

Community Based Nutrition Education: A Model For Raising Awareness Of Childhood Obesity

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ABSTRACT

Background: Since 2003, Texas Southern University has coordinated conferences to educate Houston's Third Ward community about strategies to combat childhood obesity. Presenters included faculty and students as speakers and activity coordinators. Participants indicated that these conferences are helpful in increasing awareness of health problems and the availability of community health resources. **Purpose:** To address the high rate of childhood obesity in Houston's Third Ward and its costs in terms of health and long-term productivity on that community, faculty at Texas Southern University (TSU) coordinated annual conferences to educate community members about strategies to combat childhood obesity. **Methods:** Seven conferences intended to involve parents, community leaders, policymakers and educators have been coordinated since 2003. Each conference has focused on different aspects of childhood obesity including: partnerships between parents, policymakers and educators, community supported agriculture, early nutrition education and access to health care. Presenters included faculty, undergraduate and graduate students, and invited content experts. Presentations are consumer friendly and designed so that attendees do not feel intimidated or embarrassed about their current condition by allowing for open dialogue between participants and presenters. Promotion of the conference was through flyers and word of mouth. **Results:** Approximately 700-800 individuals have attended the conferences, with an average annual attendance of 100 and a maximum of 250. Evaluations from the community participants indicate that 80-90% now feel like they are "part of the solution, not part of the problem." They feel accepted at the university and are comfortable about accessing the resources of the university. The conferences have increased student involvement in conference planning and student interest in improving the welfare of the community. A community garden maintained by TSU students was established in the neighborhood. A partnership was

created with Cuney Homes, a Third Ward low-income housing project, to provide nutrition education to parents. Economically disadvantaged and Head Start students at HISD Charter School and W.R. Banks Child Development Laboratory School at TSU and their parents, who usually do not participate in these types of educational events, were actively involved in these conferences through incentives and recognition programs. TSU will continue to coordinate these annual conferences. **Conclusions:** Community conferences sponsored by a university can be helpful in breaking down barriers between academic institutions and community members and increasing awareness of strategies to combat childhood obesity. This model can be used by other universities and organizations to effectively engage community members who are not traditionally included in the planning process for activities to make an impact on childhood obesity.

KEY WORDS: Nutrition, Obesity, Community, Education, Awareness