Vermonters' perceptions regarding barriers to children consuming more nutritious meals at school and at home & the importance of "food, farms and nutrition" in Vermont K-12 curriculum

2004

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Introduction

Beginning in 2004, the Growing Farms, Growing Minds Project (GFGM) Partners began work to increase the consumption of local and healthy foods among children in the Burlington School District in Vermont. The data presented in this report will help inform GFGM partners and stakeholders on barriers to children consuming more nutritious foods in Vermont, as well as how Vermonters' view the importance of "food, farm and nutrition" as part of the curriculum in Vermont schools. This report presents information from a statewide public opinion survey conducted in 2004.

Methodology

2004 Data

The data used in this report were collected by the Center for Rural Studies at the University of Vermont as part of the annual "Vermonter Poll." The survey was conducted between the hours of 4:00 p.m. and 9:00 p.m. beginning on February 24, 2004 and ending on March 3, 2004. The telephone polling was conducted from the University of Vermont using computer-aided telephone interviewing (CATI). The sample for the poll was drawn through random digit dialing and used all of the telephone exchanges in the state of Vermont as the sampling frame. Only Vermont residents over the age of eighteen were interviewed. The poll included questions on a variety of issues related to public policy in the state of Vermont.

There were 607 respondents to the Vermonter Poll. The results based on a group of this size have a margin of error of plus or minus 4 percentage points with a confidence interval of 95 percent. Only parents of children grades K-12 were asked the first two questions in this study (barriers to more nutritious meals), while the entire sample was asked the latter two questions (importance of "food, farm and nutrition" in school curriculum).

For questions 1 and 2, categories were initially created based on previous literature on barriers and predictors of food consumption. In the analysis, all responses were read and immediately coded. As new responses appeared, new categories were created. Literature was again consulted when collapsing or expanding categories. In instances where respondents provided more than one answer, only the first was coded. For those categories where N <3, responses were either collapsed into "Other" or an appropriate general category.

Analysis and reporting

The survey results were analyzed using the statistics program SPSS 11.0.1 (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). Tables presenting the frequencies and the results were created using Microsoft Word.

Demographics

Table 1: Demographics

Demographic variables reported	
Some college	20%
College degree (Associates, Bach, Prof)	46.9%
Mean years of age	50 years
Mean years lived in Vermont	34.2 years
Average number of HH with children under 18	32.3%
Households with incomes more than $65,000	33.5%
Households with incomes less than $20,000	15.9%
Chittenden County residents	20.6%

Source: Center for Rural Studies, University of Vermont, 2004 Vermonter Poll

Table 1 indicates that 20 percent of respondents reported having some college experience, while 46.9 percent reported having obtained a bachelors degree or higher. The mean age of respondents was 50 years old and respondents reported living on an average of 34.2 years in Vermont. Approximately 32 percent of respondents reported having children under the age of 18 living in their household. Incomes over $65,000 made up 33.5 percent of respondents, while 15.9 percent reported earning less than $20,000 in 2003. Nearly 21 percent of respondents reported Chittenden County as their residence.

Results and Discussion

Table 2: What is the biggest barrier to your child eating more nutritious meals while at *school*?

	Frequency	Percent
Limited Selection	**41**	**21.9**
No barrier	**36**	**19.3**
Child's preference	**30**	**16.0**
Food Quality	15	8
Limited time	13	7
Institutional problems	9	4.8
Lack of supervision	8	4.3
Peer pressure	7	3.7
School vending machine	7	3.7
Price	4	2.1
Other	8	4.3
Don't know	9	4.8
Total	187	100.0

Source: Center for Rural Studies, University of Vermont, 2004 Vermonter Poll

Table 2 indicates that nearly 22 percent of parents cited 'limited selection' as the largest barrier to their child eating more nutritious foods while at school. Responses include, "availability," "finding foods which taste good and are healthy," "lack of choice," and "foods that schools offer." Nineteen percent of respondents indicated that their child faced no barriers in eating more nutritious foods. However, it is important to note that 22 percent (N=8) of these respondents indicated there was no barrier because their child brought food from home. Sixteen percent of parents responded that their child's

preference was the largest barrier. Responses included, "picky eater," "doesn't like fruits," "doesn't taste good," "[un]willingness to eat the stuff" and "her own preferences." Eight percent of parents indicated that that the biggest barrier was due to poor quality of school food. Parents stated, " food is awful," "high in sodium and fat," and "the content is not really great."

Parents stating that 'time' was the main barrier (7 percent), referred to the lunch period being too short for children to eat or simply stated 'time.' Nearly 5 percent of parents listed institutional problem as barriers, such as "lack of government funding" and the "food system." Those who cited vending machines as a barrier (3.7 percent) offered responses such as "snack machines prevent children from eating their healthy lunch" or simply "snack machines." Two percent of parents noted "price" was the main barrier.

Table 3: What is the biggest barrier to your child getting more nutritious meals while at *home*?

	Frequency	Percent
Child's preference	**68**	**34.5**
No barriers	**51**	**26.0**
Limited Time	**33**	**16.8**
Lack of parent supervision	9	4.6
Television influence	8	4.1
Poor parent modeling	8	4.1
Availability of nutritious foods	6	3.0
Cost of nutritious foods	4	2.0
Other	7	3.6
Don't know	3	1.5
Total	197	100.0

Source: Center for Rural Studies, University of Vermont, 2004 Vermonter Poll

Table 3 illustrates that 34.5 percent of parents indicated child's preference as the biggest barrier to their child obtaining more nutritious foods while at home. Responses include, "they don't like anything," and "personal selections." Of those parents indicating 'child preference' as a barrier, 13.2 percent (N=9) of respondents specifically noted that their child preferred junk food. Twenty six percent of parents indicated that there were no barriers. Nearly seventeen percent of parents stated limited time was the biggest barrier, specifically citing "No time," "scheduling" and "convenience." Lack of parent supervision (4.6 percent) included responses such as, "supervision, guidance," "if I am working, they eat crap." Parents indicated that television influence was the biggest barrier (4.1 percent). Three percent of parents indicated that availability of nutritious foods was the biggest limitation, citing " having nutritious snack available" and "lack of fresh produce." Finally, poor parent modeling (4.1 percent) included responses such as "their father," and "what we buy." Two percent of parents stated that 'cost' was a barrier; example responses included "income," and "can't afford nutritious meals."

Table 4: Yes or no, do you feel that it is important for children to study "food, farms, and nutrition" as a part of the curriculum in Vermont schools?

"Food, farms and nutrition" is important	Frequency	Percent
Yes	621	96.1
No	18	2.8
Don't know	7	1.1
Total	646	100.0

Source: Center for Rural Studies, University of Vermont, 2004 Vermonter Poll

Table 4 illustrates that 96 percent of respondents feel it is important for children to study "food, farms, and nutrition" as a part of the curriculum in Vermont schools (see Table 4). When asked why it was important for children to study "food, farms and nutrition" as part of the curriculum in Vermont schools, respondents provided a wide range of answers (see Table 5). The largest response was categorized as respondents' concern for children improve and/or maintain health (24.8 percent). Examples of respondent answers: "Kids do not have good eating habits and should be taught about proper nutrition," or simply, "health." Fourteen percent of respondents felt it was imperative for students to understand the food system or "where food comes from." Answers in this category included "children need to know that food doesn't just materialize, it needs to be grown and cared for, and people invest time, money and effort into making sure it is safe… children need to respect where [food] comes from and the people that produce it," and "To understand the cycle of our food. To get the entire idea of where food comes from, how much labor goes into the process..."

Table 5: Why is it important for children to study "food, farms and nutrition" as part of the curriculum in Vermont schools?

	Frequency	Percent
Improve and/or maintain health	**79**	**24.8**
Understand food system	**84**	**13.8**
Help children make good choices	**74**	**12.2**
Vermonter history & heritage	**72**	**11.8**
Obesity and related disease prevention	47	7.7
Basic, essential knowledge	37	6.1
Because they are young	29	4.8
General Awareness	24	3.9
Understand farming	18	3.0
Parents don't teach	17	2.8
Counteract TV, junk food	17	2.8
Important for the future	9	1.5
Other	30	4.9
Total	609	100.0

Source: Center for Rural Studies, University of Vermont, 2004 Vermonter Poll

Approximately 12 percent of respondents felt that including "food, farm and nutrition" in the Vermont curriculum was important so children could make informed choices about their food and related policies, as well as so children could learn to take care of themselves. Respondents stated that teaching 'food, farms and nutrition' "gives kids

information so they can make better food choice," and " makes them better able to take care of themselves." Twelve percent of respondents reported the importance of children understanding the legacy and history of agriculture in Vermont. Responses included, "Farming is an important part of the heritage of this state, [there] won't be many farms left in the future," and agriculture is the "backbone of our state."

Six percent of Vermonters stated that food, farm and nutrition concepts were basic and essential to a students' knowledge base. Respondents described these concepts as "life skills" and essential to a good education. Nearly 5 percent stated it was imperative to teach food, farm and nutrition in Vermont schools because this information is more relevant and/or useful while children are still young.

Nearly 4 percent of respondents stated that teaching "food, farms and nutrition" was important for a child's 'general awareness.' This category includes statements that were broader in focus. Examples include, "so they can understand their surroundings," and "to be more aware of what's out there." Three percent of Vermonters stated that children should understand the practice of farming and nearly three percent of Vermonters felt that some parents did not teach their children about "food, farms and nutrition." Nearly three percent of respondents felt that television influence needed to be counteracted. Finally, 1.5 percent of respondents felt that learning food, farms and nutrition was important for the future. Examples included, " for their future," and "for the knowledge of the future."

Appendix A

Vermonter Poll Questions

*Questions 20 & 21 asked to parents only.

Q: q20 **********
What is the biggest barrier to your child eating more nutritious
meals while at school?

[INTERVIEWER: CLICK ON NEXT TO CONTINUE]

Q: q21 **********
What is the biggest barrier to your child eating more nutritious
meals while at home?

[INTERVIEWER: CLICK ON NEXT TO CONTINUE]

Q: q22 **********
Yes or no, do you feel that it is important for children to study
"food, farms, and nutrition" as part of the curriculum in Vermont schools?

1.Yes
2.No
3.Don't Know [DO NOT READ]
4.Refused [DO NOT READ]

[INTERVIEWER: HAVE RESPONDENT COMPLETE THIS EVEN IF THEY DO NOT HAVE KIDS]

Q: q23 **********
Why do you believe it is important?