

Hoecker Grant Application: Resourcing classrooms to support fruit and vegetable consumption
in Elementary Schools

Primary investigator: Tina Dodge Vera, Linn and Benton Counties, Family and Community Health, SNAP-Ed coordinator

Project summary: This project sought to make fruit and vegetables the easy choice in classrooms by supporting healthy celebrations, parties, and everyday snacks. Twenty-five elementary school teachers were resourced with food preparation supplies in the form of a “Healthy Celebration Toolkit” (HCK) for their classrooms.

Target audience: Elementary school teachers at Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program-Education (SNAP-Ed) sites in Linn and Benton County. These SNAP-Ed sites are under-resourced low-income schools with 55-85% of 1889 students eligible for free and reduced lunches.

Background: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education (SNAP-Ed) is a federal program funded by the USDA. It is a nutrition education and obesity prevention program with the goal of improving the likelihood that low-income families and individuals will make healthy food choices within a limited budget and choose physically active lifestyles consistent with the current Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

Oregon SNAP-Ed is part of Extension’s Family and Community Program. The Linn-Benton unit uses a Health Equity lens and prioritizes working in schools with high free and reduced lunch percentages and students that identify as Latino. The Latino population is disproportionately impacted by overweight and obesity and related chronic conditions. In and out of the classroom, environmental strategies can help create a context that makes behaving in a positive way easier.

School based assessments conducted by Linn-Benton SNAP-Ed found that schools wanted to improve their school food environment and culture for students and staff; yet they were challenged by lack of resources, which impeded promotion of healthy food options and modeling of healthy eating by staff and teachers. The HCK offered an evidence based strategies and the resources to support positive classroom food practices around fruit and vegetables.

What was done: Twenty-five teachers in four elementary schools were trained and resourced with a HCK to support fruit and vegetable recipe preparation in their classrooms. Training used a train-the-trainer methodology. This experiential learning provided a hands on opportunity to learn the tools of HCK, taste a Food Hero recipe, and learn how to implement HCK within their classrooms. Additionally, schools were resourced with a school level enhanced kit to be brought into the classrooms as needed.

- Classroom kit: 1 storage bag, 2 cutting boards, 1 mixing bowl, 1 spatula and mixing spoon, 1 measuring spoons, 1 measuring cups, 1 liquid measuring cup, 1 can opener, 1 vegetable peeler, 1 vegetable scrubber, 1 colander, 1 dish cloth and soap, resource book

with Food Hero recipes ideal for classroom recipe prep, Food Hero Healthy Celebration, School Snacks, and High-Speed Handwashing guide sheets.

- School level kit: 1 storage box, 1 blender, 1 electric griddle, 1 chef knife, 1 grater, 2 serving trays.

What we learned: Teachers identified challenges such as lack of time, classroom management, and large classes as barriers to using the kits. Teachers commented, “I had wonderful intentions to use the kits, but didn’t get the chance”, “I did not use the kit due to the amount of students I had. If I have it at the beginning of the year and plan year long, then I will make better use of it. Sorry.”

Outcomes: More than 476 students were exposed to fruit and vegetable food preparation and tasting within classrooms by resourcing teachers with a HCK. An environmental context that supports healthy eating behavior results in healthy eating behaviors. The most utilized type of Food Hero recipe was smoothies and on average teachers used the kits 1-2 times over the three-month period.

Impacts: The use of HCK increased teacher’s confidence in providing healthy celebrations and hands-on food activities in the classroom. Teachers found the cooking equipment and supplies as the most important component of the kit compared to the parent letters, policy suggestions, recipes and buying guides. The majority of teachers shared they were likely to use HSC the following school year.

Teachers shared positive feedback:

“Our title 1 students experience so few in life. This was a great way to add to the classroom exposure without a lot of teacher prep. Thank you.”

“It helped my students experience recipes made from scratch. It also added to their use of fresh veggie and fruits in their diets. Gracias”

Next steps: Improvements for the 2019-20 school year included earlier training and delivery to classrooms. Thirty-nine teachers were trained on HCK during October 2019 for the 2019-20 school year. A post survey will again be utilized for on-going improvement of HCK and continue building the evidence base.