

CSREES-USDA FINAL REPORT

Project Number: 98-EFSQ-1-0292
Title: Development of Food Safety Policy for Schools Through Education
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State/University: Rhode Island/University of Rhode Island

Background and Overall Goal:

While consumers have a heightened concern about food safety and recognize the importance of bacterial contamination and growth, evidence still continues to show continued mishandling and storage. There is a tendency for consumers to ignore their own food handling practices as a contributory factor to food safety hazards. However, this belief not only influences their practices at home, but in their role as volunteer food service workers as providers of food items to their children's school functions. In school settings, food is often used to enhance the learning process. Parents, guardians and/or teachers provide a variety of cooked items for the children - from safe to potentially hazardous items. While young children are particularly at risk for foodborne illness, they are not part of the decisions that allow the use of food in schools. Preventing foodborne illness requires a multifaceted approach - from education to policy development. However, many decisions and policies are developed in response to a crisis. An informal survey of several Rhode Island school district "decision-makers" suggested that not only were there no policies governing this issue but they recognized the issue only after they were polled. Without the proper education and information, the issue was not recognized and a policy regarding food brought from home in classrooms did not exist. The need is not only to develop policy in regard to home prepared foods brought to schools, but to educate decision-makers and home food handlers as to the food safety issues. Therefore, the goal of this project was to improve food safety education by controlling or eliminating food borne risks through food safety public policy education program for school decision-makers.

Objective 1: To develop and implement an educational forum for RI school improvement team members that will increase awareness and understanding of food safety and foodborne risks and illnesses and serve as a basis for development of sound food safety school policies.

Objective 2: To develop and implement an educational workshop for school improvement team members of RI elementary schools as part of a pilot program.

Objective 3: To develop increased awareness and understanding of food safety and foodborne risks for parents and teachers through in-service opportunities.

Objective 4: To development a guidebook that could by used by extension specialists in other states to help implement food safety policy-making programs in schools.

Program Addendum and Changes to Original Protocol and Objectives:

The scope and direction of the original proposal – targeted at school *district* and *statewide* school decision-makers – was modified in response to recommendations made by the project

advisors to individual school-based management. An initial meeting with members of the Southern Rhode Island Collaborative (SORICO) led to agreement on the issues and that they had been previously unaware to the potential risks associated with foods prepared at home or in the classroom. However, the SORICO representatives expressed concern that educating school principals and members of school board about food safety issues, as originally proposed, would result in a policy that would result in an immediate and all-encompassing ban on foods brought from home or made in the classroom. This assessment was based on prior experience with a similar type of occurrence on an unrelated issue. The SORICO representatives felt that as soon as the potential for illness and the school's resulting liability were revealed to administrative officials, the practice would be eliminated to protect the schools. The ramifications of this issue could be large and far-reaching and a state mandate would be required to implement the proposal as originally written. To decrease the likelihood of an all-out ban on the practice of bringing in foods, the SORICO representatives suggested starting at a lower level with people already knowledgeable about food safety, allowing these people to develop a plan, and then taking it to the school authorities for approval. They suggested starting with a smaller, local pilot approach and allowing the plan to grow slowly. Therefore, it was recommended that an advisory committee be individuals sympathetic to the overall goal and constructive in their advisory capacity.

The investigators decided to carry out the grant by providing food safety education materials to the parents and teachers as recommended. Subsequently, it was discovered, through the advisory group, that each school in Rhode Island is mandated by the Department of Education to have a “*School Improvement Team*”. These teams are composed of faculty, administrators, parents, and support staff (nurses, psychologists) and, at the high school level, students. The main focus of the school improvement team is school-specific policy and curriculum or site-based management with the goal to improve student performance. The mission of the school improvement team seemed to fit well with objectives of this grant, and it was decided to use this team as a vehicle to disseminate food safety information and education materials. As this team is also charged with policy making within its particular school, it could serve as the group targeted for the educational forum as well. In addition, concern was expressed about *legal issues* and resulting liability in the case of an incident – an issue not addressed in the original project proposal.

Therefore, the objectives were changed to those described above from the original to reflect the use of school improvement teams rather than district or statewide school decision-maker. In addition, a pilot-scale workshop would be developed and presented to elementary school improvement team members that would include potential legal issues regarding food in the classroom. The scope of the in-service was modified with the offering of manager certification courses interested teachers and/or parents. Finally, the guide would reflect the “*process*” in undertaking a policy-making program with observations made during the program.

Project Design and Implementation:

An advisory group was formed and the RI Department of Education(RIDE)/Office of School Improvement provided the project directors with mailing lists for RI elementary schools. A 3-hour workshop was developed and offered during the afternoon which included presentations by the URI food safety specialist, the Chief, RI Department of Health, a liability attorney and the URI Director of Safety and Risk Management. Information focused on school food safety issues from potential school food safety hazards to liability concerns and solutions and an example of policy

development/implementation at URI. Confirmation correspondence was sent to each speaker acknowledging their willingness to participate. A dinner break was offered at each workshop and time was allowed for group discussions, questions and recommendations. While there was pre-registration, there was no fee and on-site registration was allowed.

Two workshops were offered – March 15, 2000 and November 15, 2000. Information regarding the workshop and registration was sent to the principals and school improvement team chairs at 260 elementary and/or middle schools (all schools with grades K-6). The second forum also included an additional mailing of information to presidents of PTO/PTA at each school.

Prior to implementation of the first workshop, the project directors met with school improvement team members from each of the interested schools to delineate the issues, discuss the purpose of the workshop and to make potential participants aware of available resources. In addition, those who responded to the first school food safety forum were also given an opportunity to sign up a maximum 20 teachers and/or parents for participation in a manager certification course that would be funded by the grant. The first workshop also offered \$100. stipend toward the purchase of food safety-related materials for each school that sent school improvement team representatives. In addition, follow-up meetings were offered and scheduled for those individuals interested in further discussions and guidance in policy development. The second workshop did not offer these incentives for participation.

There was follow-up correspondence with each of the workshop participants prior to and after the event for both workshops. Finally, an instructional guide as to the process of implementing a school food safety policy program was developed containing examples of all correspondence.

Target Audiences:

School improvement team members including: parents, elementary school teachers, school-nurse teachers, principals, and health teachers. Food service directors were also encouraged to attend whether or not they were a member of the school improvement team.

Expected Impacts:

The project was expected to impact in the following areas:

- Improved knowledge and awareness of food safety issues specifically pertaining to food brought into schools from home preparation.
- School food safety policy development and subsequent implementation
- Transfer of information to other states regarding barriers to the development and implementation school food safety policy

Evaluation Methodology:

Using a 5-point scale (1 = not applicable and 5 = extremely useful), participants of both workshops were asked to evaluate the 3-hour workshop as to its overall usefulness as well as the usefulness of the information presented by the individual speakers. The evaluations also included an assessment by the participants as to the estimated timeframe for implementation of some school-based food safety policy. For each workshop there was a 3-month follow-up survey sent to each participant in an effort to assess the status of policy development and its difficulties. Finally, there

was a one-year follow-up survey was also distributed to those individuals that attended the first workshop.

Accomplishments and Results:

An advisory committee was assembled and based on their recommendations the objectives were modified to target school-specific food safety policy development rather than district or statewide policy efforts. Two workshops were completed that impacted 33 participants and reflected 16 different schools from across the state (representatives from one school attended both workshops and the RIDE School Improvement Team Director attended the first workshop). The first forum had representatives from 8 schools, while the second had participants from 9 schools. Of those that responded to the workshop evaluation (16 out of 20 and 6 out of 13 for workshops one and two respectively), over 95% rated the workshop as very or extremely useful. Of particular interest was the presentation by the liability attorney as to the legal ramifications of food safety policy relating to food brought from home. The presentations on food safety issues and liabilities was rated as very or extremely useful by all workshop participants and information presented regarding policy development was rated as very or extremely useful by 82% of the attendees. When asked when some kind of school food safety policy might be implemented at their schools, of the 22 responding, 45% indicated within six months, 41% indicated within one year, and 14% were unsure. Of the nine participants that responded to the 3-month follow-up survey, most had shared the information with their colleagues or school improvement team members but none had begun working on a draft policy – although five had plans to do so. One school already had a policy – no food was to be brought into school - and the workshop participants were hoping to get that policy relaxed using the information presented. However, all thought that policy development and implementation would be very difficult and that major roadblocks included other priorities, state-wide mandates/initiatives, awareness, need for assistance in policy development, unsure of where to start, and the need for administrative support. The one-year follow-up had three respondents and none had drafted policy although there was an effort by one school to rewrite the restrictive policy currently in place.

One follow-up meeting was scheduled, however only one person attended. In addition, there were no registrations for the free manager certification course.

Finally an instructional guide as to the process of school food safety policy development was completed and is part of this report.

Conclusions and Future Direction:

Of 260 schools contacted multiple times, only 16 school had representatives at two workshops. While it was clear that all those who attended the workshops saw a need to address school-related food safety issues, it clearly was not a priority. Subsequent evaluation efforts resulted in comments relating to the need for district-wide and “central office” support. With other state and federal mandates and the requirements for standards-based education, food safety policy development and awareness has an uphill battle. Incentives did not appear to impact attendance. The directors have been in contact with the RI school-nurse teachers association and hope to revisit the workshop with this group as the target audience.