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Title of Research: Rural Students' Fruit and Vegetable Intake, Preferences, and Availability: The Together We Grow Healthy Project

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Introduction/Purpose:

The Together We Grow Healthy project is a garden-based nutrition intervention in rural Washington County elementary schools. Implementing successful nutrition education programs begins by determining the participants' initial food intake, preferences, and availability. Purpose: To determine the intake of and preferences for fruits and vegetables among third through fifth graders in two rural schools and investigate the availability of fresh produce within these communities.

Experimental Design:

This research evaluates the impacts of the Together We Grow Healthy project, modeled on the principles of community-based participatory research. Data were collected at Lincoln and Ainsworth Elementary schools in Washington County. A validated, classroom-administered questionnaire was completed by 227 students (57% response rate). Availability of fresh produce was determined via local grocery store inspection based on the NEMS-S tool.

Results:

Students reported a median intake of 1 fruit (25th% = 0, 75th% = 3) and 2 vegetables (25th% = 1, 75th% = 5) per day. The top fruit choices were apples (97% liked), grapes (96%), oranges (94%), melons (93%), and bananas (93%). However, 67%, 56%, and 44% reported never having tried pomegranate, coconut, and mango, respectively. The top vegetable choices were sweet corn/polenta (92% liked), carrots (90%), potatoes (excluding French fries) (85%), lettuce (82%), and broccoli (72%). However, 83% and 63% reported never having tried eggplant, fava beans and brussels sprouts, respectively, even though these vegetables are available at the three major grocery chains in Washington. Ainsworth does not have a local grocery store but does have a gas station that sells limited fruits and vegetables.

Conclusions:

The fact that fruits and vegetables that students have never tried or do not like are indeed available in the area suggests the importance for behavior-based projects like Together We Grow Healthy. There is a need to introduce students to new fruits and vegetables in order to increase the number eaten each day as well as provide variety.