

4-H health advocates lead change for nutrition equity at Caldwell High School

AT A GLANCE

4-H health advocates support track and field athletes through a nutrition and hydration project to improve athletes' overall health and well-being.

The Situation

While Caldwell is a fast-growing community in both population and economics, it continues to have a significant number of youth living in financially challenged households. Caldwell School District is eligible for the USDA's community-level free lunch program with 76% of the students from limited-resourced families. Nutrition and hydration are among the most basic of needs, and vulnerable students are impacted disproportionately by the lack of school-based resources.

Our Response

University of Idaho Extension's Well Connected Communities (WCC) supported two 4-H health advocates in their True Leaders in Equity Institute (TLEI) project addressing nutrition and hydration practices of Caldwell High School (CHS) student athletes. The health advocates and WCC mentors designed and received University of Idaho Institutional Review Board approval for preseason and postseason surveys for CHS track and field athletes. The surveys focused on student athletes' attention to their nutrition and hydration practices; perceptions of the impact of these practices on their well-being; and the level of perceived support from school staff to engage in healthy nutrition behaviors.



4-H health advocates distribute water bottles to high school track and field athletes.

With support from the CHS principal and coaches, the health advocates presented the project to the athletes. After administering the preseason survey, they provided all track athletes with a water bottle. Healthy snack bags were distributed at the beginning of four track meets. The bags contained two to three nutrient-rich snacks, healthy tips and suggestions on how the snacks could be eaten before, during or after athletic events. A post card with a QR code for local food pantry/distribution resources was included. The athletes completed a postseason survey assessing their perception of the project.

Program Outcomes

Athletes demonstrated improved nutrition and hydration practices and increased knowledge about healthy

foods. Seventeen students completed the preseason survey and 25 completed the postseason survey. The preseason survey showed generally positive results from the responding athletes. Most pay attention to their daily consumption of vegetables, fruits and water, as well as being active and encouraging others to be active. Slightly more than half pay attention to how many sugary drinks they consume. Athletes responded to the frequency that they ate breakfast, fast food and school lunch (Table 1.).

Table 1: Attention paid to food/beverage consumption and activity.

Pay attention daily to how much they:	Yes	Usually	Not really	No
Eat fruit	29%	35%	23%	12%
Eat vegetables	24%	47%	18%	12%
Drink water	53%	6%	29%	12%
Drink sugary beverages	35%	24%	41%	-
Engage in physical activity	59%	35%	7%	-
Encourage others to be active	41%	53%	6%	-
How often athletes eat:	Every day	Most days	Some days	Never
Breakfast	41%	12%	41%	6%
Fast food	-	-	94%	6%
School lunch	41%	12%	29%	18%

The preseason survey results indicated nine motivators for positive eating and hydration practices. The three key ideas shared were better understanding of how nutrition and hydration impacts athletes, healthier foods offered during school and sports activities, and having a personal water bottle to carry during the school day. Fifty-three percent indicated that they did not feel they had control over the types and amounts of food they eat. Athletes felt supported by coaches to make healthy food choices (83%).

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The athletes ate snacks before (88%) and after (56%) competing, indicating that the students were hungry for snacks after school and after competing. The nutrition fact cards helped athletes (84%) learn new information. They (76%) also indicated that having a new water bottle helped them drink more water. Although 28% indicated that they would have access to nutritious snacks on athletic event days, 44% said they would not have (Table 2). The coach shared that while a list of healthy snacks is provided to athletes at the beginning of the season, they don't come to track events with nutrient-rich snacks, or their families can't afford to purchase them.

Table 2: Effect of receiving snacks and a water bottle.

	Disagree	Neither disagree nor agree	Strongly agree or agree
Helpful in supporting athletic performance	-	-	84%
Had a positive impact on sport season	-	-	100%
Made me feel supported by peers	4%	3%	88%
Helped in drinking more water	4%	20%	76%
Learned new nutrition information	8%	8%	84%
Would not have had access to nutritious snack on event day	32%	24%	44%

Athletes (84%) indicated that the snack bags supported their performance and had a positive impact on their sport experience (100%). They also felt supported by their peers (88%). Athletes indicated (96%) that healthy food and water should be offered at school events and want to see healthier food choices offered during school lunch. (Table 2).

Cooperators and Co-Sponsors

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