



## Nutrition Service Learning with the Hartford Public Schools



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### Collaboration Purpose

To build a partnership, based on the common interest in service learning initiatives, among the Nutrition Programs of the University of Hartford and Saint Joseph College. Activities were targeted toward the prevention of childhood obesity through a wide variety of food and nutrition education interventions, and were implemented with children in coordination with the Hartford Public School System.

### Community Need

The national epidemic of childhood overweight, with rates within the black and Hispanic subgroups being quite high, is well documented. Currently, the Hartford School System has a racial composition that is approximately 41% Black (African American and West-Indian), and 51.5% Hispanic (primarily Puerto-Rican, but including many different ethnicities). Therefore, these students are at a high risk for developing obesity, and the concomitant health problems of diabetes, heart disease and hypertension, advanced maturation and depression. Elementary schools are continuously gaining focus as a strong setting in which to provide nutrition education and lifestyle interventions. An extensive review of the interventions for pediatric overweight recommended school-based primary prevention strategies and showed the following to be “evidence based” (i.e. documented successful outcomes across studies): Nutrition education, Physical activity education, Behavioral Counseling, Decreasing Sedentary Behaviors and Parental/Family involvement as part of a multicomponent program). Nutrition and dietetics professionals are well poised to provide leadership roles in prevention and treatment of pediatric overweight and obesity. (3) However, few school districts have the benefit of having a nutrition professional on staff. In Hartford, there is 1 full-time Registered Dietitian for coordination of nutrition education. Service Learning opportunities for nutrition and dietetic students enrolled in the participating institutions, under the direction of nutrition professionals can fill the void for these critical services among Hartford students.

### Community Service Learning Activities

- 1. Nutrition Service Learning Symposium** – an outreach event that attracted representatives from higher education institutions from the Hartford area. Presentations fostered enriching discussions on ways to implement nutrition service learning within curriculum and what student populations to target..
- 2. Breakthrough Magnet School:** SJC students provided a 7 week, comprehensive wellness program, which incorporated the concept of the “wellness wheel,” within the school after-school program. Students
- 3. University of Hartford Magnet School:** We provided personalized nutrition and exercise wellness reports to individual elementary students that included a detailed analysis of current habits, recommendations, sample menus, healthy ethnic recipes (as appropriate) to better foster disease prevention and longevity. We also provided a health fair for elementary students and their families to enjoy (see pictures on right).
- 4. Kennedy Middle School:** We collaborated with their after-school program and took a group of 7<sup>th</sup> graders to a local supermarket for a SuperMarket Tour. University students led the tours and gave each middle school child their personally developed handouts for “tips to healthy shopping & eating. We also developed nutrition and health related posters for the school nurse to be displayed in her office area.
- 5. Hartford Public Schools:** University students developed Nutrition Public Service Announcements to be read on a local radio station and displayed on monthly school food menus.

### 😊 Impact: Significant! 😊

Students, elementary children, teachers, school administrators, school RN’s, and Cloutier & Gaughan benefited greatly from the service learning activities. Feedback was significantly positive – from verbal comments to written student evaluations. “I was able to use my skills that I have learned and I also learned some new things as well! I truly enjoyed this experience,” “This had an enormous impact on my life,” “Not only am I more educated, but I now have the ability to educate others,” and much more. Learning indeed take place for all parties involved. We made an impact.



### Future Plans

To develop a quality publication based on our nutrition education curriculum and distribute copies (at least one per school), for the elementary and middle schools in the Hartford School District. We plan to hold a training day to work with interested representatives from each school to familiarize them with some of the basic nutrition concepts. Evidence-based nutrition messages can be most effectively disseminated to a diverse audience using the “train the trainer” model. Each school could send an interested “point person” for nutrition and wellness; teams could include school nurses, teachers, parents, food service managers, etc. Each attendee will receive a copy of the curriculum and continue to implement activities of interest in their own schools.

