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Addressing Government Targets with Healthy Lunchboxes

There is increasing concern regarding the rise of childhood obesity and the implications of obesity persisting into adulthood. According to the Northern Ireland Health and Social Wellbeing Survey 2005/06, 18% of children aged 2-15 are obese, 20% of boys and 15% of girls.

The local Western Health and Social Care Trust (WHST) in Northern Ireland have been working along side various partners to begin to halt the rise in obesity. Furthermore, the Priority For Action target for obesity in Boards and Trusts in Northern Ireland states, by 31 March 2008, they will contribute to stopping the increase in the levels of obesity in children through the implementation of integrated plans by Boards, Trusts and Investing for Health partnerships and by 2010 to halt the rise in obesity.

Smart Snack Scheme

Following on from the success of the local Smart Snack Scheme, a healthy breaks initiative in the WHST, it was apparent that school-based health promotion interventions can be effective in transmitting knowledge, developing skills and supporting health behaviour choices (O'Neill & O'Donnell, 2002).

With the introduction of nutritional standards for school meals (Department of Education for Northern Ireland, 2001), an emphasis was being placed on the nutritional content of school meals;

however, local schools believed there was a need to address the gap for those children and parents preparing and bringing a packed lunch to school.

The Healthy Munch Box Challenge

The Healthy Munch Box Challenge was developed in 2006 as a joint initiative between the WHST Health Promotion Department, Western Education and Library Board (WELB) and Environmental Health. 110 schools (60%) have since participated in the challenge and aim to promote healthy eating habits and improve oral health in children, through the implementation and maintenance of a healthy lunch box.

The objectives of the challenge are to:

- Support and encourage Primary Schools within the WHST to introduce a healthy lunch box based on the Eat Well Plate (Food Standards Agency, 2007) in partnership with parents, teachers and Board of Governors
- Establish healthy eating practices as customary practices

Local programmes

Local programmes grounded in the school setting have been an effective and efficient way of engaging with the local population. Local schools stated, "there has

been a massive change, most children are now eating their packed lunch and there's very little being sent home, less sweets/chocolate have been brought into school with more children bringing in fresh fruit drinks, sandwiches and less crisps".

Successful challenge

As each school takes direction from their Board of Governors, the continued support is necessary for the effective implementation of the challenge. 100% of schools said that their Board of Governors have been very supportive of the challenge and, in general, welcome any initiative that will aid in the improvement of their pupils' health.

Many schools suggested that, in the short term, the challenge was implemented and it has proved to be successful. However, it is early days and will take some time to become established. The Healthy Munch Box Challenge has worked towards achieving a balance between schools, Health Promotion Department, parents and the Board of Governors by developing a resource applicable to all concerned.

The WHSCT Health Promotion Department stated that the challenge was successful in providing a platform to engage with individuals to improve health and wellbeing. Other initiatives, which have been locally successful, include the

Health Promoting School Award and Smart Snacks Award.

With the Government's target on halting obesity in Northern Ireland and the Health Secretary Alan Johnson recently unveiling plans for a national movement to tackle the problem, this school-based healthy eating intervention programme has the potential to influence children's eating habits and have a positive effect on combined efforts of parents, school staff, and children.

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