From NIH to Texas Schools: Policy Impact of the Coordinated Approach to Child Health (CATCH) Program in Texas

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Editor’s Note: Active Living Research has awarded the third annual Translating Research to Policy Award to the Michael and Susan Dell Center for Advancement of Healthy Living’s Coordinated Approach to Child Health (CATCH) program. The purpose of the award is to recognize innovative teams or individuals representing research, policy, and/or advocacy who have had success in catalyzing policy or environmental change of relevance to youth physical activity, sedentary behavior, and obesity prevention. The goal is to celebrate achievements, understand how success occurs, and share these stories so others will be inspired to use or adapt new and effective approaches. The commentary that follows describes the work that is being recognized by the Award. Active Living Research commends the awardees on their success in changing policy, and we commend this as a model to others.

With the recent interest in child obesity prevention, states are increasingly focused on enacting legislation that can provide significant changes in child obesity rates. Despite good intentions, there are few examples in which evidence-based programs have been mandated. In addition, there are limited data to evaluate the effectiveness of recent legislative efforts directed at child obesity prevention. The experiences and successes recently documented in Texas through implementation of coordinated school health (CSH) programs such as CATCH and concomitant evaluation efforts can provide a model for other states to emulate.

Use of Research to Guide the Legislative Process

Results and presentations highlighting the 1996 publication of CATCH results began the process of CATCH dissemination in Texas. CATCH (Coordinated Approach To Child Health) is a CSH program targeting obesity prevention through classroom lessons, PE classes, child nutrition services, and the family and home environment. Originally funded through a National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI) grant as the “Child and Adolescent Trial for Cardiovascular Health,” CATCH improved child physical activity, dietary behaviors, and improved the school environment. These effects maintained 3 years postintervention.

When CATCH results were first released, staff members from the Texas Department of Health (now the Texas Department of State Health Services) inquired about using CATCH nutrition and physical activity lessons as a diabetes prevention program for elementary school children. About this same time period, data from the School Physical Activity and Nutrition (SPAN) survey found Texas children, especially 4th grade children, were more overweight than children in the United States. Early CATCH dissemination efforts, as well as increased awareness of the obesity epidemic, were noticed by state legislators interested in health and school issues. This eventually led to state mandates for CSH, beginning with Texas Senate Bill 19 (SB 19) in 2001.

Initial effects of SB 19 were evaluated using data from the SPAN survey. Overall, the prevalence of child obesity in Texas among 4th, 8th, and 11th graders was not significantly different between 2000 to 2002 and 2004 to 2005; however, data from the El Paso region showed a statistically significant decrease. These data corroborated findings at the school-level, indicating elementary school students who attended CATCH schools in the El Paso region experienced a lower rate of increase in childhood overweight compared with students in a neighboring comparison region. These and other SPAN data were presented to the Texas Health and Human Services Committee, under the leadership of Senator Jane Nelson, and at various policy forums and conferences in Texas. Thus, data from University research projects provided necessary feedback to state officials, paving the way for support of additional mandates.

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Legislative Champions

Several legislators have been active in seeking evidence-based programs to translate to general practice: most notable include Senator Jane Nelson (R, Flower Mound) and Texas Comptroller Susan Combs (R). Senator Nelson drafted legislation and initiated interim reviews with input from SPAN survey data and on-going CATCH and related policy research,\(^7,8\) funded by the Active Living Research (ALR), to expand the evidence for school-based health policy. ALR funded research documented a high level of compliance with many of the key requirements of SB19,\(^7,8\) especially in the El Paso region,\(^7\) corroborating evidence from SPAN population based surveys.

In addition to the leadership provided by legislators, stakeholder efforts have been crucial to implementation of CATCH. After SB 19 was passed, the Texas Coalition for Coordinated School Health and Physical Education was disbanded and another advocacy group, the Partnership for a Healthy Texas, was formed in 2006 (see http://www.partnershipforahealthytexas.org). The Partnership, which includes over 40 organizations together with the Texas Health Institute, sets a legislative agenda for obesity prevention that is focused on evidence-based approaches such as CATCH. As an adjunct to the Partnership, another coalition, Live Smart Texas, provides additional support and organization to obesity prevention efforts.
What Were Lessons Learned From the Texas Experience?

Several factors contributed to the success of CATCH and SPAN research in influencing policy in Texas, including (1) the use of a scalable evidence-based program; (2) legislative champions who were effective in passing evidence-based child and health legislation and related mandates; (3) stakeholder coalitions which provided a united agenda to increase political leverage versus fragmented and multiple stakeholders promoting similar, but disparate agendas; (4) statewide health-related monitoring to determine the ultimate success of the legislative agenda, as well as any unintended negative consequences; and (5) infrastructure, personnel, and material resources to support school and community-based programs.

Building relationships among researchers, stakeholders, practitioners, and key decision makers in schools and communities is crucial to support and sustain evidence-based policy and environmental change. Although consistent dialogue between these stakeholders is important in moving forward evidence-based approaches to obesity prevention, these relationships can be difficult to develop and maintain. In general, academics are not rewarded for attending committee meetings and providing assistance to legislators; in addition, data use by state agencies can hinder peer-reviewed publication efforts. Universities need to recognize the contributions of academics to the legislative process and seek methods to quantify and encourage use of data for this purpose. In turn, researchers should seek funding to examine the effects of policy on obesity and related behaviors, at local, regional, state, and national levels.

Despite the CSH mandates in Texas, complete implementation of these programs is difficult, largely due to the low priority of health compared with other academic subjects; insufficient funding; and lack of strong accountability mechanisms. One solution to this problem has been the contribution of local foundations, which have funded initiatives in Austin, Houston, and El Paso.

Future Directions

The momentum for child obesity prevention efforts continues to grow in Texas. Several additional state legislators have become interested in child obesity prevention and are beginning to introduce new initiatives. Another SPAN survey will provide data for 2010, to determine the progress of state mandates for CSH programs. The Partnership and Live Smart Texas continue to grow and support a common legislative agenda. With these and other efforts, the state of Texas is working toward a future of healthier children and families.

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References