Nutrition and Physical Activity Education: A Maricopa County SNAP-Ed Schools Needs Assessment & Implications for Curriculum & Systems Changes

Maricopa County, Arizona

February 2014
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was commissioned in October 2013 by the Maricopa County Department of Public Health (MCDPH) Office of Nutrition and Physical Activity (ONPA) and was funded entirely by Arizona Nutrition Network’s Supplement Nutrition Assistance Program Education (SNAP-Ed) funding. The information or content and conclusions are those of the authors and should not be construed as the official position or policy of, nor should any endorsements be inferred by the Arizona Nutrition Network and Maricopa County Department of Public Health. This report was prepared by Saguaro Evaluation Group LLC (www.saguaroevaluation.com), a small evaluation and social service consulting group with expertise in needs assessment, training, and human services program evaluation. The needs assessment of nutrition and physical activity programs in Maricopa County Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education qualified schools began in October 2013 and the report was completed in February 2014. Saguaro Evaluation Group would like to recognize the thoughtful input and assistance of the program staff within MCDPH ONPA and the following Maricopa County school districts: Pendergast, Deer Valley, Dysart, and Creighton. Moreover, we would like to thank all the school administrators and staff who participated in the focus groups for sharing their time and experiences with us. For questions, please contact Christine Hicks at christinehicks@mail.maricopa.gov Maricopa Department of Public Health, Office of Nutrition and Physical Activity, 4041 N. Central Avenue, Phoenix, AZ 85012, phone number: (602) 506-9322.
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Maricopa County Department of Public Health Office of Nutrition and Physical Activity (MCDPH ONPA) received funding from the Arizona Nutrition Network to conduct a needs assessment of Maricopa County schools that qualify for federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance and Program Education (SNAP-Ed). The purpose of the needs assessment was to evaluate schools’ needs pertaining to nutrition and physical activity as well as perceived barriers and recommendations for delivering this type of education in SNAP-Ed schools.

Methods
Four focus groups were conducted with school personnel from Maricopa County’s SNAP-Ed qualified schools: two consisting of school staff and two involving school administrators. Staff focus groups included Kindergarten through eighth grade classroom and physical education teachers, nurses/health aides, and food service managers. Administrator focus groups consisted of principals, assistant principals, district-level child health and nutrition staff, and nurse clinical supervisors.

Major findings
Five major themes emerged from the focus group analysis. Below are the identified themes and subthemes within each major category:

Local school wellness policies
❖ Lack of awareness
❖ Lack of adherence

Current school climate for nutrition and physical activity
❖ Reduced time for physical activity and lunch
❖ Lack of nutrition education
❖ Short-term and staff-driven programs
❖ Family economic barriers
❖ Staff creativity as an asset
❖ Disparity in food quality and variety
Home environment
- Need for parent education
- Unhealthy snacks and convenience eating
- Limited access to healthy foods

Strengths and resources
- Advocates on site
- Funding opportunities
- Parent liaisons/coordinators
- Nutrition education resources

Barriers to implementation
- Focus on academics and lack of time
- Limited resources
- Teacher motivation, attitudes, and organization
- Non-inclusive programs

SNAP-ED curriculum recommendations
In each focus group, participants described the types of materials and support needed to implement a nutrition and physical activity curriculum. A number of themes regarding a standard SNAP-Ed curriculum emerged from the participants’ responses:
- Alignment with Arizona’s College and Career Ready Standards (CCR)
- Materials that are engaging and interactive
- Accessibility
- Standardization
- Technical assistance availability
- Curriculum look and feel

Conclusions and recommendations
In addition to lending expertise regarding current needs, barriers, and curricula ideas for nutrition and physical activity education in schools, focus group participants offered the following general recommendations for curricula development and dissemination:
- Use parent coordinators to engage and educate parents/caregivers
Support school programs and partnerships combatting family economic barriers and increasing access to healthy foods

Create buy-in from teachers by involving them in curricula development and marketing the new materials during new teacher orientations and professional learning committees

Identify and empower the existing school staff who serve as passionate leaders or champions for the cause

Emphasize student achievement with current research and evaluation findings

Leverage training, resources, and funding through the following partnerships with Arizona Department of Education, community organizations, local celebrities, school boards, teacher unions and professional learning communities

The following are additional suggestions from evaluators for introducing SNAP-Ed curricula:

- Work with the Arizona Department of Education to reach consensus concerning the alignment of lessons to CCRs
- Work with the each district Board of Directors to gain support before approaching schools and to increase buy-in
- Develop and implement an aggressive marketing plan including eye-catching materials, teacher training protocols, and short presentations
- Provide teacher training with the option of receiving Continuous Education Units.
- Adapt the curriculum for parents to be used in multiple settings
- Facilitate partnerships between districts/schools and organizations such as food banks, mobile markets, and farmers markets

Next steps

Needs assessment findings will be used to guide curricula development of the nutrition and physical activity education for Maricopa SNAP-Ed schools, design a comprehensive plan for dissemination, and create buy-in among various stakeholders. MCDPH ONPA will engage school staff and administrator volunteers from focus groups to review curricula, webpage design, and make recommendations for dissemination and minimizing school burden. Findings will support MCDPH ONPA’s efforts to identify and promote model school-based wellness practices locally and create healthy school environments. Findings and recommendations will also be used by
MCDPH to support the Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP), and to inform any policy promotion and system changes being made.
Nutrition and Physical Activity Education: A Maricopa County SNAP-Ed Schools Needs Assessment and Implications for Curriculum and Systems Changes

INTRODUCTION

The Maricopa County Department of Public Health Office of Nutrition and Physical Activity (MCDPH ONPA) received funding from the Arizona Nutrition Network to conduct a needs assessment of nutrition and physical activity education in Maricopa County Supplemental Nutrition Assistance and Program Education (SNAP-Ed) qualified schools. The purpose of this needs assessment was to:

❖ Evaluate the perceived barriers and obstacles to delivering nutrition and physical activity education in school settings
❖ Understand the way school personnel view nutrition and physical activity education
❖ Explore barriers and motivations associated with nutrition and physical activity in the classroom and school settings
❖ Gauge reactions of administrators to proposed education strategies
❖ Stimulate innovative ideas for a nutrition and physical curriculum

Needs assessment findings will be used to guide curricula development of the nutrition and physical activity education for Maricopa SNAP-Ed schools, design a comprehensive plan for dissemination, and create buy-in among various stakeholders. Findings will support MCDPH ONPA’s efforts to identify and promote model school-based wellness practices locally and create healthy school environments. Findings and recommendations will also be used by MCDPH to support the Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP) in multiple ways, and to guide any policy promotion and system changes under consideration.

SUMMARY OF LITERATURE

In Arizona, the percentage of children ages 10 to 17 years old who are considered either overweight or obese has been rising steadily from 33.8% in 2003, and reached 39.6% by Childhood obesity can severely impact a developing child. Obesity increases the likelihood of chronic diseases and hospitalizations, placing an increased economic
burden on the health care system. The United States loses about $147 billion annually due to obesity, with Medicaid and Medicare absorbing nearly 42% of these health care costs. People from low socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to be overweight or obese due to a lack of nutrition education, limited opportunities for physical activity, and increased barriers to accessing healthy foods.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formally known as the Food Stamps program, was designed to address health and diet-related disparities among US families by: (a) providing monetary food assistance to low income families to supplement their diets and (b) facilitating nutrition literacy and education concerning ways to achieve physically active lifestyles. As of June 2013, nearly one in seven people in the US were eligible for SNAP benefits. Since 2007, SNAP has experienced a 60% increase in enrollment, totaling 46.2 million people in April 2012. Last year, 1.1 million Arizonans (17% of the state’s population) received SNAP benefits. According to the 2012 American Community Survey, about 58.6% of households in Arizona with children under 18 years of age received SNAP/Food Stamp benefits.

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 instituted the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education (SNAP-Ed) as the Nutrition Education and Obesity Prevention Grant Program. The 2010 Act requires SNAP-Ed to include a focus on obesity prevention as well as nutrition education. For many reasons, schools are a natural setting to provide SNAP-Ed programs since children spend about half their waking hours in school, consume one to two meals while at school, and can easily access nutritional messaging through their academic and physical education classes. However, evaluations of the effectiveness of school-based SNAP-Ed programs have shown mixed results. The mixed findings may be due to complexities related to successfully implementing SNAP-Ed programs in the school environment. The following challenges are the most common barriers to SNAP-Ed implementation in schools:

- Limited time for nutrition education and physical activity
- Need for buy-in from administrators, teachers, and other school personnel
- Lack of parental support/involvement
- Limited funding
- Variability of programs as related to content, scope, duration, and design fidelity
Higher participant attrition for online programs

Alternatively, a number of strategies have been found to be effective when implementing SNAP-Ed in schools: \(^{12}\)

- Multi-faceted approaches and modes of delivery which blend school-based education, school food policies, community education, social media initiatives, strategic partnerships, and afterschool/summer programs
- Parental involvement and community outreach and education
- Indirect parental education through take home materials
- Entire school staff buy-in
- Training for all school staff
- School nutrition policy initiatives inside and outside of the cafeteria
- Incentives for healthy eating
- Food tasting and simple food preparation
- School vending/beverage machines meet nutritional standards based on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans
- Use of technology to make programs relevant and engaging
- Social media and marketing strategies include simple and compelling messages
- High quality of curriculum and program materials
- Flexibility of curriculum to accommodate staff scheduling and classroom needs

In 2010, an estimated 426 schools in Arizona were SNAP-Ed qualified. \(^{13}\) More than half of these schools were located in Maricopa County. \(^{14}\) For this reason, the MCDPH ONPA seeks to better understand school nutritional and physical activity education needs. Findings presented in this report will guide strategic planning and set priorities in delivering this education to the county’s SNAP-Ed qualified schools.

**METHODOLOGY**

Four focus groups were conducted with school personnel employed by SNAP-Ed qualified schools: two groups consisted of school staff and two involved administrators.
School staff focus groups included classroom teachers, physical education teachers, nurses/health aides, and food service managers. Administrator focus groups were comprised of principals, assistant principals, child health and nutrition district staff, and nurse clinical supervisors. The goal was to have eight to ten participants per focus group who would provide feedback and information related to nutrition and physical activity programs in their schools/districts, elucidate gaps in programming, and describe the resources needed to successfully implement a comprehensive school health program. Saguaro Evaluation Group (SEG) worked with the MCDPH ONPA’s team to develop standard protocols for focus group recruitment and facilitation. Documents prepared included informed consent, focus groups protocols and agendas, and informational recruitment emails for school staff and administrators.

**School Selection**

In order to minimize school selection bias, a blocked randomization strategy was used to select participating schools. First, the MCDPH ONPA provided evaluators with a list of 143 SNAP-Ed eligible schools from 18 schools districts. Dietitians ranked their respective schools from 0=not cooperative to 5=very cooperative. Cooperation was conceptualized as the school’s readiness and willingness to adopt a health curriculum. Next, the schools’ locations were identified on a map. The third step involved grouping schools by distance. Four groups were formed. These groups would eventually serve as the four focus groups. In each group the following conditions had to be met:

a. Groups had to include a mixture of schools with different cooperation rankings. This way each group had a variety of schools classified as not cooperative to very cooperative.

b. All groups had at least one or two schools with strong cooperation rankings of 4 or 5. These schools were identified as possible locations for focus groups.

c. All schools in each group were located no further than seven miles from the sites identified as possible focus group locations.

d. Every school had to be allocated to one group.

After the groups were formed, schools included in the first group were entered in a computer-based randomizer that selected which schools were eligible to participate. The same procedure was repeated for the other remaining three groups. All schools in each
group, regardless of their ranking, had the same possibility of being chosen for participation. After randomization was completed, the result was four groups of schools with a variety of rankings and in close proximity to each other.

Following the randomization, separate administrator and school staff recruitment lists were compiled for each group. Since the administrator recruitment lists were markedly smaller than those of school staff, recruitment was made from all administrator lists for the second administrator focus group to facilitate wider participation.

Once the dates and locations for the focus groups were confirmed, participants were invited via email to participate. SEG team members contacted superintendents and assistant superintendents by phone to request their participation. Invitation-calls were followed-up with emails containing the specifics of the focus groups. Emails to all school staff and administrators included:

- Focus group time, date, location, and purpose
- The availability of free childcare
- Mention of healthy food and beverages during the focus group
- The opportunity for each participant to receive a Visa gift card worth $100

A total of 1,364 school staff were sent an email invitation to one of the two staff focus groups; and 102 administrators were sent an invitation to one or both administrator focus groups. For the administrator focus groups, participants were registered in the order they called and/or sent an email confirmation concerning their desire to participate. All interested administrators were able to participate. For the school staff focus groups, evaluators gave special attention to ensure diverse representation of roles (e.g. teachers, Physical Education [PE] teachers, nurses/health aides, and food service managers) and across schools and districts.
During the registration process, potential participants were asked to provide their names, their employed school and district, and their role/title. If participants were classroom teachers, they were asked to provide the grade(s) they were currently teaching.

Focus Groups

Prior to starting the focus groups, participants had the opportunity to read the Participant Informed Consent and ask questions (see Appendix A). The Informed Consent contained information about the purpose of the study, participant commitment, and the possible risks and/or benefits of participating. Once participants agreed to participate, by signing the Consent, they received a Participant Form with three questions asking about their role/title, whether they were aware of their district’s wellness policy, and their thoughts about the types of materials a health curriculum would need to be attractive and useful for teachers (see Appendix B).

Focus group participants represented a total of 19 schools and ten districts, a respective 13% of Maricopa County SNAP-Ed qualified schools and 56% of eligible school districts. A skilled facilitator and an observer attended all focus groups. Focus group discussions were recorded utilizing MicroCone technology. MicroCone is a multi-directional digital microphone that captures audio from up to six different recording directions. The recordings may be uploaded to a computer where the MicroCone software will produce a visual timeline demonstrating when each person spoke. The visual timeline is beneficial in determining what each participant said during the focus group.

Focus groups were semi-structured with predetermined questions prepared ahead of time (see Appendix C for Focus Group Agendas). Groups lasted anywhere between one and a half to two hours each. Free childcare was available onsite with preregistration. SEG served healthy snacks such as vegetables and fruits. At the end of the focus groups, each participant received nutrition education materials provided by the MCDPH ONPA. An observer took notes about the dynamic of the group and the main themes discussed. The facilitator transcribed participants’ general responses on a Post-it Wall Pad during the focus group. Participants were able to easily review and provide feedback as to whether their input was fully understood. Additionally, these methods of data collection facilitated the triangulation of data during analysis.
Analysis

Data from Participant Forms were entered using the IBM-Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (IBM-SPSS). The analysis consisted of frequencies that were used in the construction of charts.

The comprehensive and systematic qualitative analysis plan was consistent with standard qualitative research protocols and included: a) data reduction; b) structural data coding; and c) trustworthiness, validity, and transferability of the data. The latter was achieved by using a member check approach at the end of each focus group, and by using negative case analysis to search for contradictions.

MicroCone recordings were transcribed prior to analysis. The transcripts were verbatim and utilized an adapted version of Silverman’s simplified transcription symbols (SSTS) to capture the richness of the discussion. SSTS uses symbols to represent voice tone (e.g. loud voices), periods of silence, and other characteristics of the conversation that provide background and context to participant’s words. Each transcript was reviewed and edited by a person who was not involved in the original transcription preparation to make sure that every word and expression was captured.

Three SEG team members versed in qualitative research were involved in the analysis of the focus group data. During the data reduction stage, each team member closely examined the data and compared similarities and differences before separately coding the main themes and subthemes. Then, the three members of the analysis team discussed their individual findings until agreement was reached regarding the themes and subthemes that best represented the data. Observer and Post-it notes were used to confirm the reliability of agreed upon themes.

Trustworthiness of Data

Data is trustworthy when it has the following characteristics: transferability, dependability, confirmability, and credibility. Transferability is evident when comparisons across units of analysis yield similar findings. In this case, there was transferability among the schools and districts. Dependability has to do with the level of agreement achieved between coders, which was particularly strong in this study.
Confirmability is achieved by intentionally seeking out potentially contradictory evidence (statements contradicting the general findings) and ensuring these cases are also reported. The study’s three coders performed this process of confirmability during data analysis. Credibility is enhanced by convergence of multiple sources of evidence (triangulation) and identifying any weak links threatening the usefulness of the study. Triangulation was achieved by comparing the observer notes, Post-it notes, and transcription themes.

**FOCUS GROUP DEMOGRAPHICS**

Data from Participant Forms reveals the composition of the focus groups related to participants’ roles/titles, knowledge about their district’s wellness policy, and their view of what a health curriculum should include. There were a total of 35 focus group participants (21 total staff participants; 14 total administrator participants). There was an average of nine participants in each focus group meeting the study’s recruitment goal of eight to ten participants for each focus group. Figure 1 presents the number of focus groups participants and their roles.

Of the 35 participants, 17 reported they knew the school or wellness policy; ten said they were unsure, and eight indicated they did not know the policy. Participants were given a list of resources and asked, “Which of the following resources would be the most beneficial for incorporating nutrition and physical activity into the classrooms?”

![Figure 1. Number of participants and their roles/titles](image-url)
Participants were allowed to choose more than one answer. Figure 2 presents their responses. All listed that curriculum resources were important to participants. The resource ranked most important was training, followed by student incentives for participating in a health and physical activity program. An online curricula was slightly less important, followed by videos, speakers, and curriculum flexibility.

![Figure 2. Curriculum resources considered beneficial by participants](image)

**KEY FINDINGS: FOCUS GROUPS**

Findings from the four focus groups were sought to inform MCDPH ONPA stakeholders about potential barriers, and to provide recommendations for delivering SNAP-Ed nutrition and physical education in schools, according to teachers and administrators from SNAP-Ed qualified schools in Maricopa County. General findings were found to be consistent across all focus groups with small differences noted. No weak links or contradictory statements were identified.

Quotes presented in this narrative serve to exemplify themes and subthemes. Each quote was recorded verbatim. Evaluators added content within brackets to assist readers in understanding the context of the conversation. Quotes that are labeled “Administrator” were from a principal, assistant principal, and/or food service director; quotes from “School Staff” are from classroom teachers, PE teachers, food service managers, and/or nurses. Names of participants and schools were removed to protect the identity of the participants and schools involved in the project. Themes and subthemes were not presented in order of importance.
The Importance of Physical Activity and Nutrition Education

Each focus group opened by asking participants whether they felt students at their schools needed education about physical activity and nutrition. A resounding “yes” was expressed by all participants who went on to describe a myriad of reasons why they felt this education was instrumental in supporting student health. Participant responses were largely centered on positive health outcomes and developing useful skills such as achieving overall wellbeing, illness prevention, knowledge of long-term health consequences, and the ability to make healthy choices.

“….having the tools to make healthy choices.” – School Administrator

“To live a healthier, more productive life. To avoid illness and sickness” – School Administrator

“They don’t understand the health consequences of not getting it [physical activity]” – School Staff

Additionally, participants described how nutrition and physical activity education affect students’ academic outcomes and cultural experiences.

“Kids tend to learn better when they’re well-nourished and when they’re physically active” – School Administrator

“To be open to other cultures…. the best exposure for our students is to our cafeteria” – School Staff

Major Themes

Five major themes emerged from the analysis of both the school staff and administrator focus groups:

1) Local school wellness policies
2) Current school climate pertaining to nutrition education and physical activity
3) Home environment
4) Strengths and resources
5) Barriers to implementation

Each of these major themes was broken into subthemes and supplemented with quotes from focus group participants to illustrate findings. Aside from a few differences between school staff and administrator participants, the major themes and subthemes were found to be consistent across all focus groups. Cases where there was a difference between administrators and schools staff were noted. Direct quotes from focus group participants were italicized and used verbatim from transcripts to further elucidate themes.

1. Local school wellness policies

In order to get a better idea of current school policies regarding nutrition and physical activity, participants were asked about their district’s local wellness policy. The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 required every local educational agency participating in the National School Lunch Program or other federal Child Nutrition programs to create a local school wellness policy for all schools under its authority. At a minimum, local wellness policies must include: (a) goals for nutrition education, physical activity, and other school-based activities that promote student wellness and (b) nutrition guidelines for all foods available on each school campus so as to promote student health and reduce childhood obesity. The Act also required schools to notify the public about what is included in the policy and periodically assess school compliance.

Across all groups, lack of awareness and adherence to local school wellness policies were identified as major themes. Many participants had never heard of a local wellness policy, did not know what was included in their school or district’s policy, and/or did not know where to locate the policy. According to participants, some wellness policies were available on their district’s website.

Additionally, there were many inconsistencies across districts and schools regarding adherence to wellness policies. Some participants shared their school/district was very strict about what foods could be served, sold, and/or brought from home to share. Other participants were lax regarding the rules established in their wellness policies and went
on to describe student groups selling unapproved food items and parents continuing to bring in unsanctioned treats. Focus group participants shared:

“It doesn’t appear ours [local wellness policy] is on our website...we have like a wellness committee.” – School Administrator

“I personally haven’t seen or read the wellness policy.” – School Staff

“They [parents] are technically not allowed to bring cakes or if it’s a cupcake it has to meet certain parameters, three inch, something like that, but... it doesn’t seem to be adhered to very strictly.” – School Staff

“Where do we get the school wellness policy?” – School Administrator

2. Current school climate for nutrition and physical activity

The current school and district climate for nutrition and physical activity education discussed by participants elucidated the many strengths, obstacles, and opportunities present in Maricopa County SNAP-Ed qualified schools. Within the theme of school climate, the following subthemes were identified: reduced time for physical activity and lunch, lack of nutrition education, short-term and staff-driven programs, family economic barriers, staff creativity, and disparities among food quality and variety.

a. Reduced time for physical activity and lunch

In both the administrators and school staff focus groups, participants commented on the reduced amount of time allotted to physical activity in schools. Participants sited budget constraints and increased emphasis on academics as the main causes. Many participants complained that physical education (PE) was only offered two to three times a week and in many schools without a dedicated PE teacher. Moreover, participants explained PE classes were not equally available to all students. Participants stated many PE classes were offered at the same time as English Language Learner (ELL) programs or did not offer adequate adaptations for the involvement of
children and youth with special health care needs. The following quotes were from focus group participants:

“I’m very jealous listening around the table is actually having PE coaches... I have five schools and they split the three coaches between all five schools” – School Administrator

“Cutting PE teachers, that just really you know, cuts down on the health of our kids” – School Staff

“In our district there’s a lot of kids that never get PE, because they get pulled out of classes” – School Staff

“We’re all competing for that time and um it’s sometimes a very hard sell like, I think, that the child who is well fed and exercises is better academically.” – School Administrator

Additionally, participants mentioned recess time being shortened or taken away as a punishment for misbehavior. Participants also noted shortened lunch times and expressed concern over students not having enough time to eat.

b. Lack of nutrition education

In all focus groups, there was found to be a general lack of nutrition education offered to students. When asked about nutrition education, many participants gave examples of food service staff educating teachers and students regarding what foods students were required to take in the lunch line. Participants did share some anecdotal examples of nutrition information shared with students and parents from the fresh fruits and veggie bags and monthly newsletters or menus. Moreover, school nurses/health aides and food service managers shared they were not currently engaged in any type of nutrition or health education activities for students, but they are willing to help. Focus group participants shared:
“[As a nurse] I usually only see the kids that don’t eat and so they come, they are usually sent to the nurses office to eat, um, we’re not provided food, so I bring my own food for them” – School Staff

“Whenever I go into a classroom I always bring a sample of a fruit and veggie that is in season, and something that’s usually on sale so that they could tell mom or dad, ‘Hey you know what, we just tried a red bell pepper and they’re three for a dollar’” – School Administrator

c. Short-term and staff-driven programs

Like nutrition education, physical activity programs in schools were found to be largely short-term and staff driven. There were examples shared across all schools of one-time physical activity events involving collaboration with different community partners or parent groups such as the Parent Teacher Organizations, Diamondbacks, American Heart Association, and Autism Speaks. Many participants reported having staff-driven (i.e. teachers, custodians, principals) physical activity programs like running groups, walking clubs, or school gardens. While these programs were enriching for students, many participants felt they were generally not sustainable due to large staff workloads and staff turnover. The following illustrative quotes were taken from focus group participants:

“‘Girl’s on the Run’ and they [two teachers] had the girls and after school they go out and they run around the track and stuff” – School Staff

“Family Fit Life. The teachers lead exercises and we turn it into a fitness month” – School Administrator

d. Family economic barriers

In both the administrator and school staff focus groups, participants discussed the economic barriers facing many families who were unable to afford food for their children. Participants described students coming to school hungry and families having little money for food during the weekends and on summer break. Participants shared that their schools and districts were very invested in the families and offered examples
of how schools work to combat student hunger. Many schools offered free breakfast in the classroom programs, which participants stated had the added bonus of reducing tardiness, nurse visits, and truancies while contributing to higher academic achievement. Parent coordinators gave food boxes to families, and schools partnered with community centers or food banks to offer meals during the summer break. Some schools had programs where the kids took home a bag of food for the weekend. A few school staff also shared that they break the rules and allow hungry students to keep left over breakfast items in their backpack as snacks for later. Conversely, participants reported while many students were not hungry, their families were not able to afford healthy or nutritious foods. Therefore, they ate largely starchy vegetables like potatoes and other processed foods. Participants shared the following examples:

“Our parent liaison goes and gives families foods in cars in Wal-Mart” – School Administrator

“In the summer we have, ah, there’s, there’s a provider, I forget the name of the provider, but they’ll come out and provide breakfast and lunch for the community for anybody under 18” – School Administrator

“We have a program where the kids can come...they get a bag of food on Fridays to take home” – School Staff

“We tell them, ‘put it in your back pack, you can have it for a snack later’...we’re not allowed to do that but we do it because kids need to eat, and we know that... and I don’t think there’s anything wrong with it because we know that there’s, you know, there’s an issue with hunger” – School Administrator

**e. Staff creativity as an asset**

Another strength shown by participants was the creativity and variety of activities developed and implemented locally at a school or district level to teach students about nutrition and offer opportunities for physical activity. Many school staff and administrators were clearly passionate about the health of their students and take upon themselves to create unique opportunities for learning and activity. One teacher described teaching students about different foods in the cafeteria line. Other
administrators shared creating posters for the cafeteria to highlight nutrition information of certain foods being served. Other participants spoke about giving students “brain breaks” during the day to be physically active in 2-3 minute spurts between subjects. Additionally, one school offered free passes to their school gym as a reward for exemplary behavior instead of sugary treats. Another school offered “boogying with the principal,” free dance time to students who met academic goals. Focus group participants reported:

“I’m literally hovering over them like, ‘take the real fruit, not the fruit cup.’ I educate them as much as I can.” – School Staff

“So instead of giving out a snack, or, or junk food, we do the open gym” – School Staff

“They [the students] got to do this for about 20 minutes for a lack of a better term ‘boogying’ and this was the award. So I kind of loved the fact that she [the principal], you know, was able to bring academics and then reward them with something that wasn’t a sucker” – School Staff

f. Disparity in food quality and variety

Across the districts and schools represented at the focus groups, there was a clear disparity in the quality and variety of foods served. Many school staff described their school’s menu as having diverse options with fresh foods and the food itself as nutritious and tasty. Conversely, other school staff complained their menus lacked variety and featured poorly tasting food. Some schools allow students to choose from a variety of entrée and side options, while other schools offer pre-made trays to students. The following quotes from participants illustrate this subtheme:

“We [food service staff] do a lot of fresh fruit, bananas, apples, oranges. We even slice our oranges” – School Staff

“I think in my district it’s actually majorly improved, recently. We have a lot more choices...I think it’s really improved. There’s little sides of pintos and extra little, you know, broccoli thing, I mean stuff that I’m seeing the kids eating now that I would have never thought they would have eaten.” – School Staff
“If it doesn’t taste good to me, then how is it going to taste good to a child? And I think that’s a real big concern” – School Staff

“They’re not letting the kids choose what they want to eat. The tray is fixed already, they have to go and choose a fixed tray.” – School Staff

Both administrators and school staff expressed concern over the large amount of food waste, particularly healthy foods. Participants described full trays including fresh fruits and vegetables going into the trash. One participant stated the students clog toilets trying to flush entire apples. Other participants spoke about students throwing away poor tasting foods. If the students didn’t like the taste, they won’t eat it. Participants shared:

“They [the students] look at you and just throw it [food] away…they will actually clog up our toilets with apples” – School Staff

“And I can’t tell you how much food is being thrown away that has had one bite taken out of it, or somebody has taken all the cheese off of the pizza but won’t eat anything else on the pizza because the bread is nasty on the pizza!” – School Staff

During the discussion, school staff focused on the quality of foods provided or allowed in school. School staff discussed, in great detail, whether their schools’ menus offered fresh, flavorful, and nutritious foods with a variety of entrée options. Administrators briefly mentioned certain foods their policies prohibit, but did not discuss menu options or the quality of foods served. Instead, administrators reported having little control over their schools’ menu or foods. Administrators stated contracted food services providers were responsible for adhering to Federal USDA mandates. The following quote illustrated this point:
“I think what impacts what happens in the cafeterias um, it’s pretty much you know, it’s food services” – School Administrator

3. Home environment

Across all focus groups, participants identified the home environment as a common reason why nutrition and physical activity education is important for students in Maricopa County SNAP-Ed qualified schools. Within the theme of home environment, the following subthemes were identified: need for parent education, unhealthy snacks and convenience eating, and limited access to healthy foods.

a. Need for parent education

Focus group participants expressed general concerns regarding parents modeling unhealthy eating habits for their children as well as cultural factors adversely affecting the food choices served at home. Participants highlighted the need to educate parents about how to cook the same traditional meals at home, but using healthier techniques and ingredients. Focus group participants stated:

“Parents or people in their homes should be educated as well.” – School Staff

“We serve a high Hispanic Population and certain items are not even considered to be purchased when they’re grocery shopping” – School Administrator

“I don't have to cook it with lard and I don't have to cook it with bacon fat. I can cook it with these different choices... and still get the same food” – School Administrator

Equally, after some nutrition education was provided to students or parents at schools, focus group participants remarked parents chose not to or were unable financially to purchase and serve healthier foods at home. Participants signaled the need to teach parents how to shop and cook healthy foods on a budget. To illustrate this subtheme, participated reported:

“We try to educate them [the students]. But if they go home and say ‘oh I can’t have french-fried potatoes tonight, let’s do brown rice or something,’ and mom says well
potatoes were $2.50 for 5lbs as compared to rice, this is what you’re going to get.” – School Staff

“If the parents will buy and serve this [healthy foods] to their children, they will get used to eating the salads and used to eating the carrot sticks and they will start enjoying it.” – School Staff

“In some cases it is an economic issue. I think people don't know that you can go to the grocery store with however much money you have and you can make healthy purchases.” – School Administrator

b. Unhealthy snacks and convenience eating

In every focus group, administrators and school staff expressed concern over the unhealthy snacks brought from home. In many cases, participants felt the unhealthy snack choices such as chips, candy, and sodas were made out of convenience. Equally, participants highlighted the frequency of modern families (including themselves) consuming “fast-foods” out of convenience and affordability. For example, participants stated:

“It’s convenient to go through the drive-through…. because if we are running from one place to the next we can either choose to eat nothing or we can choose to do something quick.” – School Administrator

“It’s like 99¢ to buy a hamburger, but if you want to get a salad it’s like four bucks” – School Administrator

c. Limited access to healthy foods

Participants described how poverty, geographic area, and access to transportation adversely affect families’ ability to access healthy foods. Participants discussed the large numbers of homeless families, families living in poverty, and students coming to school hungry. As mentioned previously, partnerships with local food banks, breakfast in the classroom, and summer meal programs were highlighted as a few of the ways
schools aid families. The following descriptive quotes were taken from focus group participants:

“There’s an issue with hunger, and we know there’s in our district...McKinney Vento [Homeless Assistance Act] is huge for us” – School Staff

“Mom and dad can only buy what they have money for” – School Staff

“Healthier foods are more expensive.” – School Administrator

“And the most affordable food is the food that’s bad for you” – School Staff

Focus group participants stated many families live in food deserts where the majority of residents live in low-income areas with limited access to a grocery store or other healthy, affordable food retail outlets. In these cases, many families were confined to foods they could buy at a local gas station or convenience stores like Quick Trip. Participants also highlighted transportation as another barrier for many families that limits their access to school summer meal programs and stores selling healthy foods. Participants shared the following examples:

“We're in a food island, where there’s no place really even for a lot of our parents to buy the food even if they knew it was healthy” – School Administrator

“There's a lot of homes that are one-vehicle families and you have to wait till dad comes home from work to do shopping” – School Administrator

“Our population walks... they’re bused to school, but they're too far to get free lunch in the summer, so they don’t” – School Administrator
4. Strengths and resources

In both the school administrator and staff focus groups, participants identified many existent strengths and resources within schools and districts that can be used for development, dissemination, and sustainability of nutrition and physical activity education in Maricopa County SNAP-Ed qualified schools. Within the theme of strengths and resources, the following subthemes were identified: advocates on site, funding opportunities, parent liaisons/coordinators, and nutrition education resources.

a. Advocates on site

In every focus group, participants identified themselves and/or others at their school and district as advocates for student health and wellness. In many cases, the advocates were physical education or other teachers. However, there were also examples of principals and custodians taking the lead to start local school programs aimed at physical activity and nutrition. Food service managers and school nurses demonstrated expertise in terms of student health and expressed their willingness to help. Moreover, many districts have wellness committees and professional learning communities made up of school administrators and staff who are passionate about nutrition education and physical activity in schools. Participants gave the following illustrations:

“For the last nine years, they [two classroom teachers] have trained students to do half marathons and every year it's gained momentum and this year currently they have 184 students participating” – School Administrator

“We had one school where we had a garden for 30 years long before gardening was what it is today in terms of today, for us, but you had one teacher and she’d be out there all summer long making sure that it was ready” – School Administrator

b. Funding opportunities

Both administrators and school staff mentioned the diverse funding sources (local, state, and federal) currently utilized to offer nutrition and physical activity education in schools. Participants described using grant funds from the 21st Century Grant and the Fresh Fruits and Vegetables Program available through the Arizona Department of
Education and United States Department of Agriculture. Additionally, other participants shared how their district successfully used public bonds to fund a community center that serves to support student and parent wellness opportunities. Participants also highlighted that many schools/districts offer student scholarships for sports programs. The following examples were from participants:

“We participate in the Fresh Fruit the USDA Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Grant, and... we’re able to expose kids to different fruits and vegetables” – School Administrator

“We pass our bonds... not for new buildings but new community center, ah, gyms” – School Administrator

c. Parent liaisons/coordinates

Another resource shared by focus group participants was parent coordinators (also known as parent liaisons) working in schools. Participants highlighted the parent coordinator role by describing their close work with parents and students. Parent coordinators were known to recognize, understand, and meet community needs by conducting activities such as the provision of emergency food boxes. Due to their close work with the community and largely bilingual (English-Spanish) abilities, participants identified parent coordinators as a great resource to leverage particularly for parent education and engagement. To illustrate, one participant shared:

“All of our community resource people are bilingual and our coordinator is bilingual... So they can probably implement more nutritional type things” – School Administrator

d. Nutrition education resources

Across all focus groups, participants delineated current nutrition education resources utilized by schools and districts. The nutrition resources came largely from three different sources including national, state, and county agencies. Many participants utilized print and visual materials provided by the USDA’s MyPlate. However, while participants stated they used the MyPlate materials, there was also confusion expressed regarding what nutrition information was the most
up-to-date. Schools participating in the State’s Fresh Fruits and Vegetables Program also received nutrition education information to share with students. Additionally, participants spoke of using resources from the MCDPH ONPA including print materials, physical education kits, and visiting dietitians for classroom presentations. “The whole MyPlate thing has changed so many times” – School Staff

“We have a fresh fruit and vegetable bag that goes to the classroom and the information packet that we create at district offices is then in their little pouch on the side” – School Administrator

5. Barriers to implementation

One of the main goals of the needs assessment was to learn about the barriers to implementing a health and physical activity curriculum in the school and classroom setting. Within the theme of barriers to implementation, the following subthemes were found: a drive to focus on academics paired with a lack of time; limited resources; teacher motivation, attitudes, and organization; and non-inclusive programs.

a. Focus on academics and lack of time

Participants in all the groups discussed, at length, the current intense focus on academics and the lack of class time dedicated to anything outside the required school subjects. Teachers as well as administrators expressed that they experience increased pressure to make sure all students were meeting academic standards. This pressure seemed to influence their choices of what they can and cannot integrate into the daily classroom regimen. Taking time away from academics to implement a health curriculum was unthinkable for most school staff and administrators. While participants considered nutrition and physical activity education to be very important, most participants felt they could not afford to dedicate unique classroom time to these subjects. These barriers signaled the need for the SNAP-Ed curriculum to serve a dual purpose of providing nutrition and physical activity education and fulfilling at least one of the AZ Career and College Ready (CCR) educational standards, commonly referred by school personnel as the “common core standards.” An ELL teacher reported:
“I have certain blocks I have to teach and like my life is integrating subjects into what I do with kids. Because I have to do 60 minutes of writing, 60 minutes of grammar…” – School Staff

Two other participants shared:

Participant A: “As much as I would love to have health and nutrition, that’s probably the last thing on my top list!”

Participant B: “That’s true because we have staff development classes that are open to every employee in the district, where they hold classes and it’s towards curriculum development to get raises and to go into step 2 level…and looking at the, um, staff development, um, booklet there is nothing in there… gear towards…[health]” – School Administrators

b. Limited resources

Recent budget cuts played a large role in limiting resources for effective implementation of nutrition and physical activity education. As mentioned previously pertaining to the current school climate, many districts report that PE teachers were shared between schools and consequently students experience reduced PE time. Additionally, PE teachers signaled the need for more coaches. Limited funding for physical activity and recess equipment was also an issue in many participating schools. PE teachers talked about jump ropes and balls being helpful during recess. However, the equipment quickly “disappeared” without the resources to replace them. This lack of equipment also impeded teachers’ ability to conduct PE activities in the classroom. Other participants reported not having a proper, dedicated space (i.e. a gym) for PE classes.

Many schools reported using double classrooms or cafeterias for PE classes. The extreme heat experienced in the Valley and the inability to provide PE outdoors year round exacerbates the lack of dedicated space for physical activity education. To illustrate, participants gave the following examples:

“She is the only PE teacher in a school of over 1,000 kids” – School Staff
“Her gym is a double classroom and since she has PE scheduled during lunch hours, she can’t routinely have them [PE students] outside either. So, she has very limited space and very limited time.” – School Staff

c. Teacher motivation, attitudes, and organization

Participants expressed concern regarding the motivation of selected PE teachers. As one participant explained when the administration prioritizes the success of classroom teachers over others, this can result in a lack of accountability among PE teachers and diminished instructional quality. According to several participants, there were schools with poorly motivated PE teachers who commonly allowed students to sit during PE time and were less likely to integrate children with special needs into classroom activities. To illustrate, one participant stated:

“There’s a few good teachers in the district and there’s a few bad ones…that unfortunately, you know, aren’t motivated to teach, themselves. And quite frankly a lot of the administration just lets them do what they want…I mean they got classroom teachers that are the priority, and then unfortunately, these PE teachers know it.” – School Staff

Additionally, participants expressed conflicting opinions regarding teacher attitudes towards change and integrating a nutrition and physical activity curriculum. Several participants expressed concern that teachers often do not like making changes, especially when it limits classroom instruction time. Conversely, other participants spoke positively about school staff’s willingness to dedicate time to nutrition and physical activity education. Participants also made it clear schools needed strong leadership and organization to facilitate an ongoing program and create a school culture of wellness. The following quotes were taken from focus group participants:

“We don’t like change” – School Staff

“I know the testable areas, like for AIMS, I know those teachers would complain cuz at losing teaching time for them” – School Staff
“We just need to get it more organized and actually come up with our game plan” – School Administrator

“Like I have 120 minutes of language arts time and they could take 10 minutes from that instead of 45 minutes from my social studies time. Like 10 minutes from math, 10 minutes from language arts. Boom you have 20 minutes of health” – School Staff

d. Non-inclusive programs

As previously noted in Current School Climate, participants spoke about the inability to adapt physical activity programs to allow the participation of students with special health care needs. School staff explained children and youth with special health care needs often refrain from PE activity. Similarly, English learners were often pulled from PE to attend academic classes and therefore do not receive opportunities for physical activity and/or health education. One participant shared:

“There have been students that are in general education in a wheelchair and the physical education teachers are not quiet sure how to… [integrate them in the activities]” – School Staff

Two participants advocated for integrated PE programming and offered an example of an adaptation:

Participant A: “It’s just fifth grade ballroom dancing. I was just thinking about the child in the wheelchair and he was not knowing how to adapt”

Participant B: “and the PE teachers adapted it with using some scarves on his wheelchair so he could...”

Participant A: “She held onto the scarves”
SNAP-ED CURRICULUM RECOMMENDATIONS

In each focus group, participants described the types of materials and support needed to implement a nutrition and physical activity curriculum in a classroom setting. The following six themes emerged from the participants’ collective responses:

1) Curriculum alignment with Arizona’s College and Career Ready Standards (CCR)
2) Materials that are engaging and interactive
3) Accessibility
4) Standardization
5) Technical assistance availability
6) Curriculum look and feel

1. Alignment with Arizona’s College and Career Ready Standards (CCR)

The most important feedback participants provided about nutrition and physical activity curricula was the need for alignment with Arizona’s College and Career Ready Standards (CCR). This alignment would help mitigate the fundamental barriers concerning limited time and increased focus on academic instruction. A curriculum aligned to Arizona’s educational standards could be used to teach a number of required topics while simultaneously teaching students about health. School administrators illustrated this point during the following conversation:

Participant A: “It needs to be incorporated into math and science because I mean, measuring, I mean come on we got fractions here. There’s so many ways to introduce it, you know....”

Participant B: “Yeah, like following directions, yeah”

Participant A: “I mean kindergarteners, you have colors, you have colors of the fruit, you know, being able to read the word ‘vegetable’ I just don’t understand why it can’t be more incorporated into this common core.”
Moreover, participants in all focus groups discussed the importance of integrating nutrition and physical activity education into multiple subject areas such as science, reading, math, and social studies. This type of cross-curricular education would reinforce positive messages about wellness without detracting from test preparation and student achievement. The following conversation, by two participants, discusses how to incorporate nutrition into subject areas such as reading and math:

Participant A: “Reading...yea the reading... you can do it! It’s easy enough; the nutrition part is easy enough!”

Participant B: “Like, ‘here’s the Sunday Circular, you have $50, you have to build the healthy meals and cut the pictures out...”

The following were additional quotes from focus group participants about aligning a health curriculum with Arizona’s standards:

“Tying it common core standards so we can test well.” – School Staff

“Making sure that everything is [aligned], cause if you link your activities to our standards, our teachers will take it on because they're all standards-driven. So if there’s PE standards and if you can embed the PE standards and health standards and pull it together, I think that helps them out.” – School Administrator

CCR standards are identified by codes composed of a CCR strand, CCR status, and a number. Teachers requested the complex codes be already embedded in the health curriculum lessons so the user would be able to immediately identify the CCR addressed by the lesson and activity. Furthermore, participants stated the codes should to be easy to find, which could be accomplished by placing them in a box parallel to the lesson title. By aligning lessons to the CCR, teachers can easily integrate nutrition education and physical activity in multiple subject areas without taking on the burden of alignment.

**Engaging and Interactive**

Across all focus groups, participants discussed the importance of creating a nutrition
and physical activity curriculum that was interactive and engaging. Participants offered the following creative ways to engaging students: utilize various technologies, incorporate videos and visuals, invite guest speakers, create activities and games, track individual progress, and use peer-to-peer teaching models.

Several participants suggested adopting an online program with downloadable activity sheets for both in-class and at-home use. They also discussed how the curriculum could be fun for students by including games such as scavenger hunts and meal planning. Across all focus groups, participants emphasized the importance of visuals to make the curriculum more student-friendly. An ELL teacher explained how she could use such a curriculum:

“[What] I would need in order to do that is student friendly material. So either articles that I could read with students because [then] you can cover ELL standards. Or discussion activities that I can use in my oral language block” – School Staff

A few staff participants felt lessons utilizing iPad applications and videos would help teachers retain students’ interest. Participants talked about having guest speakers, perhaps professional athletes who could speak to students as role models of health and wellness. The following quote was an example of a recommendation offered by participants:

“Having a...a curriculum that is available that includes lessons, um, online resources, and of course if they can provide with guest speakers, that would be very effective.” –School Staff

Instead of promoting competition between peers or schools, participants requested the curriculum empower to students to recognize and track their own progress. Participants felt this method would be inclusive of all students and motivate them through witnessing their improvement. The
following school staff participants offered an example:

“The reason it [peer competition] doesn’t motivate a lot of kids, is kids that can’t do push-ups know they can’t….kids that felt success on it had the motivation, but the kids that never felt successful on it, weren’t” – School Staff

Accessible

Focus group participants discussed the need for the curriculum to be accessible. To increase accessibility, participants suggested the curriculum be available online. Moreover, participants shared having the website link to the online curriculum available on the district website would increase use by nonverbally conferring district approval. Accessibility also related to the curriculum being aligned to CCRs, downloadable, and utilizing cheap or free student materials:

“[That we can] pull it from this website and it would already be on there, per grade level, so it’s already...” – School Administrator

“Something that is easily accessible, something that you can run really quickly, and like, you have a guideline right then and there that kind of spoon feeds it to you” – School Staff

Standardized

In addition to curriculum lessons being aligned to CCRs, staff participants stressed the importance for each lesson to follow a standard format. Drawing from best practices utilized by their district, participants requested each lesson include an outline of its scope, objectives, sequence, and materials/equipment needed. A consistent lesson plan format was suggested so teachers could know at a glance what they need to accomplish in order to teach the lesson.

“...and it’s all set scope, sequence, everything is set day to day and everybody has the equipment they need to teach that lesson” – School Staff
Although both groups agreed the curriculum should be standardized, school staff and administrators had different definitions of standardization. School staff envisioned a standardized curriculum to be on-going, yearlong, and/or more than a one-time event. In other words, the school had to be committed to nutrition and physical activity education. Administrators, on the other hand, conceptualized a standardized curriculum in a more broader sense where the curriculum could be replicated in all schools across all districts. Participants envisioned the curriculum developed in partnership with ADE and available statewide.

“If I were taught every little detail, for the whole curriculum, I mean I’d have a whole full-year curriculum with, you know, one grade level that would be great.” – School Staff

“Something that would be accessible so that it could be replicated just across the board… that would be online that we could somehow utilize in all of our districts all over the state.” – School Administrator

“Right, and also to be state-wide because otherwise, you’re just, you know, ‘this district is doing nutrition and this district is not’ and it’s going to be sporadic, and I think ADE would help not just Maricopa County but statewide.” – School Administrator

Technical Assistance

Whether the nutrition and physical activity curriculum is online or published, participants agreed they would need technical support to learn how to implement the program effectively. Ideally, participants’ expressed technical assistance where they would be introduced to the curriculum, learn how to use it, and have an advisor to answer questions or resolve technical difficulties. Both groups suggested assistance with curriculum implementation through Train-the-Trainer model, teacher orientations, and/or videos to demonstrate how to implement lesson plans.

“If there was a guest speaker who could come out and get it [the curriculum] going. I mean walk into the school, invigorate that teacher, get the lesson going with the kids.” – School Staff
Staff participants also suggested having a menu of alternative options for lesson implementation. A menu of options would allow for teacher creativity and adaptation to varying student needs. The following conversation further discussed the possibilities of adding alternatives and adaptive lesson plans:

Participant A: “There’s something at the bottom to give you an idea of another worksheet…”

Evaluator: “Alternatives you can choose from in a lesson.”

Participant A: “Kind of like a menu”

Participant B: “Right, kind of piece together your own lesson.”

Participant A: “Like I’ll do A, C, and D today, or because A, C, and D work for this group but next year A, C, and D may not work so we want to do B, F, and R.”

Curriculum Look and Feel

In both administrator and staff focus groups, participants spent a great deal of time discussing the look and feel of the curriculum. Repeatedly participants expressed the most user-friendly and attractive curriculums would include plenty of pictures and visuals, ready-to-use handouts, and homework students can do with their parents.

“Visual aids are always very important.” – School Staff

In order to make the curriculum as inclusive and culturally competent as possible, participants also advocated for lesson plans to be age and grade appropriate, use student-friendly language, and encompass culturally relevant examples. Equally important to participants was the inclusion of adaptive lesson plans for students with special health care needs. Possible groups of students to consider would be students with physical needs, English Language Learners, and students with nutrition-related health concerns (e.g. diabetes, obesity, eating disorder, and food allergies).

“We also need adaptations for students with special needs.” – School Staff
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this report was to: (1) identify the current strengths and barriers in Maricopa County SNAP-Ed qualified schools relating to nutrition and physical activity education; (2) understand the way school personnel view nutrition and physical activity education; (3) stimulate ideas for nutrition and physical education curriculum; and (4) gauge reactions of administrators to proposed education strategies. To answer these questions, data was collected through four focus groups. A total of 35 school personnel, administrators and school staff, participated in the focus groups.

In general, findings suggested school personnel view nutrition education and physical activity as important to include in schools. However, lack of time, lack of funding, lack of inclusive programs, and intense focus on academics were common barriers to program implementation. Additionally, focus group participants discussed the economic barriers experienced by many families as well as the limited access to healthy foods. The use of community resources such as food banks and mobile markets provided parents with much needed food for free or reduced prices. Both school staff and administrators agreed parents would benefit from receiving culturally sensitive nutrition education to learn how to cook their preferred dishes in healthy ways. One strength seen in all the schools was staff creativity introducing short-term and staff driven physical activity programs including dancing with the principal and the use of open gym passes as student rewards.

School personnel also provided numerous recommendations for a successful and user-friendly SNAP-Ed curriculum. The curriculum characteristic recommendations include easy accessibility, online, engaging and interactive, and technical assistance and teacher training. The following sections are other general recommendations provided by school personnel and evaluators.
Participant Recommendations

In addition to lending their expertise to the current needs, barriers, and curricula ideas for nutrition and physical activity education in schools, focus group participants offered the following general recommendations for curricula development and dissemination:

" Use parent coordinators to engage and educate parents/caregivers about nutrition and physical activity and include ways to cook healthier versions of traditional family meals and budget friendly grocery shopping

" Support school programs and partnerships combatting family economic barriers and increasing access to healthy foods (i.e. Market on Move, weekend food bags, breakfast in the classroom, etc.)

" Create buy-in from teachers by involving them in curricula development and marketing the new materials during new teacher orientations and professional learning committees

" Identify and empower existing passionate leaders and champions at local schools or districts, and provide compensation for their time

" Emphasize student achievement using current research and evaluation findings

" Leverage training, resources, and funding through engaging in the following partnerships:
  o Collaborate with the Arizona Department of Education in order to 1) lend credibility; 2) ensure CCR alignment; 3) make the curricula available statewide; and 4) increase likelihood of use.
  o Team up with community organizations to offer opportunities for family involvement and wellness (e.g. medical screenings, local 5k walks, and farmer markets) and offer programs year round in community centers.
o Gain exposure through celebrity endorsement (e.g. Diamondbacks and Cardinals)

o Engage school boards, teacher unions, and professional learning communities to increase curricula buy-in

Evaluator Recommendations

The readiness of administrators and teachers to participate in the focus groups illustrated students’ health and nutrition and physical activity was important to them. However, there are many barriers and challenges that districts and schools experience when trying to implement a comprehensive health education curriculum. While school personnel have been creative in introducing a number of activities to promote PE among the student body, they have been clear that there is a need for more consistent efforts. Beyond the recommendations that participants have offered, the following are additional suggestions for introducing SNAP-Ed in schools from evaluators:

** Present the curriculum to the Arizona Department of Education for review and to reach consensus concerning the alignment of lessons to CCRs. Their support will help other parties consider the program with interest.

** Approach the school districts’ Board of Directors to gain support before approaching schools. Once a Board commits to health education and physical activity it will be easier to get district and school personnel buy-in.

** Develop an aggressive marketing plan that includes relevant materials, available teacher training, and short presentations.

** Provide teacher training with the option of receiving Continuous Education Units (CEUs) for completing the training.

** Adapt the curriculum for parents, so parent liaisons/coordinators/social workers in the schools can use it during parent group gatherings. If parents like the curriculum, health education will gain greater support and more advocates for its implementation in school.
Facilitate partnerships between districts/schools and organizations such as food banks, road markets and others that may be able to provide discounted fresh food for purchase to parents. This will create stronger parent support and increase the consumption of healthy foods at home.

Next Steps

Needs assessment findings will be used to guide curricula development of the nutrition and physical activity education for Maricopa SNAP-Ed schools, design a comprehensive plan for dissemination, and create buy in among various stakeholders including teachers, district staff, school boards, school health advisory councils, and parents/caregivers. Findings will support MCDPH ONPA’s efforts to identify and promote model school-based wellness practices locally and create healthy school environments. MCDPH ONPA will engage school staff and administrator volunteers from focus groups to review curricula, webpage development, and make further recommendations for successful program dissemination and minimizing school burden.

Findings and recommendations will be used by MCDPH ONPA to support the county’s Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP) as it relates to school wellness, obesity prevention, and enhancing the overall mission to empower communities working together to reach optimal health and quality of life for all. As policy changes and system modifications are considered, the perspectives and findings shared in this report will be considered. Needs assessment findings will also be presented to the CHIP’s Community Partner Education Cloud, and the Arizona Department of Health Services to aid in tracking Maricopa County schools' wellness policies, program infrastructure, and other related wellness activities.
References

http://childhealthdata.org/browse/survey/results?q=2415&r=4


http://www.fns.usda.gov/ora/MENU/Published/snap/FILES/Other/SNAPEdWaveI.pdf


Appendix: A

Maricopa Department of Public Health
Office of Nutrition and Physical Activity
Focus Group
INFORMED CONSENT FORM

We are asking you to participate in a focus group. The purpose of this consent form is to give you the information you will need to help you decide whether to participate. Please read the form carefully. You may ask questions about the purpose of the focus group, what we would ask you to do, the possible risks and benefits, your rights as a participant, and anything else about the evaluation or this form that is not clear. When we have answered all your questions, you can decide if you want to be in the focus group or not. This process is called “informed consent.” We will give you a copy of this form for your records.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY
This focus group is part of an evaluation designed to help Maricopa County Department of Public Health Office of Nutrition and Physical Activity (MCDPH ONPA) better understand the current nutritional and physical activity education needs of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education (SNAP-Ed) qualified schools in Maricopa County. In addition, barriers and obstacles to delivering this educational program in SNAP-Ed qualified schools will be evaluated.

STUDY PROCEDURES
If you agree to take part in this focus group, we will begin to talk with you and the other participants about the needs and barriers related to nutritional and physical activity education in SNAP-Ed qualified schools. The focus group will last a total of 2 hours. Facilitators will audio-record the focus group. You may leave the focus group at any time and you don’t have to answer any questions that you don’t want to answer.

After the focus group discussion has ended and the recording device has been turned off, we will give you a short Participant Form asking questions about your current role in schools, wellness policy, and helpful resources. This survey should only take 5 minutes to complete.

RISKS AND BENEFITS OF THE STUDY
There is no anticipated discomfort for those participating in the focus group; so risk to participants is minimal. Your participation or non-participation in the focus group is completely voluntary. Neither your job nor your relationship with SNAP-Ed will be positively or negatively affected by your focus group participation.
CONFIDENTIALITY

Information about you is kept confidential. We will not link your name to anything you say. We will store the recordings of the focus group in a locked office and no one but Saguaro Evaluation Group evaluators and MCDPH ONPA staff will have access to the recordings. Even though your name will not be on the tape or in our notes, it is possible someone could recognize your voice. We will not use your name in any reports or presentations.

OTHER INFORMATION

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant or any concerns or complaints, please contact Dr. Monica Parsai or Aimee Sitzler at Saguaroevaluations@gmail.com or 480-381-2649. If you have questions about this project, you may contact Joshua Beck, Management Analyst MCDPH ONPA, by phone at (602) 506-9345 or email at JoshuaBeck@mail.maricopa.gov.

Participant’s statement

I have read and understand the above consent form; I certify that I am 18 years old or older. By signing below, I indicate my willingness to voluntarily take part in the focus group.

Participant Name ___________________ Participant Signature ___________________ Date ___________________
1. What is your current role?

2. Are you aware of your school district’s Wellness Policy?
   - Yes
   - No
   - Unsure

3. Which of the following resources would be the most beneficial for incorporating nutrition and physical activity into the classroom? Circle all that apply:
   
   a. Training for school staff/faculty
   b. Guest speakers
   c. Incentives
   d. Videos
   e. Handouts
   f. Hardcopy curricula
   g. Online/downloadable curricula
   h. Flexibility of curricula to accommodate intervention staff scheduling needs
Appendix: C

SNAP-ED

Focus Group Agenda

Administrators

❖ Opening remarks
❖ Housekeeping items
❖ Introductions
❖ Ground rules
❖ Purpose of the focus group
❖ Explanation and completion of informed consent form
❖ Completion of short participant form

Brief review of current nutrition and physical activity school policy.

❖ Discussion questions:

  o Do you feel that students at your school need education about physical activity and nutrition?
  
  o Can you tell me about your school District Wellness Policy?
  
  o What are some of the nutrition, health, and physical activity programs that your school is currently using?
    a. How did you choose those programs?
    b. What do you like best about those programs?
    c. What do you like the least about those programs?
  
  o What type of materials and support would you need from the Maricopa County Department of Public Health, Office of Nutrition Physical Activity to be able to implement a nutrition and physical activity curriculum?
  
  o What are some of the strengths of your school that can be used to implement the nutrition and physical activity education program?
  
  o What are some of the barriers to using the nutrition and physical activity education program at your school?
  
  o If physical activity and healthy nutrition were a concern of your Board Members, how would that change your school’s education?
Focus Group Agenda

School Staff

❖ Opening remarks
❖ Housekeeping items
❖ Introductions
❖ Ground rules
❖ Purpose of the focus group
❖ Explanation and completion of informed consent form
❖ Completion of short participant form

Brief review of current nutrition and physical activity school policy.

❖ Discussion questions:

  o Do you feel that students at your school need education about physical activity and nutrition?

  o Can you tell me about your school District Wellness Policy?

  o What are some of the nutrition, health, and physical activity programs that your school is currently using?
    a. How did you choose those programs?
    b. What do you like best about those programs?
    c. What do you like the least about those programs?

  o What type of materials and support would you need from the Maricopa County Department of Public Health, Office of Nutrition Physical Activity to be able to implement a nutrition and physical activity curriculum?

  o What would the physical activity and nutrition curriculum have to look like for you to be more likely to use it?

  o What are some of the strengths of your school that can be used to implement the nutrition and physical activity education program?

  o What are some of the barriers to using the nutrition and physical activity education program at your school?