



External Evaluation of Fruit in Schools

Executive Summary - Final Report

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Prepared for

5+ A Day Charitable Trust

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Executive summary

Evaluation outline

This report presents the findings of an independent evaluation of Fruit in Schools conducted by Quigley and Watts Ltd in late 2014. The primary purpose of the evaluation was to understand and document the benefits of Fruit in Schools, in particular any wider health promotion impacts, with a particular focus on nutrition and healthy eating.

The evaluation drew on a range of information sources including findings from an online survey of principals of Fruit in Schools schools (n=378) with a response rate of 81%; 16 key informant interviews with school principals, Health Promoting Schools facilitators, and a Ministry of Health official; and previous Fruit in Schools evaluations.

Programme description

The Fruit in Schools programme is funded by the Ministry of Health and provides a piece of fresh produce for each child each school day in low decile primary and intermediate schools. A wide range of high quality fruit and vegetables are supplied, with an emphasis on seasonal local produce. Each school has developed its own processes for storage and distribution of the fruit. As at September 2014, there were about 480 schools participating in the Fruit in Schools programme.

Benefits of Fruit in Schools

Principals valued Fruit in Schools highly, and believed it was very beneficial for their school and the wider community. Survey respondents were asked to rate the overall effect of Fruit in Schools on a scale from 1 ('Has had no positive effect') to 10 ('Has had a very positive effect'). 87% rated it 8, 9, or 10, with 46% of principals giving Fruit in Schools the highest possible rating – 10.

Key informants advocated strongly for the continuation of the programme, and expressed concern about what would happen if Fruit in Schools ended. Findings about the specific benefits of the programme are summarised below.

Feeding hungry children

According to principals, feeding hungry children is the number one benefit of Fruit in Schools. 85% of principals surveyed reported their school had fewer hungry children as a result of Fruit in Schools. 80% reported reduced stigma as a result of Fruit in Schools, and said that children were more willing to ask for food if they were hungry. Principals said that children coming to school hungry or bringing little or no lunch was a significant issue in low decile schools.

Educational benefits

In the survey, 72% of principals agreed or strongly agreed that 'if Fruit in Schools was ended, academic outcomes would suffer.' Principals explained that the main way fruit provision contributed to academic outcomes was by providing 'brain food' that enabled children to concentrate and stay on task, and 74% reported they had observed increased concentration in class as a result of Fruit in Schools. Many principals also observed that Fruit in Schools was contributing to learning by providing authentic learning opportunities (89%), reducing behaviour problems (46%), and improving attendance and engagement (60%).

Health benefits

Both principals and Health Promoting Schools facilitators agreed that Fruit in Schools was providing direct health benefits for children in low decile schools due to increased consumption of fresh produce, and wider dietary changes triggered by Fruit in Schools. For example, in the survey:

- 66% of principals reported they had observed an improvement in students' general health as a result of Fruit in Schools;
- 43% had observed fewer cases of school sores and skin infections;
- 35% said students had fewer sick days due to Fruit in Schools;
- 91% agreed or strongly agreed that 'the overall health of children would decline' if Fruit in Schools was ended; and
- 97% agreed or strongly agreed that 'if fruit in schools was ended many of our kids would eat little or no fruit'.

Interviewees agreed that a key benefit of Fruit in Schools was the normalising of fruit eating, and the instilling of positive habits and attitudes to healthy eating.

- All principals (100%) reported that Fruit in Schools contributes to awareness among staff and pupils about the importance of healthy eating
- All principals (100%) said Fruit in Schools contributed to positive attitudes among pupils about eating fruit and vegetables
- Almost all reported that the programme contributed to awareness about the '5+ a day' message (99%), and increased knowledge among pupils about nutrition and health (98%).

Supporting a healthy school environment

Key informants reported that Fruit in Schools had been part of a culture change towards addressing child health and wellbeing as a core education issue. Fruit in Schools was seen as having cultural and social benefits as well as educational and health benefits, for example 95% of principals said Fruit in School contributes to a sense of equality between pupils regardless of their family circumstances.

Almost all participating schools had broader nutrition and healthy lifestyle initiatives in place, including healthy food policies, school gardens and orchards, and healthy lunchbox initiatives for example. Health Promoting Schools facilitators commented that such changes made by schools were generally maintained long term. 96% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that Fruit in Schools helps to keep health and wellbeing on the agenda.

Schools differed in the extent to which wider health promotion initiatives were directly attributable to Fruit in Schools. Some schools saw Fruit in Schools as the catalyst and foundation for their wider healthy lifestyle approach, whereas other schools introduced health promotion initiatives before or at the same time as Fruit in Schools and therefore saw it as a complementary programme rather than a catalyst.

Supporting a healthy home environment

Principals reported that Fruit in Schools was having a positive impact on children's home environment and parental behaviours, at least in some families. For example 44% of principals reported that 'many families' were providing less sugary drinks and junk food in school lunches, and a further 40% said 'a few families' were doing so.

Success factors for Fruit in Schools

The majority of key informants agreed that Fruit in Schools was successful because:

- It is meeting a genuine need and making a real difference
- It is very well managed, and easy for schools to participate
- The fruit and vegetables provided are varied and of high quality
- It has been consistent and reliable over many years

These factors, and that fact that the programme is delivered at no cost to schools or communities, have made Fruit in Schools sustainable from the schools' perspective.

How could Fruit in Schools be improved?

Several principals and Health Promoting Schools facilitators said the programme should be expanded to higher decile schools, since food insecurity and poor nutrition are not limited to decile one and two schools. This finding was also reflected in the survey with 83% of principals agreeing or strongly agreeing that 'Fruit in Schools should be extended and made available to all decile 3 and 4 schools.' One Health Promoting Schools facilitator said the programme should be expanded to low decile secondary schools so that the good eating habits continue to be supported as children grow up.

Most principals were satisfied with the nutrition-related teaching resources available, however a lack of resources in Te Reo Māori was an issue for Māori immersion schools.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the current evaluation, we conclude that Fruit in Schools is an effective food and nutrition programme with wide ranging benefits. It is highly valued by schools and well aligned with international evidence on how to improve nutrition and reduce obesity in children.

The findings of the current evaluation reinforce and update the findings of previous evaluations and show that Fruit in Schools is still a much needed and highly valued programme. We recommend that Fruit in Schools is continued and consideration is given to the expansion of the programme to decile 3 and 4 schools, and low decile secondary schools.