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Lessons Learned Recruiting Comparison Elementary Schools for Impact Evaluation of SNAP-Ed Interventions

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Cover Page Footnote

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Lessons Learned Recruiting Comparison Elementary Schools for Impact Evaluation of SNAP-Ed Interventions

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Abstract. To determine the effectiveness of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program- Education (SNAP-Ed) nutrition and physical activity programming in elementary schools, it is necessary to recruit socioeconomically similar comparison schools not receiving SNAP-Ed programming. We developed a flexible recruitment strategy to tailor our approach to each individual school district and site. Here we discuss the lessons learned during the 10-month recruitment period, including early outreach, emphasizing participation benefits, leveraging and building relationships, and visiting sites.

INTRODUCTION

Ninety-five percent of U.S. children attend school, demonstrating the potential reach of nutrition and physical activity (Nut-PA) programming delivered in this setting (Snyder & Dillow, 2015). Evaluation of such programs, like those administered by Extension or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program- Education (SNAP-Ed), is essential to ensure the investment produces desired outcomes. Despite administrator and teacher preference for Nut-PA education to occur during the school day, incorporating programming—and particularly evaluation—is challenging (Cupp et al., 2006; Frye et al., 2002; Harrell et al., 2000; Hermann et al., 2011). Use of a comparison group in evaluation is essential for attributing outcomes to the intervention (United States Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2005). However, engaging, recruiting, and retaining comparison schools not receiving programming can be difficult. In this paper, we describe lessons learned during recruitment of 36 comparison elementary schools.

DESCRIPTION OF EVALUATION

Evaluators conducted a three-year evaluation of California Local Health Department (LHD)-administered school-based SNAP-Ed programming consisting of an annual pre and post (fall and spring) Nut-PA survey of fourth/fifth grade students, supplemented with a self-administered site-level assessment of Nut-PA-related policies and practices (Rider et al., 2020). In California, SNAP-Ed consists of education (e.g., Nut-PA classes or promotional materials) and policy, systems, and environmental change approaches (e.g., nutrition standards for school foods and improved wellness policies). Comparisons receive no intervention, but agree to the evaluation activities, an estimated time commitment of six hours annually. For their participation, comparison sites receive \$500 per year, along with their annual evaluation results. Due to the SNAP-Ed funding structure and grant cycle, delayed intervention or guarantee of future programming cannot be made.

COMPARISON SITE RECRUITMENT

The study objective was to determine the impact of SNAP-Ed programming on elementary students in comparison to regular practice. Therefore, we needed to recruit comparison schools with similar sociodemographic

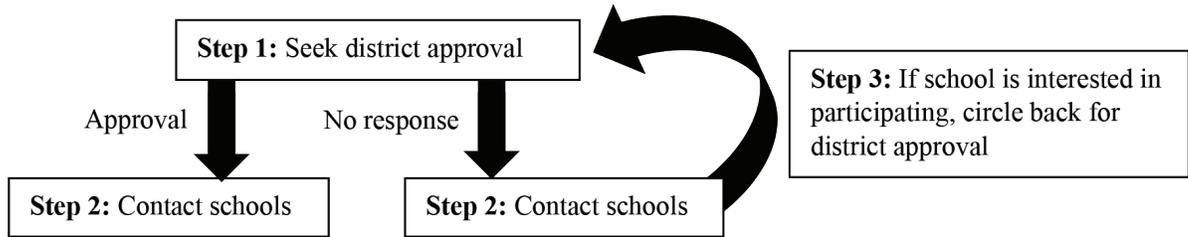


Figure 1. Steps in acquiring district approval.

characteristics that instituted programming that occurs naturally in the absence of SNAP-Ed. Inclusion/exclusion criteria for comparisons included: at least 50% of students eligible for Free/Reduced Price Meals; no current/recent SNAP-Ed programming; no externally funded Nut-PA programming. Schools whose usual practice included Nut-PA classes or gardens were not excluded, even if practice was high quality. Site-level assessments were used to control for variations in existing practices. To the extent possible, districts/schools were prioritized based on location, enrollment, and sociodemographic similarity to intervention schools. For feasibility, we prioritized those that lacked a research proposal requirement.

Flexible recruitment procedures (Figure 1) were developed so that we could effectively and consistently proceed based on the responses we received at each step in the recruitment process. Districts/schools were contacted over a 10-month period using these three steps.

RESULTS

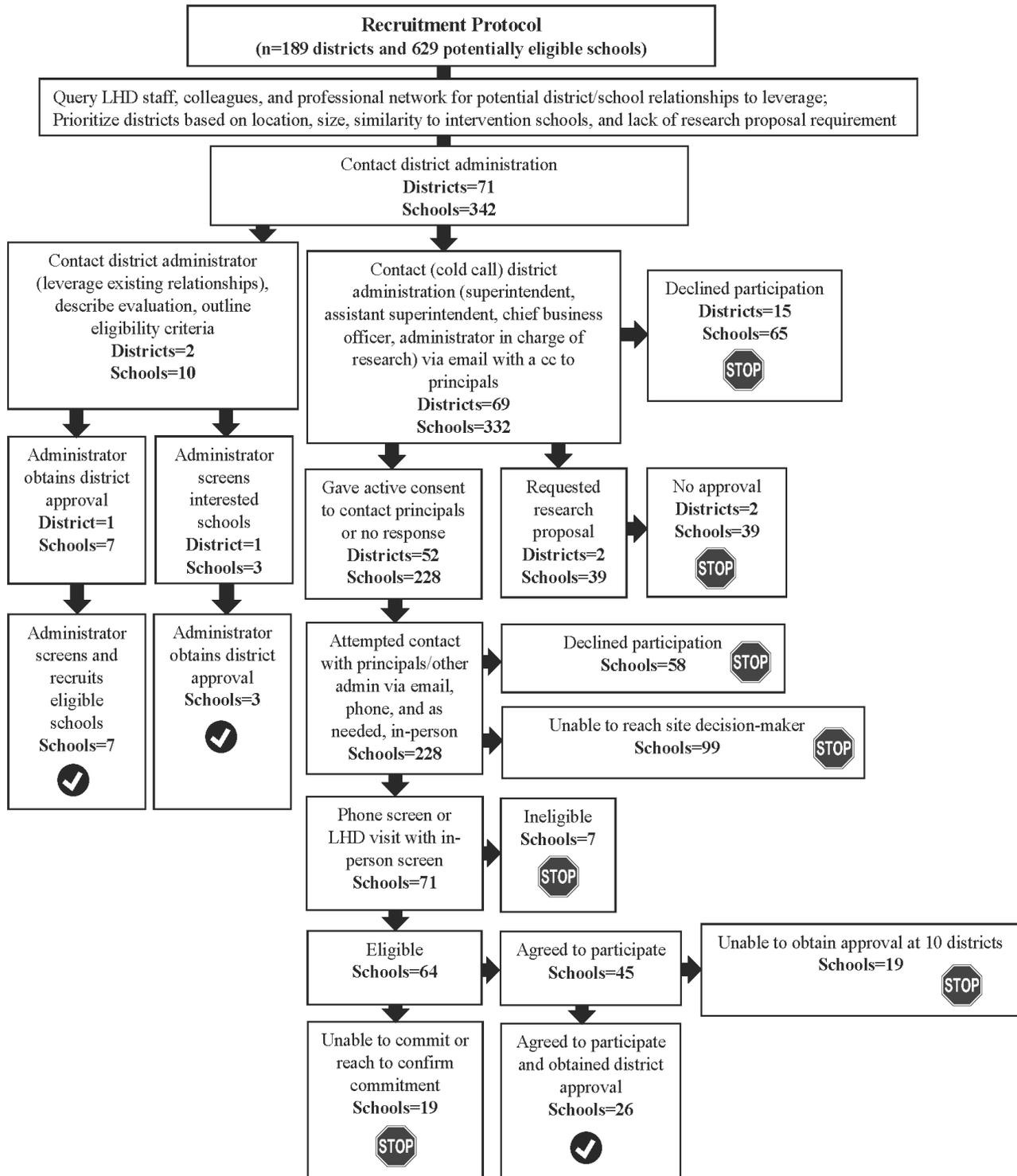
Figure 2 outlines the recruitment process. Researchers identified 629 schools in 189 districts as potentially eligible comparisons. Based on selection criteria and available time, 71 of these districts were contacted. Of these, two districts (10 schools) were recruited by leveraging existing relationships. Of the remaining 69 districts contacted, 52 of 69 districts, managing 228 schools, provided either no response or active consent to contact principals. Of these 228 schools in districts that provided approval or no response, 71 agreed to be screened to confirm eligibility. Of the 71 schools screened, 26 were eligible, had confirmed district approval, and agreed to project commitments. A total of 36 comparison schools were selected for the three-year evaluation.

LESSONS LEARNED

Researchers identified the following lessons in recruiting comparison schools:

1. Fall and winter are ideal for recruitment, but recruiters should begin the school year prior. Time of year plays an important role in school administration decisions to participate in evaluation activities (Befort et al., 2008). Almost 90% of schools were recruited between September and February, indicating that those months are the most fruitful for recruitment. Although school administrative offices were easy to reach in May-early July before summer closure, few schools were recruited between May and August because schools were focused on wrapping up the year and principals took summer break. Fall/winter recruitment success is consistent with previous findings, as by spring, state testing and other commitments take precedence (Befort et al., 2008). Timeline in relation to evaluation start is also important. For this evaluation to measure change over time in school-year interventions, intervention and comparison pre-testing was slated to take place in fall (before intervention began) and post-testing was slated to take place in spring (after interventions are complete). Although there was interest from schools in January/February, some administrators did not want to participate until the following school year, which was too late for year one pre-testing because interventions had begun.
2. Build relationships with multiple decision makers. Because principals are key decision makers, recruitment efforts centered on reaching them. However, many schools had other administrators (like vice principals, Guidance Instructional Specialists, and school nurses) that were easier to reach and had similar latitude in decision-making. These leaders, often identified through school websites, facilitated and expedited recruitment. Furthermore, building a relationship with the school office manager and gaining his/her trust was key, because the office manager serves as a gatekeeper to the principal.

Figure 2. Steps in the recruitment process.



3. Clearly and succinctly emphasize benefits of participation. Practical and tangible benefits can be more important to administrators than monetary incentives (Befort et al., 2008). A few months into recruitment, materials were revised to be more concise and compelling. Materials highlighted SNAP-Ed's role in supporting school Nut-PA, and how their school's participation would benefit children throughout the state—a benefit beyond monetary incentives and access to analyzed data.
4. Consider scheduled, in-person visits. It became difficult to reach and ultimately solidify participation by phone/email with some promising sites. It was impractical for state-level recruitment staff to travel to schools across the state, so LHD staff visited prospective schools in their county as needed. Some of these visits were scheduled, while others were impromptu. Although impromptu visits afforded immediate face time, unannounced visits were not always welcome for safety reasons. Therefore, impromptu visits should only be conducted by recruiters who are at schools for other purposes and/or by those with prior relationships with administration.
5. Leverage existing relationships. Where possible, recruitment staff leveraged existing personal and professional relationships (their own and those of LHD staff) with school districts. Having an “in” provided a district-level point person who could champion the project, recruit multiple schools in a district, and facilitate approval.

CONCLUSION

The best practices outlined here provide guidance to Extension professionals evaluating school-based programs utilizing a comparison sample. Recruitment of schools presents unique and evolving challenges. Increases in time needed to fulfill educational mandates and state testing requirements means less flexibility for programming and evaluation beyond the common core subjects. School health and safety concerns make it harder for outside organizations to engage schools. These competing demands mean that recruitment processes must remain flexible and innovative. Recruiters must present a strong case regarding the benefits of participation and leverage professional networks to gain access to decision makers. While strong selection criteria for a comparison sample is the gold standard, evaluators should consider relaxing their criteria when the pool of potential comparisons is limited. In these instances, evaluators can use statistical corrections to accommodate for differences in demographics between intervention and comparison sites. This evaluation, like many others, was adapted due to COVID-19. Substantial loss of instructional time in the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years is a potential barrier to participation in evaluation activities going forward. Nonetheless, providing Nut-PA programming and evaluating its effectiveness has arguably never been more important.

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