Abstract

Barriers to Implementing a Healthy Food and Drink Environment in New Zealand Schools: Baseline Results from the Healthy Active Learning Evaluation †

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Abstract: Dietary habits established during childhood and adolescence influence behaviours in adulthood and may impact health later in life. Primary and secondary schools have the unique ability to reach almost all children and young people during the first two decades of their lives, making them ideal settings for influencing health. Healthy Active Learning (HAL) is a 5-year joint government initiative between Sport NZ, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Education which seeks to improve the wellbeing of students through healthy eating and drinking, and quality physical activity in schools. A baseline evaluation of HAL undertaken by Massey University commenced in July 2020. School leaders, teachers, and parents and family were invited to complete surveys and participate in focus groups. Measures included an evaluation of the healthy food environment, including food policies, practices, and food availability (menus). Surveys were created using online survey software, and focus groups were facilitated by two experienced qualitative researchers. Food environment and food availability surveys were completed by 257 and 173 schools, respectively. Most schools had a healthy food and drink policy (82.9%); 59.2% of these schools stipulated water and milk only policies. Barriers to implementing a healthy food and drink environment included convenience and ease of access to processed and ready-to-eat foods, resistance from parents, and loss of profits. Survey responses from 1060 teachers (including 184 responses from principals/school leaders) were received. Teachers agreed that their schools saw healthy eating and drinking as a key part of student wellbeing (84.4%), yet only 57.4% of teachers felt that they upheld their school food policy. Food insecurity was identified from 53 teacher focus groups (n = 307 teachers) as a key barrier to implementing food policy. Support from the nutrition promotion workforce may help schools achieve a healthy food environment in an equitable way.

Keywords: food policy; food practices; school food environment; children; teachers; nutrition promotion

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