

The USDA Fruit and Vegetable Pilot Program Evaluation

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National data on the diets of U.S. children and adolescents indicate they are consuming more fat and saturated fat than recommended while their intakes of fruits and vegetables fall well below recommended levels. The increasing prevalence of obesity in these age groups adds to concern about the quality of their diets. Schools can be a venue for promoting healthful eating habits among youth not only because of the schools' ongoing influence in children's daily lives, but also because of the considerable Federal investment in USDA child nutrition programs such as the National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program.

Fruits and Vegetables Get High Grades in Pilot Schools

To promote fresh fruit and vegetable consumption among the Nation's schoolchildren, the Nutrition Title of the 2002 Farm Act provided \$6 million for USDA to award to schools through a Fruit and Vegetable Pilot Program for the 2002-03 school year. The pilot provided fresh and dried fruits and fresh vegetables free to children in 107 elementary and secondary schools—100 schools in 4 States (25 each in Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, and Ohio) and 7 schools in the Zuni Indian Tribal Organization in New Mexico. The pilot funds were allocated to each school on a per student basis of \$94 per student. The intent of the pilot was to determine the feasibility of such a program and students' interest in participating. As requested by Congress, the Economic Research Service conducted an evaluation of the pilot. The evaluation was based on an analysis of monthly administrative school reports, December reports, February reports, site visits to schools, focus groups, interviews, and a conference of pilot program managers, other pilot staff, and policy stakeholders.

The pilot was popular among most students, parents, school teachers, principals, pilot managers, foodservice staff, and State representatives. Of the 105 schools reporting on feasi-

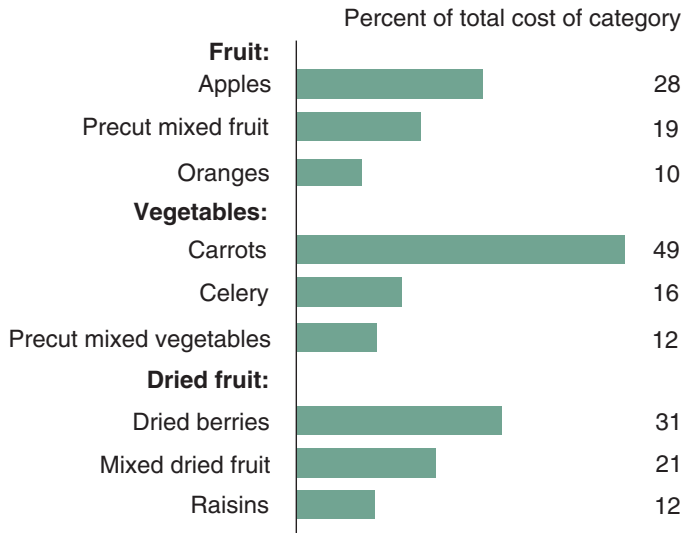


bility, 100 schools thought that it would be feasible to continue the program beyond the pilot if funding were continued. Schools reported that 80 percent of students were very interested in the pilot and 18 percent were somewhat interested; 71 percent of the schools believed that students' interest had increased during the pilot period.

Four Key Factors in Pilot's Success

- The level of cooperation, communication, and commitment among principals, teachers, foodservice directors, and other staff was high, perhaps partially because principals and foodservice directors applied voluntarily to participate in the pilot.
- The level of support and partnerships with States and other nonschool partners was also high.
- The flexibility of the pilot allowed each school to develop its own implementation plan, work out problems, have

Apples, carrots, and dried berries top list for food expenditures



Source: Nov. and Dec. 2002 monthly administrative reports.

broad involvement among teachers and other school staff, and reach its own solutions. Schools could choose when, where, and how they wanted to implement the pilot and could select the mix and quantities of pilot foods to offer students.

- There was ample funding for the pilot, which allowed schools to provide higher quality fruits and vegetables; value-added products, such as pre-sliced items or individually packaged products (e.g., bagged baby carrots); and condiments (e.g., dips to accompany vegetables).

Can the Pilot Program Go National?

Some schools were not spending all money granted to them (\$94 per student), largely due to the time needed to start and implement the pilot. Some schools initiated the pilot in October 2002 while others started as late as January 2003. Even if schools had fully implemented the pilot the entire school year, funding for the pilot for the 2002-03 school

year would have been ample. However, many schools said that the 10-percent cap requirement on paying nonfood costs (e.g., administrative costs necessary to implement the pilot, such as extra labor, storage, and equipment) out of grant money was too restrictive.

Nationwide expansion of the program at a level comparable to that of the pilot would cost an estimated \$4.5 billion, based on an average cost of \$94 per student and a count of 48.2 million children in public schools in 2001. Costs would be higher if private schools also participated. These estimates do not include the costs and burden for USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS)—the agency responsible for implementing the pilot—or for State departments of education and health to administer and support an expanded program. Costs could be lower if all schools offered fruits and vegetables only once a day.

Information Sources

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