An E-Learning Culinary Training Program: Increasing Confidence Among Wisconsin School Nutrition Professionals During COVID-19

Erin Skalitzky, MPH, eskalitzky@wisc.edu, University of Wisconsin-Madison Population Health Institute; Kelly Williams, RDN, CD, Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI)

Objective: The objective of this study was to evaluate the Wisconsin Quality Meal Improvement (QMI) culinary e-learning training program, a hands-on curriculum for school nutrition professionals (SNPs), using outcome evaluation techniques.

Use of Theory or Research: Past research supports chef-based culinary trainings as successful strategies for increasing skills and confidence among SNPs. The Kirkpatrick’s Four Levels of Training Evaluation were incorporated into the evaluation.

Audience: SNPs from 32 Wisconsin school districts participated in the e-learning QMI culinary training course during the summer of 2020.

Description: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction designed a hands-on, culinary curriculum to increase knowledge, skills, and confidence among SNPs across the state. The curriculum included 8 lessons ranging from knife cuts to using herbs and spices. The lessons also included professional chef demonstrations and opportunities to practice. The program was originally designed to be in-person, but it was moved to a virtual, e-learning format in response to COVID-19.

Evaluation: Participants completed a post-training survey (n=99) and a 6-month follow-up survey (n=77). The post-survey included course satisfaction and changes in culinary skills confidence. The follow-up survey included knowledge and skills used since and changes observed due to participation.

Results: Post-survey respondents reported higher confidence in their culinary skills after participation in the e-learning training (p<0.001). About two-thirds were inspired to increase the variety of recipes in future menus. Almost half preferred the virtual format over in-person. Most follow-up survey respondents reported having had used the gained knowledge and skills since participating in the training, most commonly by using knife skills in the kitchen and preparing a recipe with a fresh vegetable. Many observed changes in their program due to their participation, including increased menu variety and positive staff and student feedback.

Conclusions and Implications: These results indicate that an e-learning training program can increase confidence in culinary skills among SNPs. These results are specific to Wisconsin, and further exploration is needed on the outcomes of this innovative culinary skills training model for SNPs.

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Enhanced School Nutrition Strategies, Training, Action Plans, and Resources (E-STAR) Grant

Whitney Vance, MS, RDN, vancew@michigan.gov, Michigan Department of Education; Monal Shroff, PhD, MPH, Michigan Public Health Institute; Janet Gaffke, MS, RDN, SNS, Michigan Department of Education; Nicholas Thompson, MPH, Michigan Public Health Institute; Kristina Talarek, MA, Michigan Public Health Institute; Jordan Kamal, MPH, Michigan Public Health Institute; Viki Lorraine, MS, Michigan Department of Education

Objective: To implement and evaluate the Institute of Child Nutrition’s (ICN) Enhanced School Nutrition Strategies, Training, Action Plans and Resources (E-STAR) program to improve school meal quality and student perception of meal quality in select school buildings in Michigan.

Description: Sixty-four School Nutrition Managers participated in the initial grant training. Managers were paired with retired food service directors who served as their “mentors” for the 2-year grant period. Despite many challenges, Managers worked toward their goals by attending virtual training, developing and implementing action plans, delivering Manager’s Corner trainings to their frontline staff, and holding regular meetings with their mentors. Schools participating in the E-STAR Grant received sub-grant funding plus a technology stipend. The technology stipend allowed E-STAR schools to purchase electronic devices for their School Nutrition Manager to use for virtual grant activities in response to the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Evaluation: E-STAR Managers created action plans to improve meal quality and student perception of meal quality. In year 1, the most selected strategies for meal quality were increasing menu variety and choices (44%), enhancing visual appeal of meals (33%), and enhancing culinary preparation techniques (22%). The most commonly selected strategies for student perception of meal quality were enhancing the school environment (44%), marketing efforts (36%), and nutrition education (20%). School Nutrition Managers delivered Manager’s Corner trainings from ICN to their frontline staff. Within the first year, 156 trainings were provided to 95 staff. The most popular training topics were customer communication and experience. Satisfaction surveys revealed 98% of staff agreed the trainings increased their knowledge, 96% agreed the trainings helped them do their job better, and 98% agreed the trainings will help them improve meal quality. Action plan activities will be assessed at the end of year 2 as well as focus group discussions and results of student surveys.

Conclusion and Implications: The E-STAR grant continues through September 2023. With a few minor modifications, this program may be replicated in other states.

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