

SCHOOL HEALTH INDEX – ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Module 4: Nutrition Services

Bethel Elementary/Whitcomb Jr/Sr High School Health Team Members

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Planning Questions

Planning Question 1

Look back at the scores you assigned to each question. According to these scores, what are the strengths and the weaknesses of your school's food service policies and programs?

The greatest strengths of Bethel's program are that we offer breakfast, lunch, and free nutritious snacks every day through the fresh fruit and veggie grant. The cafeteria space is also clean and well-maintained. Students participate by wiping their own tables at the end of mealtimes, which increases cleanliness as well as students' sense of ownership and efficacy. In fact, it is not uncommon to see the youngest students beg (and sometimes argue) to be the table cleaner for the day! The cafeteria staff is also well-versed in healthy food preparation techniques which contributes to the nutritional value of meals they serve (i.e., by ladeling fat off soups before they are served).

Planning Question 2

For each of the weaknesses identified above, list several recommended actions to improve the school's scores (e.g., offer an accessible school breakfast program).

Historically in Bethel, there has not been much collaboration between the cafeteria staff and teachers. However, our principal and health teachers are all relatively new and very interested in developing relationships with food service staff and improving the program. The easiest way to build collaboration would be to schedule regular meetings to discuss working together and developing nutritional goals. Since school nutrition is such a complex topic and, frankly, we are in need of major improvements in this realm, it would be best for a subset of the School Health

Team (including the food service director, principal, and health teachers) to be a part of this group in order to stay focused on key nutrition challenges and opportunities.

The lack of Smarter Lunchroom techniques is also a major challenge in Bethel. For example, a spread of a couple dozen chocolate milks meets students at the end of the lunch line, with a few white milks tucked behind, clearly sending the message to students that the “normal” drink is chocolate milk. Similarly, when a hot veggie is served it simply sits, covered, next to salad bar items. It is likely that our youngest students have been told not to touch pots in the kitchen at home around mealtimes for safety reasons, so there’s a very good chance that children will never take off the lid to see what’s inside. No effort is made to help the veggie look appealing or even to tell students what it is! Adopting smarter lunchroom techniques in Bethel could go a long way to improving our food culture. This needs to begin with training for the food service staff—our food service director was not aware of the concept of Smarter Lunchroom or behavioral economics and will need assistance to learn about and implement these improvements. This would also be a great topic to be tackled by a nutrition services subgroup of the School Health team.

Although adequate meal time also rates low on the survey, it should not be considered in need of change at this time. Students in early elementary grades tend to rush through their meals and often wind up with excess time at lunch that presents fertile ground for misbehavior. Our lunch lines are relatively short and the vast majority of students finish eating, a sign that a total of twenty minutes time in the cafeteria is serving our students’ needs.

Finally, although our food service director reported that staff members have attended some trainings in the past, she explained that last year was difficult for a number of reasons and trainings did not occur. It is clearly imperative that food service staff receive ongoing professional development to help improve student nutrition! It’s also worth noting that staff members cannot be expected to “know what they don’t know” and will need additional support to access the sorts of trainings that will be most beneficial to the program. Working with VT FEED to assess our program and develop a professional development program would be a major step forward and would help bring food service staff, health educators, and administration on to the same page when it comes to our nutrition program. A final side note: we also scored low in preparation for food emergencies and it would be wise to find trainings specific to that realm to ensure student safety in the cafeteria.