Enhancing Culinary Skills to Increase Acceptability of Local Foods

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Objective: School Nutrition Professionals (SNPs) can influence diet quality and local food systems by developing new recipes served to children participating in Federal school meal programs. This pilot project’s objective is to enhance culinary skills of food preparers, thereby promoting acceptability of local food products in the state of Louisiana.

Description: In 2021, the Louisiana Department of Education received a Team Nutrition Training Grant to support understanding, developing, and using standardized recipes within school meal programs. Improving the culinary skills of SNPs is critical to implementing newly developed recipes focusing on local foods. Culinary competence in knife and measuring skills will enhance SNPs confidence level resulting in improved job performance and student acceptance of new menu items. Student taste testing is critical to engaging staff in menu development, thereby increasing awareness of Farm to School initiatives.

Evaluation: We recruited 96 SNPs from twenty Louisiana parishes to participate in a one-day culinary training. Participants prepared newly developed recipes as part of the training, each of which included at least one locally grown/produced item. Pre/post-training evaluations about knife skills, measuring skills, food presentation, how closely recipes are followed and questions regarding use of local produce were included. How recipes reflect cultural and regional preferences and the likelihood of students’ willingness to try new recipes were also important.

Conclusions and Implications: Participants (39%) indicated Louisiana foods were served in their cafeterias and 92% believed the recipes reflected cultural and regional preferences of students. Approximately 83% of training attendees agreed that it is easy to encourage students to try local products. Pre/post training skill-based evaluations indicated competency in knife and measuring skills increased from 19% to 60% and 30% to 68%, respectively. The likelihood that program participants follow recipe instructions increased slightly. These one-day hands-on culinary trainings are cost-effective, efficient, fun, and will lead to consistent quality and quantity school meals while engaging with students about promoting local foods and acknowledging their nutrient contribution.

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Improving School Nutrition Program Professionals’ Culinary and Scratch Cooking Confidence

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Objective: To study the impact of Pennsylvania’s Culinary Training Program on school nutrition professionals’ (SNPs) use of and confidence in culinary and food service skills.

Description: Professional development is a critical component for SNPs to successfully implement school meal standards and prepare meals that incorporate scratch-cooking techniques. During the summers of 2021 and 2022, 6 culinary trainings were conducted throughout Pennsylvania with 133 SNPs, funded through a 2019 Team Nutrition Training Grant. Pennsylvania’s Culinary Training Program offers SNPs a 2-day, hands-on training with a professional chef. Team menu preparation allows peer-to-peer learning. The training is modeled after the Maryland Culinary Training Program and integrates culinary skills demonstrations including knife skills, vegetable cookery, and preparation of beans, legumes, and grains, with hands-on application of those techniques in a non-threatening and supportive environment.

Evaluation: A mixed-methods study was implemented, including: 1) a pre/post survey of confidence using culinary skills, and attitudes and barriers to scratch cooking; 2) in-depth interviews with participants to learn about takeaways, the extent to which they implement the learning, and ideas for improving the training; and 3) in-depth interviews with menu planners after the training to learn about challenges and successes implementing the skills into district menus. Pre/post-training survey data was collected from 79 participants. Modest, but statistically significant, increases were found for 9 of the 13 culinary skills assessed, including knife skills, sweating, blanching, and roasting. Participant interviews corroborated the survey findings, with participants sharing anecdotes about “holding a knife properly and safely” and “applying different knife cuts to different produce.” Both participants and menu planners also discussed the challenges of implementing scratch cooking with staff shortages and changes and kitchen limitations.

Conclusions and Implications: The findings provide evidence that culinary training can effectively impact culinary skill confidence. Lessons learned and insights from interviews to examine factors that may improve training impact will be shared.

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