

Measuring Success: Series Report on Manitoba Healthy Food in Schools

Communication of School Nutrition Policy



Our Story

In 2004 the provincial government launched the *Healthy Kids, Healthy Futures All-Party Task Force* to engage Manitobans across the province in talking about how to promote healthy eating and active living for young people.

The task force report was released in June 2005. As one strategy to address healthy eating, the task force recommended that the provincial government increase access to nutritious foods in schools.

Specifically it called on government to require all schools to have a written school food and nutrition policy as part of the school plan, to be phased in over a period of 3-4 years. This process was to begin in 2006-2007 for kindergarten to grade six and the following year for grades seven through twelve.

Why School Nutrition Policy?

It can promote patterns of eating that focus on balance, variety and moderation and are consistent with what is taught in the school curriculum.

It can foster an environment that values and role-models the importance of healthy eating.

It provides opportunities for learning, practicing and establishing healthy eating habits for a lifetime.



Why Focus on Schools?

Over the course of a school year a student may...

- eat up to 200 lunches at school
- receive food at parties, dances & cultural events
- buy food and beverages from vending machines and cafeterias
- attend a breakfast or snack program
- receive food as a classroom reward
- sell food for fundraising

Offering and promoting...

healthy food and drink choices throughout the school day is, therefore, a BIG step towards improving the nutrition of children.

Did You Know..?

- Recent research supports claims that poor nutrition is associated with poorer learning outcomes.
- Educators have linked decreased attention spans and poor student performance to hunger and missed meals.
- Poor nutrition can put young people at risk of developing childhood obesity, malnutrition, disordered eating, type 2 diabetes, iron-deficiency anemia and dental cavities.
- When poor eating habits are established in childhood, they often carry on to adulthood, where heart disease, diabetes and several types of cancer can develop as a result.



Why Look at Communication of School Nutrition Policy?

- Research shows that communication of school nutrition policies to teachers, students, parents, other staff and the wider community is an important part of successful policy
- Studies indicate that a lack of communication can hinder implementation of school nutrition policies
- Researchers who have examined school websites have found that many websites did not contain up-to-date information about nutrition policy

Therefore, our goal was to determine how and to what extent schools and school divisions in Manitoba are providing information about school nutrition policies to their community.



How We Looked at Communication of School Nutrition Policy

What We Looked For

Our study was designed to obtain information about the existence and location of :

- nutrition policies on school and school division websites.
- Links to divisional school nutrition policies or to the general division website.
- References to school nutrition policies within documents posted on the website (newsletters, policy manuals, community reports, meeting minutes, school plans and school newspapers).



How We Looked For It

We obtained a list of all schools and school divisions in Manitoba.

We searched for websites for all schools divisions (38) and schools in Manitoba (688).

We thoroughly examined each school website for approximately 30 minutes per website.

We opened and scanned all documents and links on each website.

We used key words to search web-sites and documents when this feature was available. Search terms included “ policy, nutrition, health, food ,eating, lunch, canteen and cafeteria”.

We controlled quality by having a second researcher review a sample of school and school division websites to confirm complete capture of all available and relevant information.

How We Evaluated the Results

We recorded occurrences of actual nutrition policy documents, links to policies and references to policies within documents.

We determined :

- number of schools and divisions with actual policies posted anywhere on their website, and where these were located.
- number of school and divisional websites that mentioned nutrition policies, and in what context [newsletter, policy manual, community report, meeting minutes, school plan, school newsletter] they were most likely to occur.

What We Learned

School Division Websites

Individual websites were located and reviewed for **ALL** school divisions – **38**

We searched for websites for all schools in Manitoba (**688**) . We located and reviewed websites for **599** schools .

Websites reviewed represent **100% of school divisions** & **87% of Manitoba schools!**



30 of the **38** school divisions had school nutrition policies posted either directly on their websites or within a document posted on their website.

Most School Nutrition Policies were posted within the school policy manual and were not found to be posted elsewhere on the website.

Individual School Websites

Access to School Nutrition Policy

Only **38 schools** (that's less than 1% of school who have websites) had a school nutrition policy posted directly on their website or within a document posted on their website.

27 schools posted the policy directly onto their website.

13 schools posted the policy within the school handbook which was then posted on the school website.

Communication about the existence of school nutrition policy

1 in 4 schools have used their school websites to communicate the existence and/or content of school nutrition policy.

Of schools that were found to be communicating the existence or content of school nutrition policy:

33% communicated nutrition policy within their School Planning Report

29% communicated it within Parent Newsletters

13% communicated the policy within their Report to the Community

13% communicated it within their School Handbook

Few schools had communicated about school nutrition policy directly on the school website.

What Do These Findings Mean?

- Although all schools and school divisions in Manitoba have met the provincial requirement to have a school nutrition policy, it appears that communication of the existence, purpose and content of these policies is weak – at least by way of school and school division web-sites.
- Given that web-sites have become a prevalent information medium, this seems like a missed opportunity to promote and maintain awareness of school nutrition issues.
- Other means, such as newsletters, may be used for this purpose; however, where such newsletters were posted on the web-site they were unlikely to reference nutrition policy.
- There are opportunities for creating greater awareness of the importance of nutrition at school and the role of policy.

Where Do We Go From Here?

- School Divisions could be encouraged to require all schools to, at a minimum, provide links to the divisional nutrition policy on their individual websites.
- Divisions and schools could also consider providing a link to the provincial government 'Food in Schools' website (www.gov.mb.ca/healthyschools) where extensive information on school nutrition can be found.
- The province of Manitoba can assist schools in publicizing school nutrition policy by providing material and links for schools to include in newsletters and on websites.
- Taking school nutrition policies off the page and enhancing communication, by writing articles, making presentations to staff and parents, meeting with food service operators, and otherwise engaging with the school community is one way we can increase awareness and understanding about the importance of school nutrition and school nutrition policies



Conclusion

- The creation of positive school nutrition environments has become a key part of provincial, territorial and national efforts to address child health, including prevention of obesity and promotion of food security.
- School Nutrition Policies are important tools for stating the need, rationale and means to achieve these goals, but only if they become living documents, shared with the school community.

Monitoring and Reporting

This survey is one component of a wide-ranging evaluation of school nutrition policy and programs in Manitoba. For other reports in the series, please visit

manitoba.ca/healthyschools/foodinschools

**For enquiries please send email to
healthyschools@gov.mb.ca**

**For information on Manitoba Healthy Food in Schools visit
manitoba.ca/healthyschools/foodinschools**

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