Improving Health in London

Case Study: Health in a Lunch-box

Project title: Health in a lunch-box
Location: Haringey, North London
Date: July 2001–July 2002
Funding: King’s Fund Millennium Award

The context. A balanced diet can improve children’s overall health as well as their attention levels, behaviour and educational attainment. However, it can be difficult to encourage children to eat healthily, whether they take a lunch-box to school or eat school meals.

Working with parents and staff at a school in North London, Bernadette Igboaka hosted a one-day event to raise awareness of the benefits to children of eating a balanced diet, and to encourage greater use of ethnic foods in packed and school lunches. Sample packed lunches were prepared and nutritional information was provided. As a result, many parents have adapted their children’s packed lunches to include healthier and more varied options, and the school now offers an ethnic lunch menu and a breakfast club.

The Millennium Awards scheme. Between 2001 and 2004, the King’s Fund worked in partnership with the Millennium Commission to offer grant-funding, support and training to 255 people working at community level to improve the health of Londoners. Each got a maximum £2,000 cash grant from Lottery funding, and took part in a 13-day King’s Fund leadership development programme designed to build skills in project management and networking.

This is one of a series of case studies exploring how individuals living in London have used the King’s Fund Millennium Awards scheme to make a real difference to the health of others in their communities.
Bernadette Igboaka is the manager of the Behaviour Support Team (Primary) in Haringey, North London. While she was a school improvement officer, she spent many hours observing children, looking for ways to improve behaviour. She saw that not only were children eating poor-quality food in their packed lunches, but also that many were ashamed of the idea of eating foods that reflected their own cultures. Working in her own time, Bernadette organised an event in a local school to attract interest in a wider range of possibilities for packed and school lunches. Her aim was to convince children and their families that such food could be healthy, appetising and something to be proud of.

The interview

Why did you get involved?

Two things led me to this project. I work in education – on behaviour support – and one day I was struck by the contents of the lunch-boxes that the children bring in from home, not just in a few schools but across the borough. It's always chocolate bars, crisps and apples – the hard, green ones! And sandwiches consisting of white bread with cheese or jam, which the children say are soggy. Once in the lunch-boxes, the sandwiches get squashed, and are usually left uneaten at the end of the day. Lunch-boxes provide these children with their main meal for the day, yet most of the food isn't being eaten. And then we wonder why the children have difficulties with behaviour. In education there's always talk about literacy and numeracy, but it's also important that children are eating the right diet – one that will enable them to learn.

The second experience that led me to this project involved my own children. One day I had some leftovers of cooked Nigerian food, and was packing it up for my children's lunch-boxes. They looked at the food and said, 'I'm not taking that' – they would rather have plain bread. So when I went around schools talking about eating habits, I asked children about their favourite foods. The responses were always the culturally diverse dishes – the meals they get at home. The expressions on their faces told me that they thought it was an unusual idea, and that they felt ashamed of the food they get at home. They felt it was second best.

So my project aimed to address these problems of unhealthy diets and poor cultural self-esteem.

What does your project consist of?

I worked with Welbourne Primary School in North London during their science week to host a one-day event in November 2001, at which sample packed lunches of Nigerian food were distributed to children. Before the event, I conducted a baseline questionnaire at the school, asking children what foods they liked or disliked – an exercise that reinforced what I was already thinking.

The event was a great success. About 500 people attended on the day, including parents/carers, children, teachers, the MP for Tottenham, David Lammy, and other education staff. The school was very supportive and all the staff were involved: teachers, support staff, the site manager, kitchen staff and the headteacher. There was a great atmosphere. I presented the aims of the project, which were to promote the importance of a balanced diet and the idea of food for enjoyment. The school's steel band played. There was a multicultural display for which I brought in objects and fabrics from Nigeria, and we also had King's Fund balloons.

The children took away 100 sample packed lunches that day and there was enough food, all suitable for school dinners, to feed the 400 adults and children present. In Nigeria we prepare rice in about six different ways. I made sure that on the day each method was represented, and likewise for black-eyed beans, plantain, and so on. The community dietician/nutritionist gave me big posters showing the five basic food groups needed in a balanced diet as well as leaflets providing nutritional...
information written for the African-Caribbean, English, Turkish and South Asian communities – all of which we put up on display. Six months after the event, I did an evaluation and positive changes were reported by both parents and children.

How did you get other people involved?

Originally I just wanted to hold some sort of community event based around the idea of healthy eating for children. I imagined hosting it in a hall on a weekend with the help of my family and friends. However, thinking about it more, I realised that I really needed to look at children in their school situation.

I made contact with various headteachers to discuss the idea behind the project and everyone agreed that it was an important issue. The head of Welbourne suggested holding the event at her school on a school day, and so it went from there. A colleague, Lloyd Forster, was helping the school to organise a science week, and we agreed that it would work well to have a joint event to show off the science work and launch the healthy-eating promotion.

What other kinds of help did you need?

Lloyd Forster was very interested in the whole project and we worked together a lot. He organised the release of 500 helium-filled balloons, the invitation to the MP, and various other things, while I focused on the food.

My line manager and the inspector for the services for minority ethnic achievement were also very supportive: they attended the event and helped me to organise things. During the course of the project, I also met the head of kitchens across all the schools. She came along to the event and was very positive about the experience.

What challenges did you face?

I spoke to a dietician, who was familiar with African-Caribbean food. She was to be instrumental in moving me forward with the project, although initially her response to my ideas presented me with my biggest challenge. When I met with her, I told her my plans to prepare rice in a variety of ways. She expressed her concern about the amount of cholesterol in the cooking oils for the rice and various other dishes. She said, ‘The only foods you can have are things like boiled plantain and plain rice with vegetables’. However, I felt that these foods wouldn't be very tasty and therefore would be unappealing to the children.

Shortly after, at a King's Fund training day, I shared my problem with others. I came away clearer in my mind that my project was not just about nutrition: it was also about having a balanced diet, and eating appetising and varied foods. When I went back to the dietician and told her that, she said that she couldn’t be part of the project because it would involve promoting something that went against what she would normally say. The situation was very difficult. However, when I invited her to the event, she said that she would be happy to attend.

I also learnt from the King's Fund that, if I was going to use outsiders, I had to use a reputable certified chef or caterers. It was very sad for me to have to tell my friends that I couldn’t use them for the event as I had hoped. The rules and regulations that govern catering provided a further challenge.

What lessons did you learn?

I have learnt so much. The poster for the award showed an egg hatching and each time I think about this project, I just think about the egg that has been in my head since 1994, and eventually hatched in November 2001. Isn't this amazing? If this can happen, people should never lose hope.

I have also learnt that you can work with anybody. It's about giving them responsibility, allowing them to do their work, learning from them and respecting their views. Take the dietician, for example. If I wasn’t prepared for her response, I wouldn’t have invited her to the event, but I did. Her response inspired me to move on.
Where does your project go from here?

The first thing the school did after my project was to apply for some funding for a breakfast club. That was set up within a month and has continued ever since. Before this project, there was no culturally diverse food on the school menu. Afterwards, the head identified one of the school’s cooks from the African-Caribbean community and encouraged her to come up with a culturally diverse menu. Now they do curries, different types of chicken and rice, and apparently that’s the only food that the children actually finish. Now three other local schools have added similar food to their school menus.

We need to spread this work further. I’m interested in getting more schools involved in projects that focus on children’s diets. I’d like more time and money to send that message out, not just in Haringey but around the country.

I’m also thinking of getting involved in meals-on-wheels. There are many older people from the black and minority ethnic communities – what kinds of food are they getting?

What advice would you give to others?

I can’t stress enough the importance of collaboration, of not doing things alone. When trying to work something out, seek the views of other people to gain different perspectives on the situation. If you treat people with respect, you’ll find that you can work with them, no matter who they are or where they’re coming from.

Don’t assume that you have to be absolutely clear about what you’re going to do before you begin. Once you have the initial ideas, you will find that the support you get from others along the way helps to sharpen and shape them. Putting your ideas into practice is never going to be easy, but as long as you’re open to involving others, I would say go for it!

Interested?

The Millennium Awards scheme has now closed, but the following funding opportunities remain:

King’s Fund grants We offer about £1.5 million a year in grants to London-based community-based organisations working to improve health and health care (t: 020 7307 2495, e: grants@kingsfund.org.uk, w: www.kingsfund.org.uk/grants).

Unltd This is a national body set up to provide grants, training and support to individuals working to make a positive difference in their communities (t: 020 7566 1100, e: info@unltd.org.uk, w: www.unltd.org.uk).