

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 preschool-age children and reaches a population of young children most vulnerable to childhood obesity.
- ❑ 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 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, and Healthy Kids, Healthy Futures (HKHF), an inter-institutional collaborative focused on early childhood obesity prevention. Other F2F partners were Boston Children's Hospital, Bowdoin Street Health Center, and The Dimock Center; the distribution sites associated with these partners were not included in this evaluation.
- ❑ F2F program components included:
 - Weekly subsidized Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) shares offered to Head Start parents and staff and delivered directly to Head Start centers every Tuesday afternoon.
 - Participants received \$15.00 of produce each week for \$5.00, and could pay with cash, check or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.
 - Weekly bi-lingual farm newsletters with recipes, bi-lingual nutrition education materials, and farm trips.
- ❑ Program pilot took place from July-November 2011.
- ❑ 87 Head Start parents and staff participated across the four Head Start sites that were part of the evaluation.

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

| | Parents | Staff |
|------------------------------|---|---|
| Overall Participation | 42 (12% of parents at 4 Head Start sites) | 45 (49% of staff at 4 Head Start sites) |
| Drop-Out Rates | 52% | 27% |
| Average Weekly Pick-Up Rates | 74% | 97% |
| SNAP Usage | 67% | 11% |

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

| Head Start Site Coordinators (N=3) | The Food Project Staff (N=3) |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Staff members either strongly agreed ($n = 2$) or agreed ($n = 1$) that the program was important for families at their site. ▪ Program Challenges: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Getting parents to pick up CSA shares and make payments. ▪ Replacing drop-outs in order to maintain participation levels. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Program Strengths: Opportunity to work with community partners and to provide fresh fruit & vegetables to families without easy access to local produce. ▪ Program Challenges: Farmer-consumer disconnect regarding seasonal variability in types of produce delivered. |

Staff from both Head Start and The Food Project shared positive feedback about the F2F program, along with challenges to address in future years.



From left to right: Farmer delivering produce to Head Start staff member, parent picking up her CSA share, child participating in farm trip.

Results (cont.)

Table 3. Head Start Parent Perceptions of the F2F Program (N = 14)

| | Agree or Strongly Agree (%) | Neither Agree nor Disagree (%) | Disagree or Strongly Disagree (%) |
|--|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| The fruits and vegetables were fresh and high quality. | 100 | 0 | 0 |
| My child/children enjoyed the fruits and vegetables. | 93 | 0 | 7 |
| I was pleased with the amount of food I received most weeks. | 79 | 14 | 7 |
| I used all of the fruits and vegetables I received most weeks. | 93 | 0 | 7 |
| I was happy with the types of fruits and vegetables I received. | 79 | 21 | 0 |
| I would have liked to receive more fruits and vegetables each week. | 71 | 7 | 21 |
| The pick-up days and times were convenient. | 86 | 0 | 14 |
| The packaging of the fruits and vegetables was appropriate. | 93 | 0 | 7 |
| The cost of fruits and vegetables was a good value. | 93 | 7 | 0 |
| Overall, this program has made a difference to my family's eating behaviors. | 71 | 14 | 14 |
| I would be willing to participate in the program again next year. | 86 | 0 | 14 |

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

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