# Lifting barriers to nutrition

May 24 2012, By Bev Betkowski

Anna Farmer (left) and Linda McCarger conducted a nutrition study as part of a larger U of A project aimed at evaluating Alberta's nutrition guidelines for children in schools.

(Medical Xpress) -- A University of Alberta study has revealed challenges that schools are working through, to adopt healthier food choices for their students in an effort to meet government guidelines for nutrition.

The study, recently published in the Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior showed that profit loss, parental concerns, student preferences and physical location of the school all pose challenges to adopting healthy eating guidelines set out by the provincial government.

The study was conducted as part of a larger U of A research project aimed at evaluating the awareness, adoption and implementation of the Alberta Nutrition Guidelines for Children and Youth in schools. The guidelines were released in 2008 by the provincial government, to

provide schools, child-care facilities and recreation centres, with ways to use Canada's Food Guide and create healthy food environments.

The measures—all voluntary— include offering healthier food choices in school cafeterias and vending machines, serving smaller portions, supporting children who have food allergies and ensuring students have appropriate time and space to eat.

Professor Linda McCargar of the U of A's Department of Agricultural, Food and Nutritional Science, was interested in whether the guidelines were being adopted.

"Guidelines are released all the time, and we wanted to evaluate the ones in Alberta, particularly for such a broad audience of child-care facilities, schools and recreation centres," said McCargar, who led the study.

Using a phone survey of 19 questions, the U of A researchers interviewed principals, teachers or other staff from 357 urban and rural schools across Alberta, asking about school characteristics (such as proximity to malls), use of the Alberta Nutrition Guidelines, and any barriers to using them.

The survey showed that within one year of the guidelines being released, 65 per cent of the schools had adopted them in some way, while 35 per cent were considered not to be using them at that time. Schools that were larger, public, urban and had a designated food champion were more likely to adopt the guidelines, the study found.

"The early buy-in was pretty good, but they still find it a challenge to follow the guidelines 100 per cent," said Anna Farmer, a co-author on the study and Assistant Professor in the Department of Agricultural, Food and Nutritional Science and the Centre for Health Promotion Studies.

The study uncovered a lack of resources for schools to cover various financial or programming gaps in delivering the nutrition guidelines; for instance, covering the losses of funds previously raised through vending machine sales, or having a dedicated staffer to be a 'food champion', in order to lead school initiatives on nutrition.

"By providing resources, the government will help schools move towards healthier food choices, and ultimately, we hope to see that the norm in schools and other youth facilities is that healthy eating is valued and that students learn more about nutrition," McCargar said.

The study was funded by a grant from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research.

Provided by University of Alberta

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