

EVALUATION OF THE FISCAL YEAR 2016 TEAM NUTRITION TRAINING GRANTS (TNTG)

Background

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) Team Nutrition Training Grant (TNTG) program began in 1995 to assist students participating in the National School Lunch Program (NLSP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP) in making healthy food choices and to improve the nutritional content of meals and snacks served by programs receiving Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) funding. The grant funding provided to State agencies in support of these programs is intended to be used for training, technical assistance, and nutrition education to assist schools, child care settings, summer meal sites, parents or caregivers, and children to align with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

In September 2016, FNS awarded Team Nutrition Training Grants to 14 State Agencies that administer the USDA's NSLP, SBP, and CACFP. (Ultimately, 13 States participated.) Eight States received grants focused on school meals programs, and five States focused on providing training to providers participating in CACFP in child care centers and family day care homes. This TNTG cohort was different than previous cohorts because, for the first time, grantees were asked to outline a plan to evaluate some or all of the interventions they would implement with grant funding. In order to support this evaluation, they were asked to partner with a social scientist, and FNS provided technical assistance for evaluation.

In Fiscal Year (FY) 2016, FNS conducted an evaluation of the interventions. The research objectives were:

- (1) Identify and describe the interventions as planned and implemented.
- (2) Collect and summarize characteristics of the intended and actual sites and audiences for each intervention for each State.
- (3) Determine and respond to grantee needs for evaluation-related technical assistance.
- (4) Summarize and analyze the evaluation metrics collected by grantees.
- (5) Develop recommendations for both (a) an evaluation framework that grantees can implement to measure the effectiveness of their efforts and (b) an evaluation strategy for rigorous impact evaluations of a subset of grantees and their activities.

Key Findings

- Eight interventions focused on training and technical assistance on topics including school wellness policies, culinary skills training, and communication were evaluated.
- Eleven interventions that focused on nutrition education of students – either by training school staff to conduct nutrition education activities with students or training students directly – were evaluated and showed mixed results.
- Nine interventions to improve the overall healthfulness of the school environment were evaluated, and the most rigorous of these showed significant positive results.
- School administration support, in-person training and technical assistance, and regular reminders to intervention participants help sustain participation.
- Grantees found it difficult to transition from a role providing resources and services to also being evaluators of those services.
- Multiple simultaneous or “bundled” interventions with the same participants were harder to implement with fidelity.
- Not all activities funded by the Team Nutrition Training Grants were rigorously evaluated or even appropriate for a rigorous evaluation.
- USDA should allow grantees to narrow their focus to a smaller number of objectives in order to encourage more intensive interventions that are more conducive to rigorous evaluation.

Approach

During the first 2 years of the grants, the evaluation team's technical assistance liaisons regularly corresponded with grantees. In addition, the evaluation team participated in discussions of interventions, evaluation plans, and lessons learned during the annual conferences of grantees. These communications provided technical assistance and insights into the successes and challenges of the grantees.

The evaluation team also reviewed grantee interim and final reports. Grantees' reports provided descriptions of the interventions, their audiences and design, curricula and materials developed, evaluation methods and findings, and lessons learned about implementing and evaluating the interventions.

Evaluation Findings, School-Based Interventions

Eight interventions focused on training and technical assistance on topics including school wellness policies, culinary skills training, and communication were evaluated. These interventions were evaluated exclusively with pre-post designs, where the outcome measures were tests of knowledge gained at the immediate end of a short training. More rigorous intervention strategies such as randomized control trials (RCTs) were not used. Two interventions involving training on school wellness policies showed significant gains for school wellness coordinators on knowledge of school wellness policies and confidence in implementing policies. The other six evaluations did not use tests of significance.

Eleven interventions that focused on nutrition education of students – either by training school staff to conduct nutrition education activities with students or training students directly – were evaluated and showed mixed results. Non-significant results were generally more common among more rigorous and less rigorous evaluation designs, though three RCTs provided evidence of significant changes in student nutrition knowledge and one RCT provided evidence of significant changes in attitudes towards fruits and vegetables.

Nine interventions to improve the overall healthfulness of the school environment were evaluated. There were mixed findings on changes in consumption of fruits and vegetables, with two RCTs showing significant increases but four RCTs showing non-significant changes.

Evaluation Findings, Child Care-Based Interventions

Seven interventions that provided training and technical assistance interventions to child care providers on CACFP meal patterns and culinary skills were evaluated, and six conducted significance tests of the findings. Most interventions showed significant positive changes in the outcomes of interest, though none used a rigorous RCT design.

Four interventions that provided nutrition education to child care providers were evaluated for changes in provider knowledge, attitudes and practices. There were generally positive and significant gains for participating providers. However, only one of the interventions used a two-group design and none used an RCT design.

Six interventions that used in-person coaching of child care providers to improve the overall healthfulness of the food environment conducted pre-post evaluations. These consistently reported significant gains in the healthfulness of the food offered in the child care programs, but the results for use of best practices and for provider knowledge or self-efficacy were mixed. Two interventions reported significant gains in children's knowledge of, attitudes towards, and willingness to taste different healthy fruits and vegetables after coaching.

Lessons Learned

School administration support, in-person training and technical assistance, and regular reminders to intervention participants help sustain participation. Grantees reported challenges with maintaining fidelity of implementation over time and among different participants. They believed that more technical assistance and communication between the grantee implementation team and the participants would be ideal.

Partnerships can add an array of expertise to interventions. Leveraging relationships with community and university partners was generally perceived as highly successful. Some grantees indicated that a collaborative model across all program activities maximized the impact on students.

Multiple simultaneous or “bundled” interventions with the same participants were harder to implement with fidelity. Ongoing technical assistance and communication helps maintain fidelity of implementation over time.

Grantees found it difficult to transition from a role providing resources and services to also being evaluators of those services. They were not prepared at the outset to perform evaluations at the moment they received their grants.

Grantees expended substantial time and resources to evaluate their multiple interventions. They generally increased their capacity for and skills at evaluating their interventions over the course of the grant. However, because of time and resource constraints, most evaluations did not use rigorous designs (e.g., experimental or quasi-experimental); large enough samples; validated data collection instruments; or statistical tests. As a result, it was hard to draw definitive conclusions about impact for most interventions. That said, a handful of creative and rigorous evaluations demonstrated what can be done by grantees with evaluation skills and advance planning for evaluation.

Not all activities funded by the Team Nutrition Training Grants were rigorously evaluated or even appropriate for a rigorous evaluation. Although it was not possible to gauge the impact of these activities, they may have added value or furthered achievement of the program's goals.

Recommendations

Clearly state expectations for rigorous evaluations that are part of grant activities (e.g., priority designs and outcomes). FNS could provide a clear set of standards and procedures related to evaluation and convey clear guidance on how to balance strong evaluation with service delivery.

Provide more time for planning evaluations at the start of the grant period and consider delaying implementation so evaluation components can be put into place. Grantees recommended that at a minimum, there should be allowance for evaluation planning prior to having to start service delivery.

Provide more resources for social scientists on the grant team and more resources to cover the costs of evaluation. Resources available could depend on the rigor of the evaluation proposed.

Allow grantees to narrow their focus to a smaller number of objectives in order to encourage more intensive interventions that are more conducive to rigorous evaluation. This would allow States to focus on interventions that are more intensive and of longer duration, potentially producing stronger effects.

For More Information

Goodson et al. (2020). *Evaluation of the Fiscal Year 2016 Team Nutrition Training Grants: Final Report*. Prepared by Abt Associates, Contract No. AG-3198-K-16-0071. Alexandria, VA: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Policy Support, Project Officer: Conor McGovern. Available online at the FNS research and analysis page: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/research-and-analysis>