



Case Study

Ethical Leadership in School Lunch Program Meal Offerings

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Abstract

This case study describes how school foodservice directors can utilize ethical leadership principles in order to provide healthier meals in the school lunch program. Perspectives from practice are included with data from an interview with a current Director of Nutrition Services. The concluding section of the paper discusses the implications of the findings for other school lunch program director leaders.

Key Words: obese, overweight, National School Lunch Program (NSLP), Director of Nutrition Services, Foodservice Director, ethical leadership, Rick Cota.

Introduction

The ongoing childhood obesity battle requires the leadership of many individuals and organizations. More than 23 million children and adolescents ages 2 to 19 are either obese or overweight (NASBE, 2009) and the trend is not reversing. During the past two decades, the percentage of American children aged six to 11 who are overweight has more than doubled (from seven to 15 percent), and the percentage of adolescents aged 12 to 19 who are overweight has tripled (from five to 15 percent)(USDA, 2011). Policies that emphasize environmental changes are most likely to be successful in decreasing the incidence of obesity (Wang & Beydoun, 2007).

In February 2010, First Lady Michelle Obama's declared a war on childhood obesity and introduced the *Let's Move Initiative*; a ten billion dollar, 10-year initiative to eradicate childhood obesity and raise a healthier generation of kids over the next decade (Let's Move Initiative, 2012). Her efforts and most recent initiative have garnered the attention of many public and private entities, including K-12 school districts across our nation. In fact, the Let's Move Initiative is challenging schools to take on a more proactive role in promoting healthier environments in an effort to combat the obesity problem (Let's Move Initiative, 2012).

There are many organizations in both the public and private sector that can participate in the development of policies aimed to prevent childhood obesity. Of these, schools are one of the organizations most likely to have an impact since a majority of a child's waking hours are in schools. Children on average spend 7 hours a day, 5 days per week, and nine months per academic calendar year at school, making it an ideal locale for health and dietary interventions (Briefel, Wilson & Gleason, 2009).

Schools are presented with a myriad of opportunities to prevent and manage childhood obesity. These include modification of the health and physical education curriculum, collaboration with school health staff, parent and community outreach and alteration of the school lunch program. Food Service directors grounded in morality and a universal commitment to putting "kids first" have been most successful at improving the quality of school nutrition programs (Sacheck, 2012). Additionally, as schools begin to ascertain innovative solutions, which minimize their contributions to this burgeoning obesity epidemic, they are going to recognize the need to partner with academic institutions, health Professionals and the business community (e.g. local farmers) to assist them in creating healthier campus environments.

Literature Review

There is a significant association between school food environments and practices and children's body mass index (BMI). Fox, Dodd and Wilson confirmed this relationship in a cross-sectional study using data from a national sample of children in 287 public school districts in the 2004-2005 school year. Among the children evaluated, those who went to schools offering subsidized meals including French fries and similar potato products while also offering dessert more than once per week, were associated with a significantly higher likelihood of being obese (Fox et al, 2009). The availability of energy-dense, high-calorie foods and drinks at school affect the total caloric intake of children (Anderson & Butcher, 2006). A causal link between childhood obesity and school environments has not been empirically proven, as there are some studies that do not show an association with weight and students participating in the school lunch program (Ralston et al, 2008). Regardless, decreasing the offerings of energy dense, low nutrient quality foods and beverages offered to children in schools is an important factor in preventing obesity. Therefore, modifying school lunch program practices and policies is an essential piece of the childhood obesity dilemma.

The National School Lunch Program and Prevention of Childhood Obesity

The National School Lunch Program (NSLP) is a federally assisted meal program operating in public and nonprofit private school and residential child-care institutions (USDA, 2011). It is designed to provide nutritionally balanced, low-cost or free lunches to children every day at school. One of the main goals of the NSLP is to promote the health and well being of the Nation's children (Ralston et al, 2008). The childhood obesity epidemic has lead others to question the program's ability to meet this goal. This is particularly true in the context of whether the program has shifted from preventing undernutrition to actually causing overweight

and obesity (Ralston et al, 2008). Modification of NSLP policies not only affects the meal's nutrition, but also program cost and student participation (Ralston et al, 2008). While improving the nutritional quality of school meals is a current goal of many NSLP stakeholders, it can be a costly venture. Therefore, it is likely that change in national policy may take some time to trickle into action at the local level.

This presents an ethical dilemma for all school administrators and stakeholders. It appears that the nutritional value of foods offered at school lunches is dependent on economic consequences and taste preferences of school children. This quandary is two-fold, not only is a child's health being equated to cost, but their intake of food could be compromised if they are not provided with foods that are likeable. These appear to be the main potential barriers that make many school foodservice directors and other stakeholders fearful of making changes to their food offerings. While these are important to acknowledge, these consequences can be avoided with proper implementation and leadership.

Leadership in Schools and Childhood Obesity

School Foodservice Directors need to go beyond the standards of the National School Lunch Program by applying more ethical leadership practices. Ethical leadership can be defined as "the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision making" (Brown et al., 2004). In other words, ethical leaders identify with their core moral values and are proficient in applying them to all aspects of their life.

Embodying these principles is based on a framework that aligns the internal (beliefs and values) with the external (behaviors and actions) for the purpose of advancing the common good (Center for Ethical Leadership, 2007). Ethical leaders must identify their values, have a vision, instill virtue and have the voice to share these with others in order to align their internal selves with their external conduct.

In the context of school lunch program policies, it may take a visionary to move forward before national policies make it necessary. Moving toward a foodservice program that compliments obesity prevention efforts will likely have to start at the local level. Those who take action first are apt to become successful leaders that others will eventually emulate.

A Practical View: An Interview with a Director of Nutrition Services

Rick Cota is the Nutrition Services Director for Claremont Unified School District (CUSD) in Claremont, CA. Rick first joined CUSD in 2009. Mr. Cota embarked his career at CUSD with the goal of eliminating processed¹ foods while offering fresh foods, high in nutrient quality, in their place. This was done incrementally over time by supplementing with scratch cooking, collaborating with local restaurants and farms, and building school gardens to provide fresh produce in school cafeterias.

In his first year as Nutrition Services Director, he not only eliminated 50 percent of the processed foods, he also increased the number of meals served by 18 percent. His ability to increase healthy and sustainable lunch offerings while also increasing revenue serves as a model

¹According to the USDA, processed food means any food other than a raw agricultural commodity that has been subject to processing, such as canning, cooking, freezing, dehydration, or milling. For the purpose of the interview, processed food is referred to as those not freshly made on site and foods high in trans-fats, saturated fats, sodium and or sugar.

for other motivated school foodservice directors. Part of Mr. Cota's success was attributed to his ability to employ ethical leadership practices. In doing so, he was able to improve his program's food offerings and departmental practices and policies. Mr. Cota shared his perspective on applying ethical leadership principles to combating childhood obesity through the modification of the CUSD lunch program. Five questions were chosen by the principal investigator, and answered by Mr. Cota with an interview conducted through email on May 26, 2011:

Question #1: *What ethical responsibilities do school foodservice directors have to combating childhood obesity?*

How do you personally employ some of these responsibilities? Foodservice directors around our nation have an absolute responsibility to operate their program in the healthiest manner possible. Participating in the National School Lunch Program under the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) is not enough. Over the years, virtually all food choices have gone from fresh prepared meals to frozen or canned processed ready to eat meals. The problem is kids get accustomed to foods offerings such as pizza and chicken nuggets, so it becomes an item that they frequently demand. At CUSD we have decided to move towards offering more fresh prepared entrees cooked from scratch. Students who participate in our school lunch program receive a majority of their nutrient intake from my department. It is imperative that we improve students' nutrient intake by offering more fresh food choices. By providing fresh food, students are provided with opportunities to replace processed foods with healthier alternatives.

Question 2: *What are some of the ethical dilemmas that you face as a leader in combating childhood obesity?*

How do you resolve these ethical dilemmas? Limited resources and budget constraints require us to operate our departments in the most economical manner. I am responsible for saving as much money as possible because I am a government entity using tax dollars. However, I am also responsible for the health and wellness of the students. Serving fresh foods costs taxpayers more while offering processed foods cost them less. It is the biggest barrier I hear from my peers when I ask them why they don't serve more fresh food. Since I have the support of my administration and community at large, I have decided that since I am in a position of change, that I will change our program for the better. To abate this conundrum I focus on increasing the amount of students participating in the school lunch program, which results in higher revenues.

With many fixed expenses, such as labor, increased revenue and efficiency can be achieved via meal participation. According to Mr. Cota, The 2008-2009 school year served 466,057 total complete meals with total revenue of \$2,310,000. During the 2009-2010 school year, 549,465 total complete meals were served, an increase of 83,408 meals over the prior year, with total revenue of \$2,680,000. Revenue over expenses per audited financials was \$34,000. The 2010-2011 school year projected 566,560 complete meals served based on the data from the first 108 school days - 16,995 more meals projected over the prior year, and \$2,845,000 total projected revenue. This is 23% revenue growth projected over a 2-year period (See Table 1). An increase in Federal and State Reimbursement money with increases in meal participation as well as increase in purchases by students at all grade levels has contributed to this substantial growth. Mr. Cota also noted that since implementing the menu changes from processed to more fresh food offerings that he has seen the greatest increase of participation from children who's

parents do not qualify for free or reduce lunch. What this means is that children who had a choice to spend their dollars somewhere else for food chose to spend their dollars with purchasing foods served by his school food service program (campus cafeteria versus elsewhere).

Table 1

School Year	Complete Meals Served	Total Revenue
2008-2009	466,057	\$2,310,000
2009-2010	549,465 (83,408 increase)	\$2,680,000
2010-2011	566,460 (projected = 16,995 increase)	\$2,845,000 (projected = 23% growth)

Question 3: How have you created your ethical organization? What virtues must school foodservice employees and directors practice to create ethical institutions?

I reach out to all of my employees directly via an “all crew meeting.” The meetings provide a platform for me to communicate the importance of advocating for improved health and wellness for our students. I show them pictures of students and explain the importance of having them interact with students every day. Our policy requires that foodservice employees know the students by their names and greeting them daily. I garnished support from most of the employees and over time they realized how important their role was in the education process and the general welfare of the students. This has increased employee moral and pride in our department.

Question 4: Does your organization have a Code of Ethics; if so what is it and how do you apply it to your organization?

I am not aware of a Code of Ethics at my school district, if there is, it has not been communicated. I have my own “Code of Ethics” that I try to follow:
My department knows that we are here to serve the students and provide enhanced nutrition. We are here to make a difference every day. They are the reason for our existence. We do the right thing by never compromising on quality, cleanliness or service standards. We are honest and hold each other in trust. I have asked everyone in my department to treat every student in the same manner as their own children. Every decision we make as a department is with the child in mind.

Question 5: What are some of the trademarks of being an ethical leader that you could share with your employees and colleagues?

Do not compromise on what we are currently doing with our initiatives to eliminate processed foods. For example, by choosing not to use canned fruits and vegetables on our salad bars, we are providing only fresh and organics in their place. If we were tempted to open a can of peaches that is cheaper, we would not be holding ourselves accountable. Our initiatives must be consistently applied every day. Our message for canned foods is simple, fresh foods every day whenever possible. If I gave the approval to our staff to substitute inferior canned goods, I would be a hypocrite. An ethical leader has to set the example in his or her actions. Just one short cut undermines the message. Holding oneself to standards that are preached is essential as “buy-in” starts at the top. I have to believe what I am trying to do as a Nutrition Services Director. I have to “walk the talk” so to speak. What speaks volumes is the confidence I have in day-to-day

operations being consistent whether I am present or not. I know that I can visit any school site or my central kitchen and know that my team is following directives. Not everyone will agree with every decision, but they will know that the students are always in mind when decisions are made.

Conclusions

Mr. Cota's perspective reflects some of the ethical leadership principles presented earlier. He identified with his core belief that students at CUSD warrant having increased access to fresh and healthy, nutrient dense foods. He shared his vision with his staff, administration, local businesses and farmers, and the community at large. His focus on eliminating processed foods corroborate with the perception that modifying school lunch offerings is likely to facilitate healthier, well-liked choices amongst students. He was able to do this without financially compromising his department. This was demonstrated with his ability to decrease the department's use of energy dense foods high in fat, sugar and sodium by 50 percent, while concurrently increasing school lunch program participation by 23 percent. Mr. Cota's strategies serve as an important model for other school foodservice administrators, employees and stakeholders whose core values also align with preventing childhood obesity.

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Author Biographies

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