FARM TO FAMILY: PROVIDING ACCESS TO SUBSIDIZED CSA SHARES IN A HEAD START SETTING

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Introduction

- Farm to School programs have become an important component of childhood obesity prevention efforts in school settings. The majority of Farm to School initiatives target grades K-12, but there is a growing Farm to Preschool movement that aims to address dramatic increases in obesity among preschool-age children and extend the reach of the Farm to School movement.
- Farm to Family (F2F) is an innovative Farm to Preschool program designed to make local produce easily accessible and affordable to low-income families at Head Start centers in Boston, MA.
- Head Start is an important venue for childhood obesity prevention; it is the nation’s largest federally funded education program for low-income families at Head Start centers in Boston, MA.
- Approximately 40% of Head Start children in Boston are overweight or obese (S. Carter, Personal Communication), compared to 21% of preschoolers nationally (Ogden et al., 2010).
- The purpose of this study was to evaluate the implementation and impact of the F2F program at four Head Start centers. A mixed-method evaluation was conducted to examine:
  - Participation rates;
  - Program strengths/challenges from the perspectives of farm and Head Start staff;
  - Families’ perceptions of the program; and
  - Preliminary short-term changes in family health behaviors.

Background

- F2F was piloted and evaluated by a group of partners that included The Food Project (TFP), a sustainable agriculture non-profit, Action for Boston Community Development (ABCD) Inc. Head Start, The Food Project and other partners that made the F2F program possible.
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Methods

- Participation Tracking: Sign-ups, drop-outs, and weekly pick-ups tracked for all participating Head Start parents and staff from July-November 2011.
- Open-ended Interviews: Conducted with 3 site coordinators from Head Start and 3 farming and outreach staff from The Food Project.
- Parent Surveys: Pre/post-surveys on family health behaviors and program perceptions administered via phone in English and Spanish.

Results

Table 1. Head Start Parent and Staff Participation Rates in the F2F Program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rate</th>
<th>Parents</th>
<th>Staff</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall Participation</td>
<td>42 (12% of parents at 4 Head Start sites)</td>
<td>45 (49% of staff at 4 Head Start sites)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drop-Out Rates</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Weekly Pick-Up Rates</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SNAP Usage</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Almost half of staff at participating Head Start centers joined the F2F program, compared to 12% of parents. Staff were also less likely to drop-out of the program before the end of their commitment and more likely to pick up their weekly CSA share.

Table 2. Highlights from Open-Ended Interviews with F2F Program Staff

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Highlight</th>
<th>Percent Agree</th>
<th>Percent Neutral</th>
<th>Percent Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The cost of fruits and vegetables was a good value.</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The program has made a difference to my family’s eating behaviors.</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would be willing to participate in the program again next year.</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most parents held very positive perceptions of the F2F program, with 86% reporting a willingness to participate again.

Summary and Conclusions

- F2F is an innovative Farm to Preschool strategy that enables Head Start programs to serve as a conduit between a local farm and low-income families, overcomes access and affordability barriers to fresh produce, and serves as a vehicle to communicate obesity prevention information.
- Evaluation results revealed high levels of program satisfaction, along with challenges in maintaining parent engagement.
- Efforts to increase pick-up rates and reduce drop-out rates among parents would increase program efficacy and improve the program experience for Head Start and farm staff.
- Program partners utilized these evaluation results as part of a collaborative planning process to modify and strengthen F2F in its second year.

Acknowledgments

- We are grateful to the families that participated in F2F and the staff from Head Start, The Food Project and other partners that made the F2F program possible.
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