

## ***Eat Better, Feel Better Project at T.T. Minor Elementary School*** **Evaluation Briefing Paper**

### **Overview**

The *Eat Better, Feel Better Project*, attempts to positively influence the food environment and eating behaviors of school-aged children and their families, through inclusion of a project dietitian, incorporation of a salad bar in the lunchroom, nutrition curricula for students and teachers, family nights, cooking demonstrations and the construction of a school garden.



In an excellent example of academic-community partnership, the University of Washington's Exploratory Center for Obesity Research (ECOR) and Center for Public Health Nutrition, partnered with Seattle Public Schools and Feet First to evaluate the *Eat Better, Feel Better Project*, which was funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

### **Methods**

**Study Sample:** Fifth-grade students from T. T. Minor (intervention school), and fourth and fifth-grade students in a combined classroom from Martin Luther King (MLK) Elementary (comparison school) were included in the study. The demographic profile in the intervention and comparison schools, were similar (See Table 1).

**Table 1. Student Characteristics**

	<b>T.T. Minor %</b>	<b>M.L.K. %</b>
American Indian	3	1
Asian	2	3
African-American	80	80
Latino	8	10
Caucasian	8	7
Female	52	53
Male	48	47
Special Education	8	9
Free/Reduced Lunch	87	61

Teachers, staff, parents and guardians at T. T. Minor were also interviewed for the study. Participants who agreed to be interviewed received a \$25 grocery store gift certificate.

**Student Survey:** Student surveys assessing self-efficacy for eating fruits and vegetables were administered to the students at both schools. Self-efficacy, a measurement of an individual's perception that he or she is able to successfully perform an activity, can predict future behavior. For instance, higher self-efficacy scores indicate that students are more likely to choose fruits and vegetables over less-healthy choices. Students were also asked how many times they ate a fruit or a vegetable on the previous day.

**Lunchroom Observations:** Trained study staff observed and recorded the fruit and vegetable intake of students at both schools during lunch on three consecutive days. Each observer was randomly assigned to observe 1-4 children during the lunch period.

**Key Informant Interviews (T.T. Minor school only):** Trained study staff conducted key informant interviews with teachers and staff members and parents and guardians of 5<sup>th</sup> graders. The teachers and staff were asked questions about their experiences with the program, the eating behavior of the students, and their own eating behavior. The parents and guardians were asked about the foods their family eats and about their experience with programs at T. T. Minor.

## **Results**

### **Student Surveys** (T.T. Minor n=17; M.L.K. = 15)

Results of the self-efficacy questions of the student surveys showed students at T.T. Minor are more willing to choose vegetables served at lunch compared to students at M.L.K. Students at T.T. Minor also reported a significantly greater intake of fruit than MLK students, as well as a greater vegetable intake.

### **Lunchroom Observations** (T.T. Minor n=17; M.L.K. n=15)

There was no difference observed in fruit and vegetable consumption between the two schools.

### **Key Informant Interviews** (Parents and Guardians n=11; Teachers and Staff n=19)

Responses from the interviews indicated that:

#### ***Parents and Guardians:***

- 73% were aware of the salad bar, 100% of these respondents indicated that their children use it
- 73% were aware that fresh fruits and vegetables are available for morning snacks, 75% of these respondents indicated that their children eat them
- 73% were aware of the nutritionist at T.T. Minor, 75% of these respondents thought that she made a difference in how their children eat
- 73% reported that their children talk more about fruits and vegetables during this school year than before
- 55% indicated that their children spoke of trying new fruits and vegetables at school
- 82% indicated that their children asked them to buy more fruits and vegetables
- 64% thought that their children were eating more fruits and vegetables than they did last year
- 64% thought that their entire family was eating more fruits and vegetables than they did last year

*"They have been introduced to food at the food fair. It's neat! Now they watch for the signs for the farmers' market because they want to go." –T.T. Minor Parent*

#### ***Teachers and Staff:***

- None felt that the programs were a burden or wanted to see them eliminated
- 89% saw the programs as worth the effort due to positive changes in the students' food choices, increased access to nutritious foods, and increased consumption of fruits and vegetables.
- 100% noticed a change in the eating behaviors of the students
- 79% tasted a fruit or vegetable that was new to them during the school year
- 100% reported eating more fruits and vegetables than last year
- 89% indicated that having a salad bar caused them to eat more fruits and vegetables than last year
- 53% indicated that having a nutritionist on staff led them to change their eating behavior

*"I'm more conscious about what I'm eating...especially in front of the students!"  
–T.T. Minor Teacher*

### **Recommendations for improving the program interventions.**

- Increase the physical accessibility of the salad bar so that all students can reach it (i.e. install a ramp so that shorter children can view and reach the foods)
- Improve the variety of fruits and vegetables offered for snacks and at lunch
- Modify practices to ensure variety throughout the week
- Provide more pre-cut fruit
- Extend snack and lunch periods
- Better-integrate the family environment into the nutrition education
- Involve teachers and staff more in the lesson planning

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Prepared by Mary Podrabsky, CD, RD  
www.uwecor.org***