



*“The milk
should not
be
expired!!*

Healthy Can Be Tasty: A Participatory Evaluation with Student Advocates Demanding Change in the School Cafeteria

Background

Although the concept for linking community and youth development is well accepted in research, putting this into practice is a missing component of the field (London, Zimmerman, & Erbstein, 2003). Youth opinion and involvement are seldom incorporated in programs directly affecting them, defeating the purpose of these development programs. Often times, youth are viewed as requiring remedial services or as victims rather than competent contributors to societal change (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003). Including youth in the evaluation process can enhance the quality of the inquiry and be an empowering experience for the participants (Walker, 2007). Active youth participation in evaluation provides important perspectives on the programs that serve them and can contribute to more valid and reliable findings (London, et al., 2003; Walker, 2007). Connecting youth and community development in evaluation can produce self-sustaining processes that serve to address key social issues (London, et al., 2003), strengthen social development, and the ability to create change in communities (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003).

A participatory evaluation in which program stakeholder groups and evaluators share control of the evaluation process is one way of helping those who are typically marginalized actively partake in decision-making (Brunner & Guzman, 1989). Participatory evaluation is especially beneficial for students as they are given the opportunity to voice their opinions and develop the abilities required for participation in a democratic society (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003). At the same time, the evaluator imparts his or her expertise, hence helping to build evaluative capacity and inquiry skills. Meanwhile, programs aimed at serving students benefit from the special insight youth provide (Bulanda, Szarzynski, Siler, & McCrea, 2013). Thus, participatory evaluation can help to sustain continued learning and ongoing development of both the program and the youth involved.

Supporting the students

Volunteers of America, Los Angeles (VOALA) established a student advocacy group geared towards making change in high school cafeteria food policies in an underserved East Los Angeles community. VOALA's Evaluation Department collaborated with project participants to develop a mixed-method research strategy comprised of focus groups and a survey to assess the students' concerns and overall eating environment. In addition to acting as a resource for participants, the evaluators actively trained the students so that they understood and participated in implementing the evaluation from the development of research questions and data collection to interpretation and reporting. For example, after students experienced focus groups facilitated by the evaluators, they took the lead in conducting focus groups with their peers. The evaluators also guided survey development while encouraging students to generate their own questions.



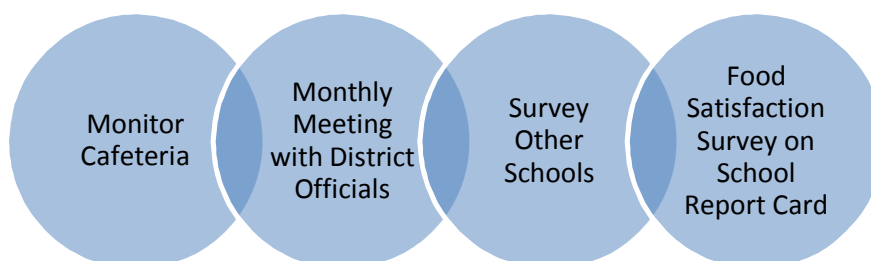


With student-developed surveys in hand, students were able to assess opinions of their peers as well as increase interest in the movement to improve cafeteria food. Armed with knowledge and data acquired through the evaluation process, the students were able to argue their position to school and local decision-makers. More importantly, the students gained the skills needed to represent their peers and effect change within their school and community. As a result of their hard work:

Students Went to District Officials with a List of Requests for Change

- ✓ Monitor food preparation and maintain kitchen facilities
- ✓ Don't give processed food
- ✓ Make sure food and milk is not spoiled or frozen
- ✓ Provide water as beverage option in addition to milk
- ✓ Add multiple options during lunch i.e. vegetarian food
- ✓ Buy food and produce from local or farmer's markets
- ✓ Have menu and nutrition facts readily available and visible
- ✓ Incorporate food satisfaction survey into school report card

Next Steps for Students



Take Home Message

- ✓ Students **EMPOWERED** with knowledge and tools = Meaningful **IMPACT**
- ✓ Students are important **CONTRIBUTORS** to positive school **CHANGE**
- ✓ School officials **LISTEN** when students are backed with **DATA**

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