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Best Practices for Designing and Implementing a Food Pantry in St. Peter Middle and High School

Kira Wellner

Minnesota State University, Mankato

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MINNESOTA STATE UNIVERSITY MANKATO

Best practices for designing and implementing a food pantry in St. Peter Middle and High School

Statement of Need & Purpose of Project

Food insecurity is a prevalent issue in many rural and small communities. "Rates of food insecurity among rural households are generally lower than urban households, but slightly higher than the national average" (Feeding America, 2013). Also, "15.4% of rural households are food insecure" across the United States, which is an estimated 3 million households (Feeding America, 2013). Research has found that food insecurity has a negative impact on various child outcomes, including children's physical health, mental health, social behavior, and school performance (Fiese, Gundersen, Koester, & Washington, 2011). A child's school performance can potentially be affected in a variety of ways including an inability to concentrate, not enough nutrients for brain development, poor relationships with others at school, as well as stress and anxiety about getting enough to eat (Rodgers & Milewska, 2007).

In St. Peter's Independent School District #508, 50% of all elementary school students are enrolled in the free and reduced lunch, which is available only to low-income households (Greater Mankato Area United Way, 2008). Furthermore, the overall food insecurity rate for Nicollet County is 9.6%, which translates to 3,090 people (Feeding America, 2013). Of those 3,090 people faced with food insecurity in Nicollet County, 1,000 are youth (Feeding America, 2013). This translates to a rate of 14.4% of youth facing food insecurity in Nicollet County (Feeding America, 2013). Even more distressing is that 39% of these youth are ineligible for federal nutrition programs because of their families' incomes (Feeding America, 2013). The purpose of this capstone project was to identify best practices for designing and implementing a food pantry program in St. Peter Middle/High School to address food insecurity.

Relevant Literature

Other counties in Minnesota have begun to combat issues around food insecurity within schools through the implementation of The Backpack Program. It is an intervention that fills the gap for weekend meals when children are at home. The food pantry model is very similar because it addresses food insecurity by providing nutritious meals and snacks on nights and weekends. However, rather than a backpack filled with food given to the student, the student chooses the items he/she needs or wishes.

The issue becomes finding empirical evidence of a school-based food pantry because it is a relatively new program. However, the literature that exists on The Backpack Program along with the escalating number of states, cities, and school districts using it suggests that this program is an effective intervention to ameliorating food insecurity in schoolchildren.

Literature concludes that better test scores, improved reading skills, positive behavior, improved health, and increased attendance are attributed to the success of The Backpack Program (Rodgers and Milewska, 2007). On a social level, The Backpack Program provides an extra support to students and families without being stigmatizing. One principal reported, "Students enjoyed receiving the bag and the food," and "parents have been very appreciative" (Fink, 2011). It has become something that children look forward to at the end of the week. Also, the food is distributed discreetly (Feeding America, 2011). This is an important consideration because it protects the student from having to divulge sensitive information to peers, which could cause embarrassment or otherwise be socially detrimental.

While school districts across the nation have implemented this program and have seen positive results in their students, far more empirical research on The Backpack Program and food pantry program is needed. There is a gap in the literature due to the lack of empirical evidence that supports the validity of reported results of using such a program.

Kira Wellner
Department of Social Work
Minnesota State University, Mankato

Practicum Agency: St. Peter Middle and High School
Agency Field Instructor: Kelly Jensen, LICSW
Field Liaison: Michelle Alvarez, MSW, EdD
Academic Advisor: Kimberly Zammitt, PhD, LICSW

Methodology

To identify the best practices in designing and implementing a food pantry program, a qualitative design utilizing semi-structured telephone and email interviews was conducted. The interviews were with schools staff employed in Minnesota schools that have either a Backpack program or food pantry. This criteria was selected to obtain a small sample of programs that were contextually similar to the food pantry program that the St. Peter Middle and High School planned to implement. A snowball sampling strategy was used to identify six schools (N = 6). The responses helped shape the development of the food pantry program in St. Peter's Middle and High School. Interview questions targeted key components in designing and implementing a food pantry. After conducting the interviews, the interviews were analyzed for themes.

Data

The following tables illustrate five themes that emerged from the interviews:

How Student is Identified	
School #1	School staff identifies
School #2	School staff identifies
School #3	Qualify for free/reduced lunch
School #4	Homeless Education Leads and school staff identifies
School #5	School staff identifies
School #6	Students self-identify or school staff identifies

Education on Other Resources	
School #1	newsletters, websites, personal contact
School #2	school social worker
School #3	School's Child Guide works with families to direct them to other resources
School #4	weekly announcements, website, flyers, special events, staff
School #5	school social worker
School #6	school counselors

Funding Source	
School #1	local church & Channel One
School #2	Thrivent Financial, business owner and local food shelf donations
School #3	private donations and two grants
School #4	donations
School #5	Channel One Food Shelf and local church
School #6	donations from local citizens and fundraising from local business

Confidentiality	
School #1	family assigned number that is kept on a tag on the bag
School #2	uses backpacks; no one knows what's in them
School #3	Child Guide and teachers only know names of students (assigned numbers)
School #4	location is confidential, students' names not required, use backpacks to carry out food
School #5	student is assigned a number; SSW hands out backpacks
School #6	students' names are not required, shelves of food in private room

Evaluation Method	
School #1	nothing formal; discussed possibly surveying families
School #2	nothing formal; feedback from school social workers
School #3	nothing formal; feedback from students and families
School #4	nothing formal; in process of creating
School #5	nothing formal
School #6	nothing formal

Findings

This past spring, St. Peter Middle and High School was able to pilot a food pantry program, which was named THE PANTRY. The themes that emerged from the interviews were compared to the CWFP's vision of the food pantry as to help in the shaping and implementation of the food pantry. The five themes were implemented in the school's food pantry in the following ways:

- Funding Source.** The funders for the CWFP, which includes all the food programs for St. Peter schools, differ from year to year. One funder is a grant provided by the Greater Mankato Area United Way. Private and business donations are also used to help with the upkeep of the programs.
- How students are identified.** Students may either be identified by school staff or self-identified. There is no criteria a student must meet to utilize THE PANTRY. The reason for this is because using the free/reduced lunch model was not allowing the CWFP to meet the needs of all the identified free/reduced lunch families in the elementary schools.
- Education on other resources.** When a student visits THE PANTRY, he/she is given a Nicollet County community resource sheet to bring home to his/her family as a way to get connected to other community resources. The school social worker's contact information is also listed on a parent/guardian notification letter as a contact for further aide in getting connected to these resources.
- Confidentiality.** THE PANTRY is located in a confidential, safe place in the school. The extra food is stored elsewhere in the school, and the National Honor Society students stock THE PANTRY cabinets when necessary. No names of students are recorded, and backpacks are used to keep the exchange discreet and confidential.
- Evaluation method.** During the pilot program this past spring, no evaluation was conducted. However, an evaluation method for the future of THE PANTRY will be established. The elementary schools in St. Peter currently survey the families, students, and teachers who are involved with the Backpack Program. A similar method of evaluation is projected to be used for THE PANTRY. The CWFP also discussed using Remind 101, a free texting service, as a possibility for part of the evaluation.

Implications & Future Recommendations

Recommendations for THE PANTRY and the CWFP for the 2013-2014 school year include:

*Building Connections in the School. The success of THE PANTRY partially relies on the building staff, such as teachers, to identify students in need. Therefore, it is important to continue to educate and increase the involvement of staff in identifying those students. This past spring, letters were sent to teachers and posters were placed around the school. However, it would be recommended for face-to-face interaction in the form of a meeting to be held so teachers can ask questions and seek clarification of THE PANTRY and its process.

*Advertising in the Community. It is recommended that a staff member or the National Honor Society begins to advertise THE PANTRY and its capabilities this fall in the form of flyers, newspaper articles, and on the school's website. Also, it would be recommended to continue advertising THE PANTRY at school conferences.

*Completing an Evaluation. Finally, it would be especially important to complete an evaluation of THE PANTRY at either bi-annually or at the end of the school year. An evaluation would help the CWFP to show need as they continue to apply for the United Way grant, and it would also show the school where the strengths and gaps are in the program as to increase its effectiveness.

References

References are available from author upon request

