

Joint Testimony of the Food-Ed Coalition Steering Committee

New York City Council Education Committee Hearing on Oversight - Health & Wellness Instruction in NYC Schools January 16, 2019

Executive Summary

“What we value we measure and what we measure we value”

New York City’s aim is to be the leader in implementing programming and methods that influence the impact on the health and wellbeing of our next generation. As pioneers of urban public health practices, it is crucial that we measure the frequency and impact of nutrition education programs in our NYC public schools.

[Research shows](#) that 35-50 hours per year of behaviorally focused nutrition education is optimal to provide students with the motivation and skills they need to make healthy choices. However, a recent study found that American students receive only a median of 3.4 hours in elementary schools, 4.2 hours in middle schools, and 5.9 hours in high schools. Our proposed reporting requirement will help us understand what the nutrition education landscape looks like in New York City so that we may better support schools to improve the quantity and quality of food education they provide and as a result inform programming and develop a strategic collective impact on the health of the next generation.

Specific Aim

To measure the frequency, reach, total time spent, overall influence, costs and specific locations of public schools that incorporate nutrition education programming into their current school day or after school programming.

Method

Schools will be given a 1-page reporting tool that they will be required to submit to the council, post on the department of education’s website and publish on the city’s open data portal in a non-proprietary machine-readable format that permits automated processing, an annual report based on data from the preceding school year.

Expected Impact

Understanding the location, frequency and reach of the current programming is critical for parents, students, educators, advocates, and policy makers to craft equitable

policies that direct resources to the schools and students that need them most. It will also allow external Nutrition Education Programs to distribute their resources in a strategic way to make an equitable impact on a greater range of children multiplying the public health return on investment of the dollars spent on these programs.

Background

Importance

New York City's social and economic health is closely tied to the health of its citizens. Providing healthful food and nutrition education to school children is a critical method of ensuring short- and long-term benefits including better health and learning outcomes. While recent legislative efforts, such as the Healthy Hunger Free Kids Act of 2010, contributed to strong federal child nutrition programs that support school wellness policies and healthier school food environments, the US Department of Education does not have specific federal requirements regarding nutrition education in schools.

[Schools are a significant part of children's lives](#), and are poised to strongly influence dietary practices and promote lifelong healthy habits. Students spend an average of 6.64 hours per day in school. In a 180-day cycle, that equates to roughly 1,200 hours. Between kindergarten and 12th grade, the total number of hours in school surpasses 15,500. Shouldn't we devote at least some of these hours to nutrition education? Our feeling is, yes, absolutely. All New York City students deserve healthy, equitable, sustainable, and culturally responsive food access and education.

Current Challenges

President Trump has just rolled back school lunch regulations championed by First Lady Michelle Obama; schools are now allowed to offer more [flavored milk](#) options, like chocolate. Additionally, efforts to limit sodium content in school lunches have been delayed or partially eliminated.

These policy changes are especially troubling because our kids are in crisis. The latest [data shows that](#) 1 in 3 children in the US are overweight or obese. [In New York City](#), nearly half of all elementary school children and Head Start children are not a healthy weight; 1 in 5 kindergarten students, and 1 in 4 Head Start children, is obese, and that is even higher for black and Latino children. Kids are also fighting serious disease related to obesity. Children as young as 8 years old are on [cholesterol-lowering](#) and [blood pressure-lowering](#) medication. [Fifty percent of children under 15 have fatty](#)

[streaks](#) in their arteries, the beginning stages of heart disease. Annual health care costs in the US relating to obesity are over \$200 billion.

[During childhood](#), low-income children are more likely to experience food insecurity and obesity, as well as a litany of other problems related to behavior and learning. Because schools are where so many of our city's students get their daily meals, it is vital that we provide the best nutrition possible to support their growth and learning.

Our children deserve better. Research shows that a combination of a healthy diet and physical activity has significant benefits for children, including better grades and school performance; increase in good behavior; increase in concentration; and a change in long term health prognosis, lowering obesity, lower BMI, diabetes and heart disease. Changes in diet do more than affect the physical body; a study published in the [American Journal of Public Health](#) found evidence of a significant relationship between unhealthy dietary patterns and poorer mental health in children and adolescents.

Why Value Nutrition Education?

Changing what kids have available to eat is only half the battle. In addition to improving healthy food access, ***we must help our children to make healthy choices***. Instead of a narrowly tailored “teach to the test” curriculum, we must reintroduce the study of food and nutrition to our school, weaving the application of common core reading and math into a practical, engaging, hands-on nutrition education that will change life-long behaviors.

“Nutrition education done well can decrease children’s BMI and weight gain, increase fruit and vegetable consumption, create positive attitudes toward fruits and vegetables, and may improve academic outcomes,” wrote the Tisch Center for Food Education & Policy in its recent brief [The Importance of Nutrition Education in the 2015 Child Nutrition Reauthorization](#). “Nutrition education is an evidence-based, cost effective way to improve health outcomes and foster healthy eating habits for a lifetime.”

It’s easy to understand why: hands-on nutrition education gets children excited about eating healthy foods, it provides children with knowledge and skills for living healthy lives, and creates an environment where healthy choices are the easy choices. It also empowers children to advocate for better food in their schools, communities, and beyond. Through nutrition education, children gain experiences cooking, tasting, gardening, and learning about food to become healthy eaters and advocates for good food.

The recent [A is for Apple Report](#) on nutrition education from the Laurie M. Tisch Center for Food, Education & Policy, a cross-sectional study to determine the landscape of Nutrition Education Programs in New York City schools during the 2016–17 school year, concluded that “through engaging hands-on activities, school-based nutrition education provides students with the motivation, skills, and knowledge to make choices that are healthy for themselves, their communities, and the planet.”

Here’s the thing: if knowledge is power then nutrition education gives children super powers. Witness a fourth grade class at PS 261 in Brooklyn sitting at attention, excited and eager as they learned how to be “Food Detectives” during a free nutrition workshop run by [the nonprofit Beechers Foundation](#). In two and a half hours, they learned how to read nutrition labels, understand ingredient lists, see through corporate marketing messages and cook a veggie chili from scratch.

Or take PS 244, a public school in Queens, which was transformed after a partnership with [Fan4Kids](#), which teaches weekly nutrition and fitness education classes across the grades. Five years after signing on, it became the [first all-vegetarian public school in New York City](#), a change spurred not by administration but by its student body. These stories are two of so many happening every day in classrooms across this city.

This reporting bill would help us to understand precisely which classrooms are filled with this kind of learning and excitement, and which are not. The DOE needs to shine a light on the gaps in food and nutrition education so that parents, students, educators, advocates, and policy makers can craft equitable policies that direct resources to the schools and students that need them most.

Why Value the Reporting Bill?

Nutrition education may be the most powerful form of knowledge a child can receive. That’s why this reporting bill is so essential—it will provide data on what the nutrition education landscape looks like in schools across the city and allow us to identify the gaps and fill them in with funding for across the board nutrition education.

[Research shows](#) that 35-50 hours per year of behaviorally focused nutrition education is optimal to provide students with the motivation and skills they need to make healthy choices. However, a recent study found that American students receive only a median of 3.4 hours in elementary schools, 4.2 hours in middle schools, and 5.9 hours in high schools. This reporting requirement will help us understand what the nutrition education landscape looks like in New York City so that we may go about supporting schools to improve the quantity and quality of food education they provide.

Once we have this data, we can fill any gaps with school-based nutrition education programs. These sorts of programs are cost-effective, saving \$900 - \$12,000 for each additional life-year resulting from obesity prevention. This ranks more favorably than other health sector interventions such as pharmaceuticals or taxes/bans on certain food items, according to a recent [McKinsey Global Institute Report](#). Initial research on the impact of state-level nutrition education funding on BMI has shown that investments in nutrition education have the desired effect of decreasing overweight and obesity.

We have some suggested edits to the legislative language to further strengthen it and streamline reporting for schools; please see Attachment A, suggested edits.

Great nutrition education is a critical ingredient in the recipe for a healthy school community. Through nutrition education, students have exciting and engaging experiences gardening, cooking, and critically thinking about our food supply. Students gain knowledge and skills to make food choices that promote health, ecological sustainability, and social justice. They gain confidence to navigate our challenging food environments and persuasive marketing of unhealthy foods.

Our goal is to ensure that all New York City students have access to great nutrition education. We have the ability to shape the lives of 850,000 children every day. **Let's show how much we value our children's health by measuring the variables that impact it.**

Signed by the following organizations:

Laurie M. Tisch Center for Food, Education & Policy, Program in Nutrition, Teachers College Columbia University
NY Common Pantry
Children's Aid
Edible Schoolyard NYC
FoodCorps New York
Harlem Grown
The NYC Healthy School Food Alliance
Institute for Family Health - Bronx Health REACH
The Sylvia Center
Community Action at New Settlement
Wellness in the Schools
New York Lawyers for the Public Interest
The Horticultural Society of New York