

SNACKS AND SCHOOLS

An Evaluation of the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Snack Program In Bellingham Title I Elementary Schools

In cooperation with Western Washington University, an observational study and formative evaluation of the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Snack Program was conducted at Cordata and Alderwood elementary schools to gauge student engagement and consumption of the snack offerings. After visiting Alderwood (currently in its second year of implementation of the program) and Cordata (that began the program Spring 2013), evaluators Christen Kiser and Kiira Heymann were able to classify the program according to teacher delivery, and to correlate student engagement around the snacks to these varying presentation styles.

PRESENTATION STYLES:

- **Formal:** Teachers pause class and take time separate from other learning to eat the snack; teachers call students up to get snack or have one student act as the server; instructions are offered on portions for 1sts and 2nds, and on sanitary practices (i.e. tongs or napkins); time is allowed for student discussion of the snack.
- **Semi-Formal:** Teachers pause to give guidelines for snack consumption before resuming other class activities (ranging from teacher reading time to independent projects or study); students are free to get up for snack and serve themselves as necessary; a student leader might be designated to serve his/her classmates; at the introduction of snack time, there may be some discussion around food.
- **Informal:** Teachers place snack at back of classroom and continue with daily routine with little instruction as to snack time protocol; the students know to some extent that snack is available and can serve themselves while participating in the planned class activity; there is no snack discussion.

In general, there was a *strong correlation between formalized snack time and overall snack consumption*. In Cordata classrooms that just began the program, teachers who allowed students to discuss what they were eating, and to encourage each other to try new foods had almost 100% engagement for 1sts, and nearly all the snack was consumed by the end of the designated snack period. Semi-formal settings also provided high numbers for student engagement, but not as strongly or effectively as classrooms with formal snack times. In informal classrooms, many students were observed eating their own snack from home or none at all, or were not compelled to serve themselves from the communal bowl while focusing on other school activities.

At Alderwood, where the program has been running for two years, the semi-formal approach was most often observed. It was evident that students were not only accustomed to the snack delivery (one rotating student leader was designated to serve snack each day) but also to the breadth of fruits and vegetables served. *The results in semi-formal styles at Alderwood matched the formal styles at Cordata in overall numbers of students engaged and total percentage of snack consumed*. In informal teacher surveys, it was revealed that students became more comfortable with the fruits and vegetables over time, thus boosting participation.

FINDINGS AND SUGGESTIONS:

As Title 1 Bellingham Elementary schools work to best integrate the snack program into their daily routine and to encourage student participation in the program, a more formalized approach at the start of each snack period is initially recommended. *When students are allowed to talk about their experience with food and to encourage participation amongst their peers, overall student engagement and consumption is enhanced*. Over time, these methods will likely shift to a more semi-formal approach as students become familiar not only with the routine, but also with the offerings.

- Allow time (even 5-10 minutes) for student socialization and discussion around snack
- Designate a rotating student server, or have teacher portion out the snack, so that all students are actively asked to participate in the program simply by nature of the presentation style
- Ask students to start to take responsibility for the snacks by setting clear expectations for polite behavior and sanitary practices, and reinforcing them each time

STUDENT FEEDBACK:

Evaluators were able to capture nearly 100% of the verbal comments made by teachers and students around snack time at both schools. Overall there was a positive trend (close to 100%) in comments concerning snack consumption and excitement around eating and trying new fruits and vegetables, with exclamations such as: “These snacks are good!” “I’m definitely having seconds!” “We try every snack!” and “I love that first bite [*of the apple*] when it’s just so juicy.”

MOVING FORWARD:

Going forward, evaluators recommend a re-evaluation of goals for the program in order to ensure that best practices observed and implemented are matching the needs of the Bellingham School District. If the goals of the program continue to be exposing students to new fruits and vegetables and encouraging healthy eating behavior, then focusing on matching presentation styles to student engagement will continue to serve the snack program. If the Bellingham School District has further interest in the educational potential of the snack program, more formalized and detailed delivery will need to be planned and coordinated.

Further study might also be conducted on the relative value of the snack program in the classroom in regards to sustenance, as well as the snack’s ability to enhance student focus and performance at critical times of day between meals. Informal teacher interviews revealed that the calories or protein content of the fresh fruit and veggie might not be enough to have a huge impact in this area. Further research will be needed if this continues to be a goal the Bellingham School District in regards to the program.

After observing the snack program in two different schools, there is no doubt that students are engaging in and eating more fruits and vegetables by simply having this option integrated into the daily routine at school. As the program continues to be newly implemented at Title I schools, stakeholders should continue to consider programmatic goals and decide which avenues for impact and expansion ought to be followed.