

Promoting a healthful lifestyle and encouraging advocacy among university and high school students

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In the spring of 1999, a small grant was awarded to support a California Project LEAN (Leaders Encouraging Activity and Nutrition) Food on the Run intervention at Francisco Bravo Medical Magnet High School (Bravo High School) in East Los Angeles, California. California Project LEAN, a program of the California Department of Health Services, promotes healthful eating and physical activity to underserved communities. Project LEAN's Food on the Run campaign trains high school students in nutrition, physical activity, and working with the media so that they can become health leaders in their communities. The mission of Food on the Run is to increase healthful eating and physical activity among teens as a way to improve health

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and reduce the risk of chronic disease such as heart disease, obesity, and certain cancers. Policy change by the teen advocates is a positive component of this intervention program—it refers to the students advocating for positive change in their high school environment. For example, they may advocate—for example by approaching the principal or appealing to the student body—for no sodas in vending machines. If it becomes permanent, then a policy change has occurred.

Project LEAN Food on the Run interventions have been implemented at various high schools throughout the State of California, including 4 sites in the Los Angeles region. Bravo High School is 1 of these 4 sites. Bravo High School—located in a commercial and residential area—teaches students in grades 10 through 12 (approximate age range: 16 to 18 years) and has a student population of about 1,700. The multiethnic student body is primarily of a low socioeconomic level and the predominant race is Hispanic American. The school is strategically located close to Los Angeles County

and University of Southern California (USC) Medical Centers, USC School of Medicine, USC University Hospital, and USC School of Pharmacy. Because the school is in this “medical magnet” community, many of the students have been introduced to health-related fields and many are planning to pursue health-related careers. Hence, this high school was deemed an excellent opportunity to educate future health professionals about proper nutrition and activity for a healthful lifestyle.

INTERVENTION

The Bravo High School intervention focused on a group of advocates from grades 10 through 12. These advocates were recruited through health, science, and physical education classes, school-wide announcements, and flyers. Weekly meetings were established. The advocates were trained in general nutrition, physical activity, and advocacy principles, and an official high school club was formed. The Student Health Club planned intervention activities, wrote articles for a quarterly club newsletter, posed frequently asked questions (FAQs) on the Internet, surveyed the student body regarding food and activity preferences, met with the cafeteria manager to discuss possible changes to the menu, and planned community outreach activities.

Mentors

Dietetics students at California State University at Los Angeles (CSLA) served as mentors during this intervention period. Although contact was limited during the first year, there were plans to expand the mentoring program during the following academic years. During this intervention program, CSLA dietetics students wrote letters to the high school Student Health Club members, introducing themselves and informing them about their studies and activities at CSLA. High school students were then able to respond and communicate with their mentors via e-mail or by phone. In addition, students were invited to a day of health-related workshops at CSLA. These workshops were designed to expose the high school students to a variety of health-related careers, including the dietetics profession.

Activities

There were several activities that the students planned and participated in during the school year in order to promote healthful lifestyle habits. The high

school Health Fair, a campus-wide event in which the mentors from CSLA participated, was expanded from 1 day to 1 week because of increased interest during the 1999-2000 academic year. During that week, the high school advocates set up a booth with information on healthful eating and physical activity; CSLA dietetics students, under the supervision of a registered dietitian, were available for body fat analysis and to answer questions; and the high school advocates organized a swing dance demonstration. Other activities organized by the Student Health Club included a judo demonstration, after-school aerobics classes, a low-fat shake demonstration, and production of bilingual educational materials for distribution at parent-teacher association meetings. Students also wrote FAQs and, along with answers to the questions provided by CSLA coordinated dietetic students, posted them on the Internet (<http://www.calstatela.edu/faculty/lcalder/links.htm>).

Policy Changes

An important aspect of this intervention was the policy change component. The student advocates were trained on policy change techniques, and a policy change committee—composed of high school students, CSLA dietetics students, and teachers—was formed. The main changes have been in the vending machine and cafeteria areas. The vending machines now offer more healthful choices and, to the surprise of the vending machine company, must be filled more often. The cafeteria manager has agreed to offer fresh fruit as an a la carte sales item and is considering the addition of a chicken Caesar salad.

DISCUSSION

A 2000 study (1) conducted by the Public Health Institute found that at 71% of the school districts surveyed in California, a la carte food items accounted for up to 70% of all food sales at high schools. Most of these a la carte items are high in fat and energy and low in nutrients. Offering fresh fruit as an a la carte item is a first step in a more positive trend—but, obviously, there is a long way to go.

This high school intervention is sustainable beyond the Project LEAN Food on the Run funding cycle because of its collaboration with the CSLA coordinated dietetics program. Several senior and graduate students completing their supervised practice experience were able to facilitate training the advocates as

well as planning activities. This partnership between a high school and a university, with its resulting outreach activities, has sparked much interest within other agencies and community groups. Recently, several organizations have requested that the Student Health Club be involved in both high school curriculum development and community outreach endeavors. In addition, the Student Health Club is now exploring the concept of “social marketing” within the outlying community and a focus group has begun meeting in order to determine a strategy for disseminating pertinent nutrition information to this underserved population.

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CONCLUSIONS

The success of this particular intervention is the result of several factors. First, there was immediate “buy-in” from the school physical education and health instructors as well as the administration. Second, the high school advocates were extremely interested in forming an official campus club and in following through with advocating for healthful changes. This might be expected, as a medical magnet school implies that most students are pursuing a health career. Third,

the CSLA coordinated dietetics program provided the human resources necessary to support the intervention. Plus, the CSLA students seemed to relate to the high school students and enjoyed this mentoring opportunity.

Interventions such as Project LEAN Food on the Run are necessary to combat the rising epidemic of adolescent obesity; statistics indicate that 21 percent of adolescents are currently considered obese (2,3). In fact, studies indicate that there has been a 200% increase in the youth obesity rate over the past 2 decades (4,5). With a growing trend towards the marketing of fast food items on high school campuses (1), interventions are needed to counteract this trend and its resulting consequences. High school students must be empowered with nutrition and physical activity knowledge to achieve a more healthful lifestyle. To strengthen this knowledge base, they should also be given opportunities to participate in related practical learning activities.

The goal is to expand the Project LEAN Food on the Run intervention during the next academic year. The stronger the club and the more integrated its activities become, the more likely this intervention will be sustained. Additional partnerships and opportunities will be explored, but the partnership with CSLA will continue, regardless of funding. Interventions that encourage healthy eating and physical activity in teens must continue to counteract the unhealthy lifestyles that have permeated society.

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