

Measuring Success: Series Report on Manitoba Healthy Food in Schools

Stakeholder Perceptions of
School Nutrition Policy



Manitoba 

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 Stakeholder Perceptions?

- To determine what the school community thinks about school nutrition policy
- To identify challenges experienced by the school community in implementing school nutrition policy.
- To determine how the school community sees the impact of school nutrition policy.



What We Looked At

Perceptions of Key Stakeholders (School administrators, teachers, food service-operators, students and parents) about:

- Challenges associated with nutrition policy implementation.
- Positive impacts of school nutrition policy.



How We Looked For It

We used a case-study design.

We engaged with one inner-city elementary school, one suburban elementary school and one secondary school from a school division in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

We conducted interviews/ focus groups with school Administrators, Teachers, Education Assistants, Students, Food Service Personnel, Custodians, and Nutrition Program Coordinators.

We conducted observations of the food environment within each of the 3 participating schools.

We collected and analyzed supporting documentation including nutrition policies, lunch menus, and nutrition program information.

We controlled the quality of findings by having a second researcher review and verify interpretation of findings.

How We Can Use Study Results

- To provide information on progress in the development and implementation of school nutrition policies.
- Document changes due to policy
- Enhance support for school nutrition policy
- To determine allocation of resources
- To determine future actions for successful policy implementation.

What We Learned

Challenges or Barriers to Successful School Nutrition Policy Implementation

Beliefs and attitudes:

Several stakeholders conveyed beliefs and attitudes that appeared to hinder successful implementation of some nutrition guidelines. The following are some examples:

• Requirement of teachers to role-model healthy eating behaviours	<i>“What I choose to put into my body or not put into my body is my business... so yes, we can limit sort of what’s available but it stops at expecting me and demanding me to model.”</i>
• Supporting healthy eating is beyond the control of the school	<i>“We can’t control what they are bringing from home. We can’t control if there is two bags of chips and...A chocolate bar and that’s all they have for lunch... we can offer it but if they’re not choosing it we can’t do much”.</i>
• Frustration related to policies being implemented differently between schools	<i>“[the way the nutrition policy is applied] is very different from building to building and it’s very much dependant on who’s choosing to interpret and they choose to interpret [the policy]”.</i>

Available Resources:

The adequacy of resources available within schools and in the community served as an obstacle to successful implementation. For example:

• School resources including food storage and preparation space and staffing.	<i>“When you want to serve more fruit s and vegetables. Just the logistics of getting them into the building and keeping them refrigerated. Having enough fridge space.”</i>
• Parental constraints; time, access and affordability.	<i>“If there’s going to be any changes made to our school’s lunch policy for what they can order... they need to stay within reasonable guidelines that the kids can still afford the stuff.”</i>
• Proximity of fast-food restaurants and convenience stores to schools.	<i>“They [the students] can just walk at lunchtime, they can walk down the street to [a convenience store] and get whatever junk fix they need.”</i>
• The healthy foods being offered in schools are not always appealing to students	<i>“If it was made fresh and you could put healthier vegetables in there, you might be more apt to purchase that food...”</i>



Communication

Inconsistent and/or a lack of communication about the existence and components of school nutrition policy between key stakeholders was another challenge identified.

“I think you have to know the nutrition policies first [to be able to implement them] and because I haven’t heard of them or... knew there were any nutrition policies...”

“I googled it and I looked for it [the SNP] on the school website and there is nothing.”

“Like even just saying, here is the link ... go and look at your nutrition policy. I mean there has nothing been said about it”



Positive Outcomes

School Environment

Most key stakeholders acknowledged changes to the school environment as the biggest impact that the school nutrition policy has had in schools. Specifically, they indicated that the school nutrition policy has led to:

- The removal of sugar-sweetened beverages and deep-fried foods from vending machines, canteens and cafeterias. These have been replaced by 100% juice, water, milk or chocolate milk and baked food items
- Selling healthier options and/or non-food items for school fundraisers in place of chocolate bars.
- Serving more wholesome options on hot-lunch days and for special events.

“Our hot lunch day used to be hotdogs... and as soon as we talked to them [Parent Advisory Committee] about, you know, the new nutrition policy they were very quick to start looking for alternatives.”

Awareness, Attitudes and Behaviour

Some key stakeholders said they have observed changes to individual awareness, attitudes and behaviour. Changes that were mentioned on several occasions include:

- Students have become more aware of healthy eating as evidenced in discussions around food witnessed by stakeholders
- Children are more attentive in class.
- School staff have become more aware of the importance of supporting healthy school environments.

“It’s very important to have them [nutrition policies]... things have really changed... Like what is offered here at this school and even what the kids talk about, you know, as what is healthy food.”

“I would say that certainly there’s a lot more conversation about nutrition because of the policy”.

How Can Challenges be Addressed?

Key stakeholders identified several challenges or barriers to successful implementation of school nutrition policy. According to the literature many of these challenges are similar to challenges faced by schools across Canada. The following table reiterates some of the main themes and how these are being addressed and further actions that can be taken

CHALLENGE	CURRENT ACTIONS and FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS
Negative attitudes and beliefs of key stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Several Resources, tools and tips for parents and schools can be accessed from the <i>Manitoba Healthy Schools Website</i> (www.gov.mb.ca/healthy_schools/foodinschools) Schools should be encouraged to make use of these resources and make them known to parents and staff.
School resources: staff, volunteers and facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schools may benefit from a resource containing suggestions for cost-effective, healthy and easy to store food products for food services with limited storage.
Parental constraints	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Although outreach is Important, if parents cannot access or afford healthy foods other means of provision need to be identified. Various programs such as, the Vegetable and Fruit Snack Pilot Program, the Farm-to-School Healthy Choices Fundraiser, breakfast, lunch and milk programs have been instituted in Manitoba to ensure children have access to healthy food
Offering healthy cafeteria and canteen options that appeal to students.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Models of food service that have been implemented in other provinces, such as the Farm to School Salad Bar should be piloted in Manitoba schools.
Lack of on-going communication about School Nutrition Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> School divisions should encourage the formation of school level nutrition committees comprised of students, teachers, parents and staff as one way to encourage on-going communication with all stakeholders. The Manitoba Government should require all schools to provide a link to the divisional nutrition policy on their school website.



Conclusion

- Schools have started to see positive results coming from the school nutrition policy initiative.
- To make sure that schools continue to foster healthy eating environments continual encouragement and support from all key stakeholders is needed.
- The challenges and barriers identified in this study need to be addressed in order to provide schools with the best opportunity for school nutrition policy success.

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



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