

EVALUATION OF THE 'HEALTHY BREAKS' INITIATIVE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY & KEY FINDINGS



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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY & KEY FINDINGS

1.1 Introduction

The Northern Health and Social Services Board (NHSSB) has commissioned BDO Stoy Hayward to conduct an evaluation of its Healthy Breaks initiative. The Healthy Breaks Initiative focused upon introducing, supporting and sustaining healthy eating at break time in 28 participating primary schools, alongside the introduction of a whole school ‘Healthy Breaks’ policy. This policy encouraged children and staff to consume only fruit, vegetables, bread based products, water and milk at break time. The Initiative aimed to:

“Improve the health and life chances of children who are most at risk from Coronary Heart Disease, Cancer and Stroke in later years by encouraging children from disadvantaged areas to adopt and sustain healthy eating patterns at school, at home and in the community and to create the environment to facilitate this”.

The Initiative was awarded funding of £300,273 from the Big Lottery Fund, and was co-ordinated by the Northern Neighbourhoods Health Action Zone (NNHAZ). The programme worked in partnership with the following six bodies:

Causeway Health and Social Services Trust;	Southern Education and Library Board;
Homefirst Community Trust;	Northern Investing for Health Partnership; and
North Eastern Education and Library Board;	Northern Health and Social Services Board

1.2 Key Findings

1.2.1 Activity

Healthy Breaks was introduced to 28 schools within the NHSSB area, with schools joining the Initiative in three phases. Salient points to note include:

- All participating schools introduced a ‘Healthy Breaks’ policy;
- Overall, 6,490 pupils within 263 classes benefited from participating on the Healthy Breaks initiative; and
- 301 teachers were involved in the implementation of the initiative.

1.2.2 Achievement of Objectives

The majority of Principals felt that their school has achieved either ‘wholly or ‘partially’ its objective for participating on Healthy Breaks.

	Have achieved		Won’t achieve	Still expect to realise	N
	Wholly	Partially			
To support the introduction of a healthy eating scheme within your school	64%	36%	-	-	14
To gain support to formalise a healthy eating policy within your school	85%	15%	-	-	13
To gain additional funding for your school	67%	25%	8%	-	12
To support the implementation of the revised curriculum	-	71%	-	29%	7

1.2.3 *Awareness of Healthy Eating Habits*

Most Principals and teachers were in agreement that **awareness of healthy eating habits** had improved amongst staff, pupils, pupils' parents and catering staff following participation on Healthy Breaks.

1.2.4 *Culture Change*

According to the majority of Principals and Teachers, the Healthy Breaks **initiative has been embraced** by staff, pupils, pupils' parents and catering staff.

1.2.5 *Impact on Pupils' Eating Habits*

- According to Principals, the **eating habits** of pupils (100%), Teaching Staff (86%) and catering staff (42%) had improved to 'some' or a 'large' extent as a result of Healthy Breaks.
- In addition, the majority of Teachers also agree that **eating habits** had improved among Pupils (96%), Teaching Staff (73%) and Catering Staff (46%) as a result of Healthy Breaks.
- Prior to the implementation of the Healthy Breaks Policy, the majority of Teachers (76%) reported that *'the majority of break time snacks included some or all of the following: Chocolate bar, crisps'*. However, following the implementation of the Policy, 96% of Teachers indicated that *'the majority of break time snacks included some or all of the following: piece of fruit, vegetable, bread based products'*.

1.2.6 *Impact on Pupils' Behaviour*

Overall, 53% of Principal and Teacher respondents agreed that the behaviour of pupils has improved to 'some' (47%) or to a 'large' (6%) extent, as a result of changes in diet.

1.2.7 *Impact on Pupils' Health and Life Chances*

Perhaps most encouragingly, the majority of Principals (93%) and Teachers (83%) suggested that participation on *'Healthy Breaks has helped to improve the health and life chances of the pupils'*, to 'some' or a 'large' extent.

1.2.8 *Impact on Teaching*

The majority (95%) of Teachers agreed that the Healthy Breaks messages have been incorporated throughout curriculum subject areas to 'some' (72%) or to a 'large' (23%) extent. In particular, the theme of healthy eating has been integrated into personal development and science modules.

1.2.9 *Impact on Pupils – Pupils' Views*

- 96% (n = 695) of pupils in Year 4 to Year 7 agreed that the implementation of 'Healthy Breaks' is a good idea.
- Three quarters (75%) of pupils in Year 4 to Year 7 reported that healthy eating involves 'eating a balanced diet, with the majority indicating that 'a lot of fruit and vegetables' should be consumed, combined with a moderate amount of breads; meat fish and alternatives; and milk and dairy foods.

1.3 Conclusions

1.3.1 *Achievement of Programme Aims and Objectives*

Whilst the impact that the 'Healthy Breaks' Initiative has had on improving the health and life chances of participating children will only become measurable over the longer term it is clear that the Healthy Breaks Initiative has had a clear impact on the eating patterns of participating children, and in particular within the school environment. This is recognised by principals, teachers, parents and the pupils themselves.

The evaluation's findings also indicate that participant pupils clearly understand the concepts relating to "a balanced diet". Furthermore, the findings suggest that participating pupils now eat less unhealthy foods and eat more healthy foods than they used to.

The degree to which Healthy Breaks has impacted positively upon pupils' eating patterns at home or in the community is less clear, although discussion with parents would suggest that some children are proactively requesting healthier options at home and have become more adventurous with the types of fruit and breads they consume. Of note though is the fact that many pupils continue to have less healthy snacks on the way home from school, i.e. crisps, chocolate and sweets.

A particularly positive outcome would appear to be that those children who would have eaten a healthier option before Healthy Breaks, no longer feel 'different' in doing so, and indeed in some cases "positive peer pressure" now exists to encourage pupils' peers to eat a 'healthy break'.

1.3.2 *Other Significant Achievements*

It is important to recognise that the implementation of Healthy Breaks has resulted in a series of positive achievements. These include:

- All 28 participant primary schools have developed and are implementing a 'Healthy Breaks' policy;
- The Programme has established links with 'Positive Playgrounds' in some schools, creating a synergy between physical activity and healthy eating;
- Over 6,000 pupils have participated in the programme and been exposed to the Healthy Breaks message;
- 34 events (tasting sessions and information seminars) have taken place with parents and carers, which has positively impacted upon parents' knowledge and attitudes towards healthy eating/breaks;
- A comprehensive teachers' resource pack has been developed;
- A Parents and Carers booklet 'Food for Thought' has been produced.

1.3.3 *Adoption of the 'Healthy Breaks Model'*

Overall, respondents were confident that their school will continue to implement the Healthy Breaks initiative as they considered that it had been embedded in the culture of the school and pupils are adhering to the 'Healthy Breaks' standards as a matter of routine. However, to ensure the sustainability of the Initiative, respondents reported that advice and support from an independent source is necessary. Respondents believed that the support received from the Healthy Breaks Team was 'invaluable' and is required, particularly at the outset of the Initiative to ensure that the Policy becomes embedded in the school's culture.

Each of the Principals consulted with recognised that in order to adopt a coherent approach to healthier eating they needed to develop a policy towards food. Additionally, it was recognised that a school's healthier eating policy was most effective when it was the result of full consultation with teaching and non-teaching staff, school cooks/caterers, pupils, parents and governors.

1.3.4 *Stakeholder Satisfaction*

High levels of satisfaction were recorded, amongst teachers and principals, across the individual strands of the Healthy Breaks support, including:

- The resources and materials provided;
- The funding provided; and
- The support offered by the Healthy Breaks Team. Of particular note, each of the Principals and Teachers felt strongly that the support received was 'invaluable' and is necessary, particularly at the outset of the initiative. There was a general feeling that their school's Healthy Breaks policy would not have been implemented to the same extent in the absence of the support from the Healthy Breaks team i.e. the Healthy Breaks Co-ordinator and the Senior Dietitian.

Discussion with parents also indicates that they were very satisfied with the Initiative. The Principals and Teachers suggested that the initial apprehensions of some parents were addressed and mostly overcome through a process of continuous communication and consultation to gain their approval and commitment.

1.3.5 *Relation to other Health Related Programmes*

Discussions with Principal and Teachers indicate that the Healthy Breaks Initiative complemented and added value to a variety of other 'health promotion' related activities within schools. In particular, with Playboard's 'Positive Playgrounds' initiative. It was suggested that the two programmes, when taken together, offered greater potential to positively impact of the health and wellbeing of the child as one focussed on physical activity, whilst the other focussed on healthy eating.

1.3.6 *Value for Money*

Encouraging and enabling young children to develop healthy eating patterns offers great potential for generations to come. Research highlights that eating patterns developed during childhood tend to be continued into adulthood. Many of the chronic diseases that occur later in life begin to develop during childhood. Whilst the true value of an 'early years' initiative such as Healthy Breaks may not be seen for some time (i.e. through a reduction in Coronary Heart Disease, Cancer and Strokes in later years), it is evident that the Initiative has encouraged children from disadvantaged areas to adopt and sustain healthy eating patterns at school, and in some cases at home and in the community. This is particularly positive as research indicates that people from low income households tend to have less healthy eating patterns generally and to eat less fruit and vegetables in particular than those living in more affluent circumstances.

Overall, 6,490 pupils benefited from participating on the Healthy Breaks initiative. This equates to an average programme cost per pupil beneficiary of £51 (£329,409/6,490). It is the evaluation team's opinion that this represents substantial value for money.

This evaluation also highlights a number of wider benefits in the school. For example, teachers report that the scheme is a support to teaching and learning about healthy eating and has been

used to support science, numeracy and literacy in schools. Other benefits of the Initiative include improved attention levels, an increased ability to settle down to work and better behaviour generally among the pupils.

1.4 Recommendations

Given the success of the Healthy Breaks Initiative, only a small number of key recommendations have been made:

- It is evident that there is a continuing need for initiatives such as Healthy Breaks.
- As each school is unique in terms of its existing level of 'healthy breaks' and the challenges it faces, perhaps a tailored approach is required, whereby a sliding scale of support is provided on the basis of 'need'. The basic model could entail the provision of Healthy Breaks resources (e.g. Teacher Resource Pack, including a CD Rom version, a 'Reward Chart' and stickers for pupils) and at least one day visit from the Health Promotion Officer and the Dietitian in the first year of implementation and on a needs basis thereafter.
- All schools should have a food policy, although they are likely to require help to make best use of all the advice on offer.
- Each of the Principals consulted with recognised that in order to adopt a coherent approach to healthier eating they needed to develop a 'whole school' policy towards food. It was recognised that a school's healthier eating policy was most effective when it was the result of full consultation with teaching and non-teaching staff, school cooks/caterers, pupils, parents and governors. Therefore, going forward, it is essential that full consultation with all school stakeholders is undertaken. In particular consultation with parents is vital to aid the implementation process. Indeed, on enrolment of Year 1 pupils, parents should be made fully aware of the requirements of the healthy breaks policy and sign up to it before their child commences school.
- School and catering staff, and indeed parents, should have up-to-date factual information, support and training to enable them to understand fully key concepts, such as 'healthier foods' and 'nutritional standards'. This could be achieved through tasting sessions and/or information events.
- In order to capture whether the eating habits of children have changed in the 'home' or in the 'community', a questionnaire should be given to parents of participating children once a term to track if eating habits are changing outside of school.