellness Specialists (RWS) to facilitate a coordinated school health model throughout the state.

- **Provided support** to local education agencies to address health issues including nutrition through a coordinated school health model.
- **Provided workforce development** to County Food Service Directors in twelve counties promoting school-made meals "From Scratch" (including healthy breakfast).
- **Provided guidance, support, and technical assistance** to the state's 12 local education agencies to facilitate program implementation.
- Worked through RWSs to provide **technical assistance** to all county food service staff to promote school made meals "From Scratch."
- **Trained and assisted schools** in every county throughout the state on strategies to create a healthy school nutrition environment.

III. Health Impact

HPCD successfully achieved several environmental changes and health behavior impacts. First, all 12 local education agencies received training and technical assistance to improve healthy school environments. Since every county received this training and assistance, there was an increase in the number of students who could benefit from trained personnel. Additionally, the percent of schools that provided information to students or families on the nutrition, caloric, and sodium content of foods available **increased from 50% at baseline to 98.2% in Year 5**. The state's effort also resulted in **behavioral impacts**. The *Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) School Breakfast Scorecard* results show that at the time Senate Bill 663 was enacted (SY 2012-2013), WV ranked 3rd third nationally in the rate of low-income students in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) who participated in the School Breakfast Program (66.9 per 100). WV has ranked **1st in the nation** in ratio of eligible students participating in both the school breakfast program and school lunch program for four years in a row.

- In SY 2013-2014, **73.8 per 100** in the NSLP participating in the School Breakfast Program (SBP)
- SY 2014-2015 at **82.3 per 100**
- SY 2015-2016 at **83.9 per 100**, and
- SY 2016-2017 at **85.3 per 100**

This shows a positive increase from SY2013-2014 to SY2016-2017 of **18.4 per 100** NSLP-eligible students participating in the SBP.

References

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