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Key Factors for School-Based Food Pantries: Perspectives From Food Bank and School Pantry Personnel

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The objective of this qualitative study was to identify what school and food bank personnel report as key factors for a successful school-based food pantry program.

In-depth interviews were conducted with food bank employees and school pantry personnel to gain an understanding of school food pantry operations. School pantry success was fostered by healthy relationships between schools and food banks, program marketing, convenience, supportive school staff, and adequate operating budgets. School pantries are perceived as a key component in reducing childhood hunger. An understanding of these programs is important for researchers and practitioners concerned about hunger and academic success.

KEYWORDS *school pantry programs, hunger, food insecurity*

INTRODUCTION

The United States provides an abundant food supply, yet in 2011 approximately 50 million children, adults, and seniors resided in households that struggled to obtain enough food.¹ The prevalence of food insecurity among

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children and adults rose dramatically as a result of the US economic downturn and has since persisted at high levels.²⁻⁵ Food insecurity refers to limited access to adequate food due to a lack of money and other resources,² affecting 15.8% of households with children in 2007³ and rising to 20.6% of households with children by 2011.⁴ Food insecurity is even more pronounced in female-headed households with children, where 36.8% of such households are food insecure.⁵ The current level of food insecurity is the highest level recorded since data collection began in 1995. Reducing food insecurity is a national priority for the US Department of Health and Human Services as outlined in the *Healthy People 2020* goals. *Healthy People 2020* states that food insecurity should be reduced to 6% of American households by 2020.⁶

Food insecurity is of particular concern for school-aged children, who are more likely to suffer from a number of challenges to their health and well-being. Studies have found that food insecure children are more likely to have poor health, iron deficiency, anxiety, depression, behavioral issues, psychosocial issues, and impaired academic performance.⁷⁻¹² Reducing or eliminating food insecurity is considered to be a key predecessor of allowing children to reach their full academic and social potential. The federal government invests in programs to address childhood food insecurity including The United States Department of Agriculture Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children, the National School Lunch Program, and the School Breakfast Program.¹³ Additionally, the private and nonprofit sectors provide a network of food banks and food pantries that distribute billions of pounds of food to those in need each year.

Feeding America is the nation's largest hunger-relief charity and distributes 3 billion pounds to an estimated 37 million Americans in need annually through an extensive network of food banks and food pantries.¹⁴ Feeding America has developed food pantry programs located in schools, which have experienced tremendous growth in recent years; in both school-based pantry programs and food distribution. School-based programs are a unique opportunity to reach households with children who face issues of food insecurity. Given the success of school-based food pantry programs, Feeding America recognized the importance of understanding the practices commonly used to operate school pantries.

The objective of this study was to identify what school and food bank personnel report as key factors for a successful school-based food pantry program.

METHODS

This study investigated the administration and management of school-based food pantries through in-depth interviews targeting food bank and school pantry staff. Eight school-based food pantries were selected for the study

based on the variety of distribution models (mobile market, permanent space, or prebagged/boxed) operated at each site along with the willingness of the school administration to participate in and accommodate the needs of the researchers. [Table 1](#) describes the delivery service models. Three Feeding America food banks served these school pantries. The schools had been operating their food pantries from 9 months to 2 years. Of the schools visited, the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced price lunch ranged from 75% to 96%.

The survey was designed to understand practices commonly used to operate school pantries and their relationship to client satisfaction. Interview topics included the pantry's history, delivery service models, types of food distributed, reach of the pantry, school receptivity to food pantry program, and recommendations for improving services. The interview questions were pretested at a fourth food bank and minor revisions were made based on corresponding feedback. The University's Institutional Review Board granted approval for this study.

Data collection was done by in-person visits to the selected school pantries and food banks. Fifteen in-depth audiotaped interviews were conducted with school-based food pantry personnel, including 7 school employees (social worker, counselor, school nurse, school/community coordinator, or school clerk), 4 administrators (principal or vice principal), 3 volunteers, and one teacher. In addition, 6 in-depth interviews were conducted with food bank staff, including nutrition program managers, child hunger specialists, and program coordinators. Each interview was conducted by a trained researcher (college professor or graduate student employee) and lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Each interviewee was compensated with a \$20 gift card. To analyze qualitative data, the audio recordings of the in-depth interviews were transcribed, analyzed, and coded to identify common themes and key points. The transcripts were analyzed and coded by 2 different faculty researchers who cross-checked their coding to ensure reliability.

RESULTS

Characteristics of Successful Food Pantries

School pantry and food bank interviewees described several characteristics of successful and sustainable food pantries. The interviewees perceived success as delivering culturally appropriate, healthy foods to families on a consistent basis and in a manner that supports client dignity. Interviewees also defined successful pantries as those that reach a majority of their target population. Another dimension of a successful pantry, as described in the interviews, was the ability to help build relationships between recipient families and facilitating relationships between recipients and school personnel. School

TABLE 1 Strengths and Challenges of Delivery Service Models

Model	Strengths	Challenges
Mobile market/client choice combination model	<p>May allow for distribution of perishable items.</p> <p>School does not have to have any food storage space available.</p> <p>Clients choose their own food, thus increasing client autonomy and cutting down on food waste.</p> <p>Allows school to develop relationships with clients.</p> <p>Allows clients to connect with one another.</p>	<p>Requires clients to come during set hours of distribution, which may be difficult.</p> <p>Requires more staffing and volunteers on site than preboxed/prebagged.</p> <p>May be a slower method of distribution.</p>
Permanent space/client choice model	<p>Clients choose their own food, thus increasing client autonomy and cutting down on food waste.</p> <p>Allows school to develop relationships with clients.</p> <p>Allows for flexible pickup times so parents are not required to get food during a short time window.</p>	<p>School must have storage space because food is left on site.</p> <p>Perishable items are often not distributed due to lack of access to refrigeration.</p>
Prebagged/preboxed model	<p>Allows for flexible pickup times so parents are not required to get food during a short time window.</p> <p>Ensures that all families receive the same food—described as being more “fair.”</p> <p>Clients usually do not have to wait in line because food can be distributed very quickly and discretely.</p> <p>Described as easier to administer by school coordinators and some food banks.</p>	<p>School may have to store or distribute leftover food after the distribution period.</p> <p>May diminish client dignity by taking away sense of choice.</p> <p>Clients who take prepackaged bags/boxes containing items they do not want may waste food.</p> <p>Large bags/boxes of food may be difficult for some clients to transport.</p> <p>Limited ability to distribute perishable items.</p>

food pantry personnel were often described as helping to build community around the schools by inviting parents as recipients and volunteers. School pantry programs were universally described as a point of pride for the schools and were perceived as programs that help support student learning.

In order to reach this vision of “success,” several factors were perceived by school pantry and food bank personnel to be paramount. Those factors include a healthy relationship between the food bank and school pantry; programs that were well marketed, visible, and convenient for the target population; supportive school principals and volunteers; high-quality food; and an adequate operating budget. Each of those themes will be discussed in the following sections.

To be successful, we must effectively reach the community, raise awareness, keep it relevant, stay relevant, bring nutrition education, keep the experience fun and keep it as a distribution with dignity. (Food bank staff, June, 2012)

Food Bank and School Pantry Relationship

The food bank and school pantry relationship was reported to be critical for the success of reaching pantry clients and delivering high-quality food on a consistent basis. Numerous steps are involved in the food distribution at a school pantry, including receiving food at the food bank; ordering food for the school site; repackaging and delivering food for the school; and distributing food to families. Numerous interviewees indicated the importance of food bank and school pantry communication in order to tailor food pantry logistics and the types of foods that are most popular among the recipient population.

Food bank and school pantry interviewees conveyed the importance of clearly defined responsibilities between the school pantry and food bank. Interviewees stressed the importance of effective coordination and frequent communication to ensure a high-quality food distribution program. One area that needs clear delineation is the process of food ordering. In 2 of the 3 food banks visited, the food banks ordered the food. At the third food bank, the schools controlled the responsibility of food ordering. This quote from a food bank interviewee illustrates the importance of communication between the food banks and school pantries.

The success of the pantry relies on strong communication with the key players—we need advocates at the school on a daily basis. It can be easy to prioritize other things that are talked about on a daily basis; if it [school pantry] can become part of the school culture that they embrace and see it as a service they provide to their community, utilize and incorporate other education opportunities. (Food bank staff)

School Pantry Marketing and Awareness

According to the in-depth interviews with school pantry and food bank staff, some programs have increased overall awareness of the pantry with effective marketing campaigns that utilize strategically timed phone calls to families, fliers in children's backpacks, parent meetings, and monthly newsletters with the dates of the school pantry distributions listed on the school calendar. School interviewees stressed the importance of marketing the pantry constantly because many schools have high (up to 50% in an academic year) student turnover rates. It is also important to involve teachers and school employees to effectively communicate the purpose and availability of the pantry to parents and caregivers. A final theme related to marketing in schools serving multicultural populations was the importance of having communications available in multiple languages. For example, one school believed that a key to increasing participation was having automated phone calls go out to all student households in English and a second language, if necessary.

We have a flier that we give to everyone that registers with all the dates on it for the year and we put it in the school calendar that everyone gets. On the month that it's happening, I send a flier with each student. We also do a phone call to each family in Somali and English. (School pantry volunteer)

Program Visibility and Accessibility

Many school pantry interviewees discussed the benefits of locating the pantry in a place where clients are able to see food distributions. Contrary to popular belief, interviewees stated that pantries are more successful when they are a visible part of the school community; this increases social acceptance and creates a sense of community around the pantry. These quotes are from interviewees highlighting the important role of school pantries in building community and connections.

Stigma—but not the typical conversation around stigma—not just that people won't want to come if people know they are coming. That's not true, a lot of our participants love our pantry because it is a community event and they go and feel like they are not the only ones who are struggling so there is a kind of camaraderie there. So sometimes making it more visible can be a pro, not a con. (Food bank interviewee)

Parents connect with other parents. Normally poverty can be so isolating. (School pantry interviewee)

It has brought a lot more parents together. It has put a lot more smiles on their faces and it has taken a lot of stress off parents when they are struggling in certain parts of the month. (School pantry interviewee)

Responsiveness to Pantry Recipients' Scheduling Needs

Many school food pantry interviewees reported that the hours of food distribution are an important factor impacting pantry utilization. School pantry interviewees indicated that it is often difficult to schedule distributions at times that work for the clients, school pantry volunteers, and food bank employees. Pantry hours may interfere with parents' work schedules, or clients may need daycare services for their children while they attend a distribution. One response to this challenge is to combine the distribution with another school event. Some schools reported that combining a distribution with another event can increase participation, particularly among parents who may not have been likely to attend a distribution otherwise. However, other schools reported that not having a distribution on the same night each month can create a lack of consistency and make it more difficult for some participants to plan their attendance. Some schools were very cognizant of the struggles many families face near the end of the month and scheduled their distributions strategically to help families when their home food and financial resources are low. The following quotes illustrate these sentiments, which were a theme in multiple interviews.

What we found out when we started interviewing parents is that they would really like to have it [the pantry] on the same night same time every month. (Food bank staff)

I arranged it on our calendar. The third Tuesday of every month—I do that so I get the Tuesday before Thanksgiving. We do the third week of the month because assistance money is usually running out by then. (School pantry staff)

School Pantry Personnel and Volunteers

Food bank and school pantry interviewees expressed that school pantries require a dedicated team of people in the school, including administrators, school employees, and volunteers to support their missions and operations. Several interviewees indicated that the support of the principal is key to the success of the pantry. Effective principal support of the pantry can come in the form of the principal's name on newsletters, reminder phone calls from the principal to give the program additional credibility, and a dedicated team appointed by the principal to oversee pantry operations.

Even though the principal isn't involved, she's completely supportive. (School pantry staff)

We work with a lot of principals and vice principals and counselor type positions. Some are teachers as well, at one school there is actually a nurse. But to some degree or another we work with the principal at every school to ensure they are on board though they might not be the direct point of contact. (Food bank staff)

It's also completely essential to have the school recruit volunteers and things like that. . . . I think what really makes a school pantry successful is community involvement, especially parent involvement. (Food bank staff)

One thing we learned . . . if you don't have a strong partnership with the school and you don't have buy in from the administration, it's really hard to do it [operate the pantry]. (Food bank staff)

High-Quality Food and Client Experience

Many of the food bank and school pantry interviewees mentioned having pantry personnel who are sensitive to community members' needs maximizes pantry success. This sensitivity can come in the form of parent volunteers who mirror the demographic characteristics of the recipient population, attention to the food preferences of the client group, or efforts to create positive client experiences at each pantry visit. The interviewees expressed a strong desire to make the pantry experience positive and even "family-like" for clients in order to boost participation.

The second year the food pantry really boomed and took off because we got to know more of the parents and that's what I love. I know a lot of the parents on their first name. I know a lot of their kids. The other parents know the parents and their kids know their kids and it brings them together and they interact more and they flow better you know, because it's not just a school, it's a second family for them. (School pantry staff)

I think it is important to have a pantry that is consistent and has a good selection of food items that families might not normally purchase and in my mind a lot of times that's fresh produce and some of the more expensive protein type items. And that is open consistent hours so whether that is once a week or bi-weekly but families know that it is a reliable source of food for them if they need it to be. (Food bank staff)

Budgetary Constraints

In some schools, the food ordered did not meet the needs of the number of eligible families. Due to budgetary limitations, the selection process to determine who received the services became one based on perceived need and who the school coordinators believed could benefit the most from the pantry services. Some schools served families on a rotational basis, alternating between groups of families, and others maintained limited lists of families who are notified about the pantry.

Other ideas related to budgetary constraints, included lacking the ability to provide transportation for families or daycare services to allow families to utilize pantries. Several locations expressed an interest in initiating or expanding those services but could not do so because of budgetary limitations. Other schools mentioned smaller items, such as food distribution bags, that were difficult to obtain due to their budgets.

Food pantries aren't by nature sustainable; you have to put money in them to get food there. We have to engage donors and rally them around this issue in a sustained way. Funding sustainability is probably the most important. (Food bank staff)

DISCUSSION

The in-depth interviews with school pantry and food bank personnel indicate that a number of factors are paramount to the success of school-based food pantries (Figure 1).

Schools and food banks should consider their own resources and their client populations when initiating a school food pantry. Schools and food banks have a shared responsibility to ensure clear and consistent communication related to school food pantry operations.

Food banks must work with schools to clearly delineate responsibilities for ordering high-quality food consistent with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, setting up for distributions, marketing the program, and assisting with the recruitment and management of volunteers to ensure smooth pantry operations.

Schools have a responsibility to take the lead on marketing the pantries through phone calls, fliers, teachers, staff, and students. Schools also need to ensure that they have a supportive principal and a cadre of staff and volunteers to administer the program. Schools should also consider raising the visibility of their programs and take into careful consideration what days and times of food distribution will work best for the recipients as well as the school personnel and food bank staff.

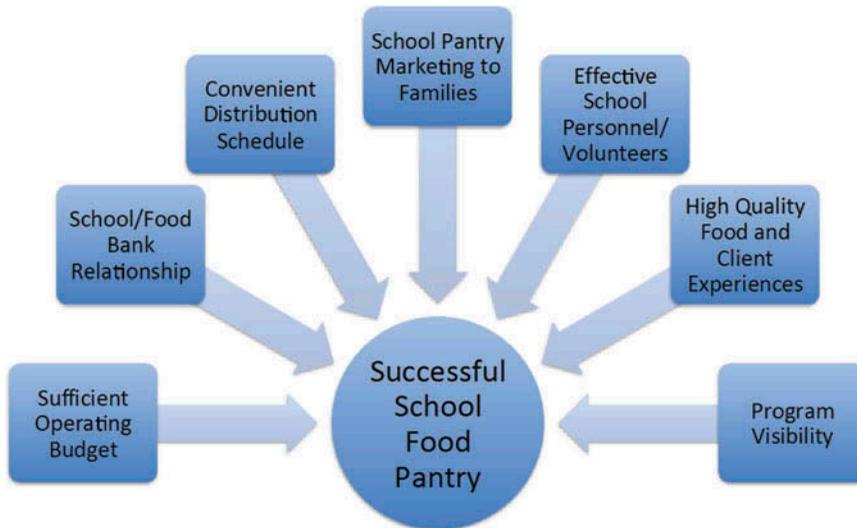


FIGURE 1 Contributors to successful school pantry program from sample of 6 food bank and 15 food pantry interviews.

Creating a sense of community through marketing efforts and volunteer participation is beneficial for reducing possible stigmas associated with receiving aid and encourage individuals to partake in the benefits of food bank programs to reduce food insecurity.

Limitations

This study has several methodological limitations. First, the study was only conducted at 3 geographic locations and cannot be considered a nationally representative study. The number of interviews conducted at each site was also limited.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

Future program evaluations conducted by both researchers and practitioners should be an ongoing process and conducted at multiple points throughout the year to prospectively examine school food pantry operations and learn from changes implemented throughout the school year. School food pantry operations could also be examined with additional qualitative interviews with pantry recipients to gain a deeper understanding of their experience with the programs. Finally, longitudinal studies examining the impact of school based food pantries on food insecurity are warranted to assess the impact of the programs on this important determinant of child health and well-being,

including the impact on child and household food security. School pantry programs are perceived as a key component reducing childhood hunger and boosting student learning. A thorough understanding of these programs is important for researchers and practitioners concerned about child food insecurity and academic success.

In terms of support services, it [school pantry] is a pretty high priority because food is basic. Kids who are hungry can't learn very well. Families who are hungry . . . that's hard. (School pantry staff)

It is a high priority—if the children are hungry they are not going to learn. All of our students get free lunch but some students go home and do not have food at home. (School pantry staff)

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