

MOVING FROM SERVING YOUTH TO ENGAGING YOUTH

Youth-led Policy, Systems
and Environmental Change
Interventions in UC CalFresh
Nutrition Education

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
cal  fresh Nutrition Education

UC DAVIS
CENTER FOR REGIONAL CHANGE

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INTRODUCTION

HOW TO USE THIS REPORT

This report examines 3 case studies from UC CalFresh SNAP-Ed nutrition education county programs who facilitated a youth-led participatory action research (YPAR) project as part of the Youth Engagement Initiative during federal fiscal year 2017. It is designed to highlight the YPAR process and inspire other SNAP-Ed programs to adopt similar approaches for authentically engaging young people in policy, systems and environmental (PSE) change strategies focused on nutrition, wellness, food access and physical activity.

Following a description of and reflection on UC CalFresh's Youth Engagement Initiative, along with brief descriptions of SNAP-Ed requirements and evaluation metrics related to this work, each UC Cooperative Extension YPAR case study is examined according to these key areas of consideration:

1. Project Overview
2. Main Adult Ally & Project Facilitator
3. Setting
4. School/Community Partnership(s)
5. Youth Recruitment & Demographics
6. Programmatic Structure
7. Calendar & Schedule of Events
8. Technical Assistance, Coaching & Support from the Public Health Institute Center for Wellness and Nutrition and the UC Davis Center for Regional Change;
9. Issue Identification
10. Data Collection & Analysis
11. Use of Data & Mapping
12. Recommendations & Action
13. Outcomes
14. Next Steps & Program Sustainability.

In addition, each case study contains youth and adult ally reflections on the project and their key lessons learned from each stage in the process, as well as links to relevant materials.

This resource is meant to complement the [Stepping Stones curriculum](#)¹ and other YPAR curricula by highlighting real world examples of programs implementing this youth engagement strategy within the [SNAP-Ed framework](#), demonstrating the wide range of possibilities available, and detailing the resources, support and intentionality that are required to do this work successfully. Since no two YPAR projects are ever the same, the following information is meant to serve as a reference guide rather than a step-by-step manual. Youth engagement program facilitators should examine these case studies and their promising practices as they craft their own youth-led PSE change efforts that fit the specific needs and circumstances of their unique communities.

THE DOCUMENTATION PROCESS

Information about these program sites was collected through a number of sources and approaches, including monthly check-in calls and additional technical assistance conversations with individual counties; statewide youth engagement conference calls that occurred every other month and involved all UC CalFresh counties engaged in this work; site visits and in-person meetings; end-of-year exit interviews with adult allies; youth-produced final reports, videos, and presentations; UC CalFresh retrospective YPAR student surveys; adult ally self-reporting through Google docs; archived items and program documents from counties; and extensive field notes compiled by staff from the Public Health Institute Center for Wellness and Nutrition and the UC Davis Center for Regional Change.

THE UC CALFRESH YOUTH ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVE

Launched in federal fiscal year 2016, UC CalFresh's Youth Engagement Initiative is exploring innovative strategies to shift from a focus on serving youth to engaging youth in nutrition and physical activity. Projects within this initiative seek to empower young people from vulnerable communities to lead efforts to improve the environments where they live, play, eat, shop, and learn.

The motivation for creating this initiative arose out of an appreciation for core youth development principles, as well as [USDA SNAP-Ed's requirement](#) that states implement PSE change efforts—like multi-level interventions and community and public health approaches—in addition to providing direct nutrition education.²

Approaching this work through the lens of the Social-Ecological Model “illustrates how all sectors of society combine to shape an individual’s food and physical activity choices...According to the [Dietary Guidelines for Americans], consistent evidence shows that implementing multiple changes at various levels of the Social-Ecological Model is effective in improving eating and physical activity behaviors.”³

“[USDA’s Food and Nutrition Service] recognizes the potential impact environmental factors, such as institutional policy, neighborhood design, food access, and advertising, may have on eating and physical activity behaviors. States must incorporate PSE change interventions into their SNAP-Ed Plans.”⁴

With PSE change interventions now required by SNAP-Ed, UC CalFresh recognized that youth who would be impacted by those decisions should be involved in identifying, planning, implementing and evaluating the change interventions themselves. The goal of this initiative is to build the capacity of youth to contribute to PSE changes that help make the healthy choice the easy and preferred choice, while developing their leadership abilities, sense of self-efficacy, civic engagement, and college and career readiness.

DEFINING PSE CHANGES⁵

Policy: A written statement of an organizational position, decision, or course of action. Ideally policies describe actions, resources, implementation, evaluation, and enforcement. Policies are made in the public, non-profit, and business sectors. Policies will help to guide behavioral changes for audiences served through SNAP-Ed programming.

Systems: Systems changes are unwritten, ongoing, organizational decisions or changes that result in new activities reaching large proportions of people the organization serves. Systems changes alter how the organization or network of organizations conducts business. An organization may adopt a new intervention, reallocate other resources, or in significant ways modify its direction to benefit low-income consumers in qualifying sites and communities. Systems changes may precede or follow a written policy.

Environmental: Includes the built or physical environments which are visual/observable, but may include economic, social, normative or message environments. Modifications in settings where food is sold, served, or distributed may promote healthy food choices. Social changes may include shaping attitudes among administrators, teachers, or service providers about time allotted for school meals or physical activity breaks. Economic changes may include financial disincentives or incentives to encourage a desired behavior, such as purchasing more fruits and vegetables.

YOUTH-LED PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH (YPAR)

YPAR promotes process-oriented, reflexive research and activism that are driven by youth's perspectives and strengths, allowing young people to study and address social issues that impact them in ways that build their capacities as civic actors⁶

YPAR is recognized by SNAP-Ed as a practice-tested PSE strategy and an “intervention designed for youth ages 12–18 to identify nutrition and physical activity environmental issues in their community, develop an action plan to resolve the issues, and implement the plan to improve their community.”⁷

YPAR projects provide youth with the opportunity to “engage in leadership, critical thinking, problem solving, strategizing skills, and service learning to address their target issue related to nutrition and physical activity.”⁸

CAPTURING YPAR THROUGH SNAP-ED EVALUATION TOOLS

The impacts of YPAR projects in the UC CalFresh Youth Engagement Initiative can be captured at both the Individual and Environmental Settings levels in the [SNAP-Ed Evaluation Framework](#).⁹

- The Individual level tracks impacts on youth participants' own health-oriented behaviors in both the short term goals and intentions—ST1: Healthy Eating and ST3: Physical Activity and Reduced Sedentary Behavior—and the medium term behavioral changes—MT1: Healthy Eating and MT3: Physical Activity and Reduced Sedentary Behavior.
- The Environmental Settings level is where YPAR efforts' PSE changes are captured. In the short term, ST6: Champions and ST7: Organizational Partnerships are particularly relevant to this work. Medium term indicators at this level pertain to the PSE changes (i.e. supports) that are adopted. Long term indicators track organizational implementation and effectiveness and community involvement in PSE intervention efforts, particularly LT5: Nutrition Supports Implementation, LT6: Physical Activity Supports Implementation and LT10: Planned Sustainability.
- At some point in the future, YPAR and PSE change intervention impacts should be able to be captured at the Sectors of Influence level as well.

The new [Program Evaluation and Reporting System \(PEARS\)](#),¹⁰ which is being implemented by UC CalFresh and SNAP-Ed programs in over 20 states, will be able to capture whether youth were actively involved in shaping a PSE change effort in its PSE module.

CONCLUSION

COMBINING DIRECT NUTRITION EDUCATION WITH YOUTH-LED PSE CHANGE INTERVENTIONS

These case studies demonstrate the potential cumulative impact that can be achieved when direct nutrition education is administered in conjunction with a youth-led PSE change strategy like YPAR.

- For program facilitators new to YPAR, implementing direct education programming helped them build the foundation for their eventual PSE change interventions. Starting with direct education curricula either at the beginning of the school year or during the previous year allowed them to establish relationships with local partners and youth through programming that may have been more comfortable and familiar.
- Program facilitators also recognized the benefits of utilizing direct nutrition education to develop young people's critical understanding of key SNAP-Ed topics in order to more effectively move towards issue identification and a PSE change intervention that was relevant and SNAP-Ed allowable.



COMBINING COLLECTIVE TRAININGS WITH INDIVIDUALIZED TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

While a series of regional trainings focused on key youth engagement topics was utilized to support UC CalFresh nutrition education county programs, individualized technical assistance was also recognized as critical to staff capacity building and the success of their youth-led PSE change interventions.

- Providing ongoing technical support and guidance through one-on-one check-in calls, site visits, and online communication channels helped build on the lessons learned during training sessions and troubleshoot issues as they emerged.
- Individualized technical assistance also helped establish a continual practice of reflection and evaluation with nutrition education county program staff, supporting program assessment and improvement throughout all stages of the YPAR process. This was particularly important because no two YPAR projects are ever the same and conducting a youth-led PSE change intervention is significantly more complicated than facilitating a step-by-step direct education curriculum.

LEVERAGING LOCAL PARTNERSHIPS

In many ways, the success of these projects also depended on the relationships they cultivated and the collaborations they established with key local stakeholders.

- All of these youth-led PSE change interventions were collaborative efforts between UC CalFresh nutrition education county programs and teachers, afterschool program facilitators, and school and district staff members.
- Partners played vital roles in each project, providing UC CalFresh staff with access to youth, meeting spaces, assistance with logistics, co-facilitation of programming, additional resources, and pathways to decision makers.

ACKNOWLEDGING THE PACE OF CHANGE

These examples demonstrate how long it can take to enact a PSE change through an authentic, youth-led process, highlighting the importance of recognizing this work as a process-oriented approach, setting realistic expectations for adults and youth, and celebrating successes along the way.

- All three program facilitators used the entire school year to the best of their abilities, and yet only one project was able to get through all of the steps in the YPAR process in that approximately nine-month time frame. The other two projects had to continue the action phase of their efforts into the summer months and the following school year in order to try and enact the PSE changes sought by their youth participants.

CAPTURING YOUTH REFLECTION & PROGRAM EVALUATION

To support continual program development and improvement, strengthen youth leadership and ownership, and capture youth voice and qualitative data in addition to quantitative data, it is recommended that adult allies build in ample opportunities for consistent, youth-led reflection and program evaluation throughout the entire YPAR process. Establishing these practices as a regular facet of all meetings, activities, and end-of-year celebrations from the beginning helps to build youth capacity and ensure that this critical data is captured in the face of inevitable time constraints.

- While the adult allies in these programs had multiple opportunities to reflect on and debrief their YPAR projects throughout the year via regular check-in calls and training sessions with the Youth Engagement Initiative technical assistance team, not as much intentional reflection and debriefing occurred with youth participants.
- There was also not much consistency across these three case study sites regarding the methods that were used for youth evaluation or the frequency with which these activities transpired: all of the programs documented here generally had informal conversations with youth to evaluate the progress of their projects, while two sites administered the UC CalFresh-designed, IRB-approved Retrospective YPAR Student Survey, one site also administered the UC CalFresh YPAR Project Assessment Survey, and one site facilitated a focus group reflection session at the end of the year.

NEXT STEPS

Moving into federal fiscal year 2018, the UC CalFresh Youth Engagement Initiative aims to build on its significant programmatic successes. In an effort to provide even greater support to counties implementing youth-led PSE change strategies, a cohort model will be adopted for training and technical assistance. The youth engagement cohorts will encourage collective learning and mentorship at the regional level and support sustainable state-wide youth engagement. Additionally, this initiative will continue to expand upon collaborations with key program partners like the UC Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources and the California Department of Public Health. Together, the goal is to continue shifting from a focus on serving youth to engaging youth in nutrition and physical activity in more and more communities across the state.

What follows are the three UC CalFresh Youth Engagement case studies, providing a deeper examination of the opportunities and challenges for youth-led PSE change work in SNAP-Ed.

EL DORADO

MRS. BROWN'S 6TH GRADE CLASS AT GEORGETOWN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL



PROJECT OVERVIEW

El Dorado County UCCE staff facilitated PhotoVoice exercises and a YPAR project with an entire class of 27 6th grade students at a rural elementary school. Meetings and activities were conducted for one hour each week during class in partnership with the teacher, with some additional class time devoted to the project as well. Through photography, reflective writing and guided discussions, youth identified a number of issues and focused in on the need for access to healthy snacks on campus. The group recommended purchasing a healthy vending machine and researched options for making that goal a reality. They presented their findings to the principal, food services staff, teachers and their 5th grade peers, and also produced a video documenting their efforts. This project will continue with a new cohort of youth next year, and the hope is to keep working on this initiative to bring a healthy vending machine to the school.

MAIN ADULT ALLIES & PROJECT FACILITATORS

Monica Drazba, UCCE Community Educator (Summer of 2016 – November 2016)

She had extensive experience with direct nutrition education with youth but was new to participatory and process-oriented youth engagement approaches like PhotoVoice and YPAR.

PHI CWN staff, Metria Munyan and Jesse Tedrick (November 2016 – February 2017)

Miranda Capriotti, UCCE Community Educator (February 2017 - Summer 2017)

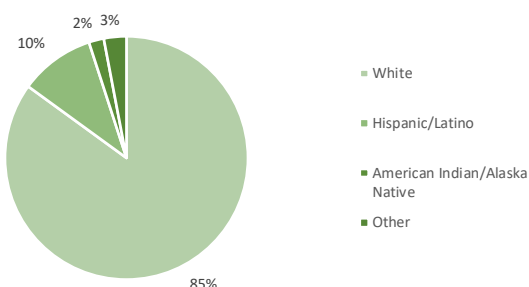
While she brought with her a wealth of nutrition education experience, this was her first experience with youth engagement and YPAR and she had never heard of either one before she started working with this group. She worked with youth in school gardens as a college student, but none of the projects were youth-led.

SETTING

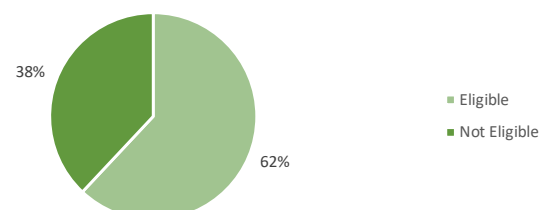
This project took place at Georgetown Elementary School in Black Oak Mine Unified School District. This district serves a rural region known as the Georgetown Divide, which is situated along the border of El Dorado and Placer Counties. Due to its geographic isolation from the rest of the county, it is a tight-knit community where the schools also serve as important hubs for community life. Overall district enrollment has been decreasing steadily since the mid-1990s.

Due to the presence of many youth-related issues, a number of youth-serving nonprofits have served the region and promoted youth development for over a decade, including Divide Ready by 5 and Divide Ready by 21.

Georgetown Elementary School Students by Ethnicity in the 2015–2016 School Year

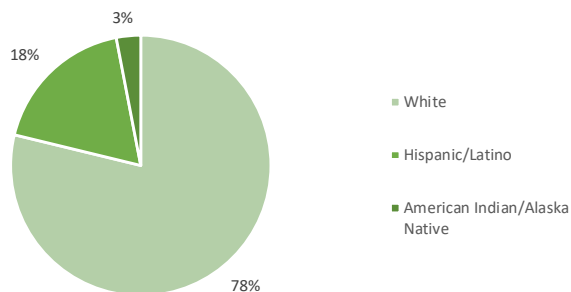


Georgetown Elementary School Students by Eligibility for Free or Reduced Price Meals in the 2015–2016 School Year

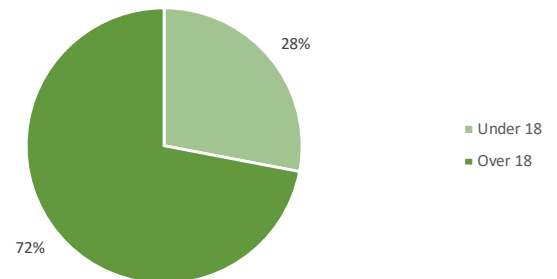


N=232; Source: CDE

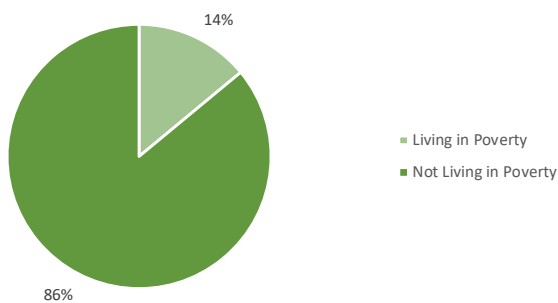
Georgetown Residents by Ethnicity in 2015



Georgetown Residents by Age in 2015



Georgetown Residents by Poverty Level in 2015



N=2,473; Source: ACS 5-Year Estimates

SCHOOL/COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP(S)

This youth engagement project was organized and facilitated in partnership with Mrs. Annie Brown's 6th grade class at Georgetown Elementary School.

- Monica started building relationships with the school, the students and their teacher the previous school year by providing nutrition education. So, she had established relationships with the key stakeholders before she proposed doing a youth engagement project.
- Annie Brown, the students' teacher, was a major ally for this project. She coordinated scheduling, helped with classroom management, helped advance project tasks/goals outside of regular meeting times during class, and helped advocate for the project to school administration.
- Although new to the school this year, the principal was also very excited about and supportive of the youth engagement project and wants to continue it next year. Miranda did not have any contact with her until the end of the school year because Georgetown's previous principal left her position mid-way through the semester and she was not hired until May. Monica had met with the former principal on a few occasions at the beginning of the year, though.

Lessons Learned

- It was extremely helpful to partner with a teacher who was invested in and committed to the project. Mrs. Brown gave the students extra time throughout the week to work on the project and always stayed in the classroom when Miranda worked with the students to assist with classroom management.



YOUTH RECRUITMENT & DEMOGRAPHICS

Since this project involved all 27 students in Mrs. Brown's 6th grade class and took place in school during class time, no further youth recruitment was conducted. The main recruitment effort occurred during the previous year's nutrition education programming and relationship building.

Lessons Learned

- Involving all of the youth from the same classroom in the project made recruitment easy and guaranteed a consistent group of participants throughout the year. However, it also forced young people to participate and did not give them the option to opt-out of the project. For some youth, this negatively impacted their sense of ownership over the project, their buy-in and their level of engagement. Many students did not take real interest in the project until the end, and even then, some of them still were not really motivated to participate.

PROGRAMMATIC STRUCTURE

This was a classroom-based youth engagement effort that started in October under Monica's leadership as a PhotoVoice project examining the school campus.

- Monica used the *Snapshots and Stories: My Voice, My Community* PhotoVoice curriculum, although they did not work through the full process.
- With the involvement of first PHI and then Miranda following Monica's departure, the photography aspect of the project ended with the students identifying an issue they wanted to focus on. At that point, the Stepping Stones curriculum was introduced to guide the rest of the YPAR process and incorporate additional research methods into their work.
- Activities were normally conducted in 1-hour work periods, once a week, in the classroom and were scheduled with Mrs. Brown. They generally were organized in the hour before students were released from school for the day. Some activities required additional time and Mrs. Brown allowed students to work on these project tasks during regular class time.

Integration with other SNAP-Ed programming/activities

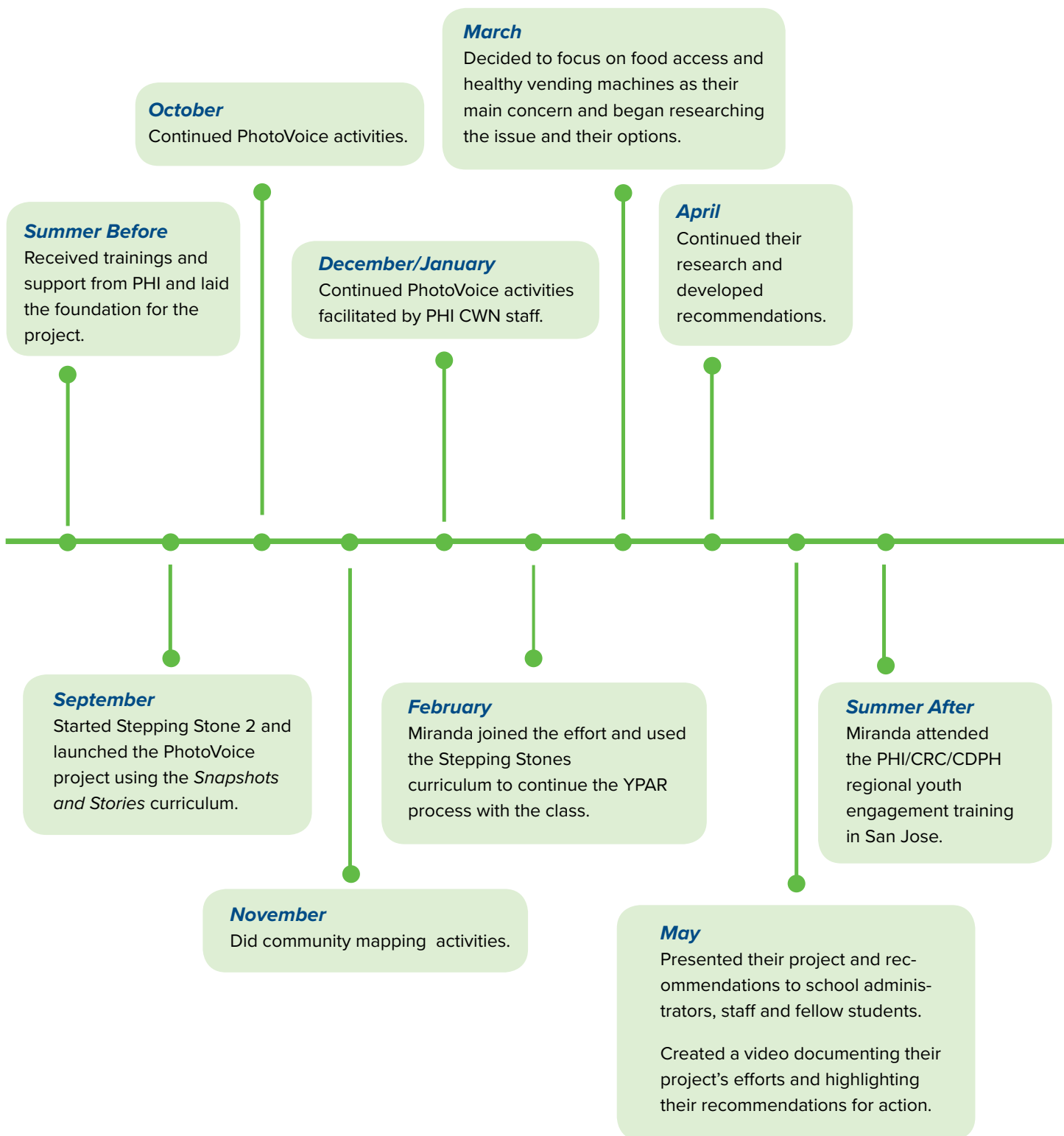
Monica Drazba worked with a number of classrooms at the beginning of the semester on garden and nutrition education. She also provided nutrition education to the same cohort of students in Mrs. Brown's class the previous school year.

Lessons Learned

- As a classroom-based project involving 27 6th grade students, it was a very large group to manage—especially during the last hour of the day—and student buy-in was always an issue. To address this, Miranda broke the class up into 5 separate committees—the Presentation, Fundraising, Solutions, Survey, and Visual Aid action teams—to give everyone more specific tasks and give them some ownership over what they did and how they were involved in the project. This also helped with classroom management for such a large group of students.
- Incorporating hands-on activities into the lessons and discussions was really helpful and Miranda would have liked to include even more of them. For example, she noticed a clear positive change in group dynamics and engagement when she brought in camcorders and let the group start filming their own video.
- One's youth engagement approach very much depends on the age group, as well as the time of the school year, since youth develop and change throughout the year, too. Miranda felt the level of youth participation in the program hovered between being consulted and informed about adult decisions and making joint decisions with adults based on adult initiative. Ideas for the project came from the students, but not without heavy coaching by adult allies.
- With Monica leaving during the first half of the school year, staff turnover was a challenge. Maintaining consistency at the school site and with the youth was integral to the success of the program, so PHI CWN staff temporarily stepped in to provide youth engagement activities and support the project until Miranda was fully transitioned into the adult ally role.



CALENDAR & SCHEDULE OF ACTIVITIES



TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE, COACHING & SUPPORT FROM PHI & CRC

The project at Georgetown Elementary School received a great deal of direct support from PHI in particular, which included PHI staff members taking over the main adult ally role of running the project, facilitating meetings, and maintaining relationships with the teacher and the students during the UCCE staff transition to keep project momentum going.

Aside from PHI's direct involvement, UCCE staff also participated in monthly check-in calls and bimonthly All-County Youth Engagement calls and received additional support through site visits.

Lessons Learned

- Miranda felt that it would be very beneficial to learn about classroom management strategies within a youth engagement setting. In particular, helping adult allies find the delicate balance between free interaction and expression on one hand—so youth interact and feel comfortable expressing themselves—and a focused group and atmosphere on the other so it remains productive and things do not get out of hand.
- Miranda felt the monthly check-in calls with PHI and CRC were very helpful and supportive and it was good to keep in touch on a regular basis.
- It is important to provide adequate training up front before people get involved in a YPAR project or other youth engagement effort. Miranda did not know much about youth engagement when she joined this project midway through the school year, and she felt she could have benefitted from some initial training going into it.

ISSUE IDENTIFICATION

The PhotoVoice process was utilized at the beginning of the year to explore youth perspectives about what made the school a healthy place. However, this youth engagement strategy and research method was not fully realized due to Monica's departure.

To assist with issue identification and move the YPAR project forward, PHI staff facilitated an exercise using the Virtual Healthy School interactive online tool from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Youth explored this virtual setting to think about amenities their school lacked and come up with a list of priority issues to make their school healthier.



After initially identifying 6 potential issues, students narrowed their focus down to 3 top priorities:

- Acquiring healthy vending machines for the school.
- Fixing the school water fountains.
- Acquiring new PE clothes for students to support increased physical activity.

To focus in on just one priority, students were split up into teams and each team was assigned one of the different initial issues they identified. As a group, they then had to explore the pros and cons of their issue and present a case to their peers advocating for why it should be their top priority. After the presentations, youth voted for their favorite issue.

As a group, they decided to focus on acquiring a healthy vending machine.

- There is a lack of healthy snacks available at the school and youth get hungry during the day.
- Only staff have access to the single vending machine on campus and it is not stocked with healthy options anyway.

Research question: How can we get a healthy vending machine to improve students' access to healthy foods?
Lessons Learned:

- Youth had many great ideas that took them off the main track a bit but were still worth exploring, so it was important to have patience and maybe allot extra time to allow for this.
- As part of their team presentations, youth were taught to differentiate between short-term and long-term goals and came up with a list of both for each issue. In the end, understanding this multi-tiered, multi-year process for change helped participants recognize that not completing their eventual long-term goal within the year's timeframe did not constitute a failure, since they still accomplished a number of their short-term goals and next year's youth cohort could continue their advocacy effort.

DATA COLLECTION & ANALYSIS

- The Survey Team created a set of questions to gauge support amongst their peers for a healthy vending machine. They did a trial run with other students in the class to test it out and they wanted to administer it online, but they did not have enough time to conduct it in the school.
- As a class, they identified and voted on the top 13 healthy snack items that they would want to include in a healthy vending machine.
- Participants researched possibly selling snack items during lunch or allowing students to add a snack item to their cafeteria meal. But they learned that they have to be aware of laws that do not let them sell anything else that might detract from school meal participation.
- They also explored how they could raise money to fund this project and get the machine, and how vending machines could help the school raise additional money.

Lessons Learned

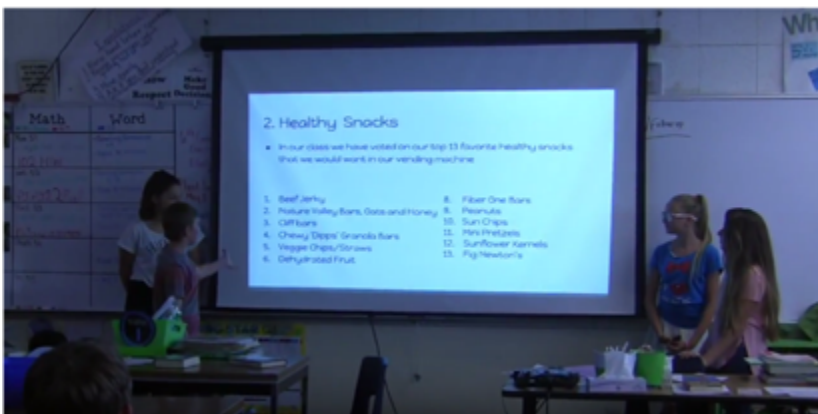
- It would have been beneficial to do lessons that prepared youth for key activities—like survey design—ahead of time. While time is always an issue, it can be very challenging to rush through these processes. Youth need adequate training and support to build their capacity to do effective research and advocacy.

USE OF DATA & MAPPING

- Utilized a community mapping exercise with the class to support issue identification, critical reflection and discussion.
- Collected data related to fundraising, purchasing and stocking a healthy vending machine.
- Youth planned to collect primary data at the school through a survey, but this activity was postponed due to lack of time.
- Miranda was not able to incorporate the CRC's mapping and data tools into the group's work this year but is planning to utilize them with next year's cohort to explore how food and vehicle access data align with students' own analyses of their school and community. She also thinks their local youth-serving nonprofits could benefit from these resources and there might be increased opportunities for collaboration with them along those lines.

RECOMMENDATIONS & ACTION

- The group gave a presentation about their project and recommendations to the principal and food services director.
- Youth participants also gave a second presentation to their 5th grade peers, 5th grade teachers and the principal again. They used this opportunity to ask them for their support and hopefully inspire next year's cohort to continue the project. This presentation was filmed and shared online.
- The group also filmed their own video documenting their project, their research and their recommendations. Footage was captured by youth and they conducted interviews with their peers and the principal. Miranda supported their effort by editing the footage and posting it [online](#).



OUTCOMES

- The group started investigating the funding process for a vending machine and they're exploring their options but they do not have a clear path forward just yet.
- Although the principal seems to be supportive of their proposed change, food service staff appear to be a bit more reluctant to the idea. They are worried about the added workload involved in maintaining a new vending machine, so they would rather explore other ways to get healthier foods into the cafeteria.
- Through this process students were able to increase youth voice and engagement to advocate for nutrition and physical activity changes within the school environment.

"I am pro vending machines if they're dispensing healthy foods. I think it's a great way for students to access healthy food when everybody else is busy, so they can be independent and get good food at their own convenience." – Principal Westsmith

Lessons Learned

- Presenting to their peers provided a good moment of reflection for the youth participants as they answered questions and explained the project to younger students.
- According to Miranda she really loved this project, despite it being challenging at times. She felt YPAR and youth PSE change advocacy take more work than direct education, but also can be more powerful.

NEXT STEPS & PROGRAM SUSTAINABILITY

- Miranda administered the UC CalFresh YPAR Retrospective Surveys to evaluate the project's impact and plan for the coming year's effort.
- Regarding youth recruitment for next year, Miranda will be working with the same teacher at the school and the same class, she will just have a new cohort of 6th grade students.
- This year's participants are all moving on to middle school next year and Miranda had to help them come to terms with the fact that they would not see their change occur while they were still students at Georgetown. The hope is that the new batch of youth participants will continue with the project's current focus.

EL DORADO YOUTH REFLECTIONS

"I've learned that this school has, um, needs improvement, um, and I think that we can do that."

ONE THING ABOUT THIS PROJECT THAT REALLY STOOD OUT FOR ME

"It serves a great role in leadership and responsibility."

"That we could accomplish [sic] so much."

"How much work we put into this project."

"The importance of the outcome."

"Is how much I learned."

"Is that people can come together and do things."

"Was that you need to be active."

"Listening to the questions that other kids asked."

"That my school has kind of a lot of unhealthy things that need to be improved."

"I loved narrowing down our options and how in depth the project is."

ONE THING I WOULD LIKE TO CHANGE ABOUT THIS PROJECT

"Start this project earlier in the year!"

"I would like to change nothing because I think that we did an awesome job."

"Is starting sooner."

IMPERIAL

MEADOWS UNION ELEMENTARY SCHOOL'S HELPING HANDS ACTIVE KNIGHTS (HHAK)



PROJECT OVERVIEW

Imperial County UCCE staff facilitated a YPAR project with 10 6th and 7th graders in collaboration with the local After School Education and Safety (ASES) Program. The group met weekly on campus after school and focused on the lack of physical activity equipment and options for 6th-8th graders. Youth participants mapped out their school resources, surveyed their peers, and analyzed publically-available physical fitness and obesity data for the school, advocating for new physical activity equipment and approval of a playground stencil project. After presentations to school and district officials and their 5th grade peers, their recommendations were approved and are currently being implemented at the school with the group's assistance.

MAIN ADULT ALLY & PROJECT FACILITATOR

Paul Tabarez, UCCE Community Educator

Strategized overall youth engagement programming and the YPAR project, including planning and facilitating all youth group meetings and activities.

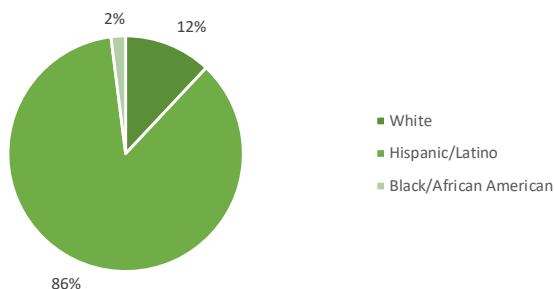
- Before joining UCCE, Paul attempted to do a YPAR project with high school students previously as a sub-contractor with the local food bank. But they started the project late in the school year in the spring without technical assistance or resources beyond an introductory youth engagement training, so the project did not really get off the ground.

SETTING

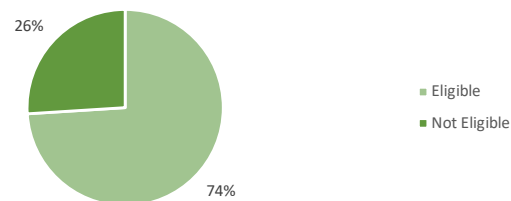
This project took place at Meadows Union Elementary School, a rural K-8 school surrounded by agricultural fields with mobile home parks interspersed throughout the region and no walkability. This is the only school in the Meadows Union School District and it is located in the desert about 5 miles east of El Centro and 6 miles west of Holtville.

- Half of all students were Spanish-speaking English Language Learners in the 2015 to 2016 school year.
- According to the school, approximately 40% of their students' parents work in agriculture.

Meadows Union Elementary School Students by Ethnicity in the 2015–2016 School Year

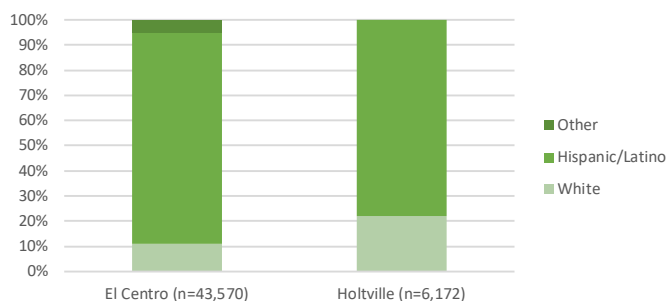


Meadows Union Elementary School Students by Eligibility for Free or Reduced Price Meals in the 2015–2016 School Year

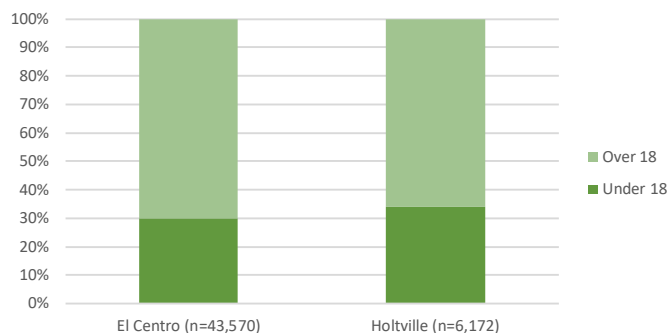


N=459; Source: CDE

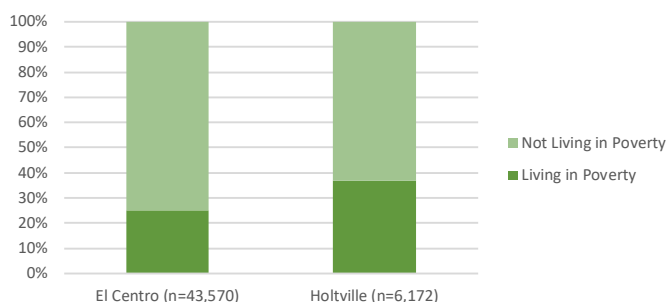
El Centro and Holtville Residents by Ethnicity
in 2015



El Centro and Holtville Residents by Age in 2015



El Centro and Holtville Residents by Poverty Level
in 2015



Source: ACS 5-Year Estimates

SCHOOL/COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP(S)

This YPAR project was organized as an afterschool youth engagement effort at the school site in collaboration with the local After School Education and Safety (ASES) Program.

- ASES provided coordination and logistical support, as well as some vital financial assistance—they donated funds for group t-shirts and also provided transportation for field trips. Paul's relationship with Edith Martinez, the local ASES Coordinator, developed into a very beneficial partnership that also provided Paul with a direct connection to the school's principal.
- Both the principal and the superintendent were very supportive of the YPAR group and its project. Mary Welch-Bezemek, the UCCE Nutrition Program Coordinator, already had a strong relationship with the superintendent before the project started, which helped them get going and build support at the school early on. The district was also focusing more on career readiness and youth leadership development, so Paul was able to speak to these potential benefits of a YPAR project when promoting his program.

Lessons Learned

- It is important to keep in mind the different variables involved when dealing with an afterschool program, particularly logistical concerns. These can include youth leaving meetings early due to transportation requirements or other commitments, dealing with different competing activities at different times of the year (e.g. sports, talent shows, end-of-year events, etc.), and meeting locations that may not always be conducive to the work. Try to anticipate potential issues ahead of time and work around them.

- Building a close working relationship and maintaining open communication with the afterschool program coordinator was key to help work through logistical challenges. This eventually allowed Paul and the coordinator to deal with issues that arose as a united front, improving programmatic organization, backing each other up and supporting the youth from multiple angles.
- Strong relationships—and a diverse portfolio of partnerships—were key to this program’s success overall, including relationships with the afterschool program coordinator, the superintendent, the principal, and the team of young people. Although the superintendent, one of their main champions, left his position at the end of the school year, this change did not really hurt their project because they were also working closely with the principal and it is a small, intimate school district.



YOUTH RECRUITMENT & DEMOGRAPHICS

Paul started out doing nutrition education and CATCH physical education in collaboration with the ASES afterschool program. This allowed him to get to know the youth, foster interest in a potential YPAR project and recruit participants. This also allowed him to build a relationship with the ASES Coordinator, who worked with him to develop and implement a recruitment plan for the YPAR project.

- The YPAR project was introduced to the young people in October and a group of youth from the afterschool program split off to participate with Paul.
- The YPAR group was composed of 6th and 7th graders, although the majority were in 6th grade. There were 10 youth participants in total, with about 6 of those being core group members who were the most consistent and committed throughout the year.

Lessons Learned

- It was sometimes difficult to manage younger students’ shorter attention spans and keep them engaged. Being patient was key and Paul may have had to help them out a little more than older youth. This situation might be easier with next year’s effort, given the maturity, experience and leadership gained during this year’s project.
- It is important to keep in mind that we do not always know what is going on in students’ lives outside of the program.
- Regarding youth commitment, it is important to include language about commitment in the group agreements at the beginning of the program and hold each other accountable. Having key individual youth leaders step up and commit set a strong example for the rest of the group as well.
- Would have liked to have more incentives for youth participants, such as gifts, stipends, and other ways to show appreciation, acknowledge their contributions, and compensate them for their time and effort.

PROGRAMMATIC STRUCTURE

This youth engagement effort was organized as a YPAR project utilizing the PHI Stepping Stones curriculum. Weekly meetings took place afterschool at the school site. As the end of the school year approached, they started meeting twice a week so they could accomplish all of their goals in the shortened timeframe.

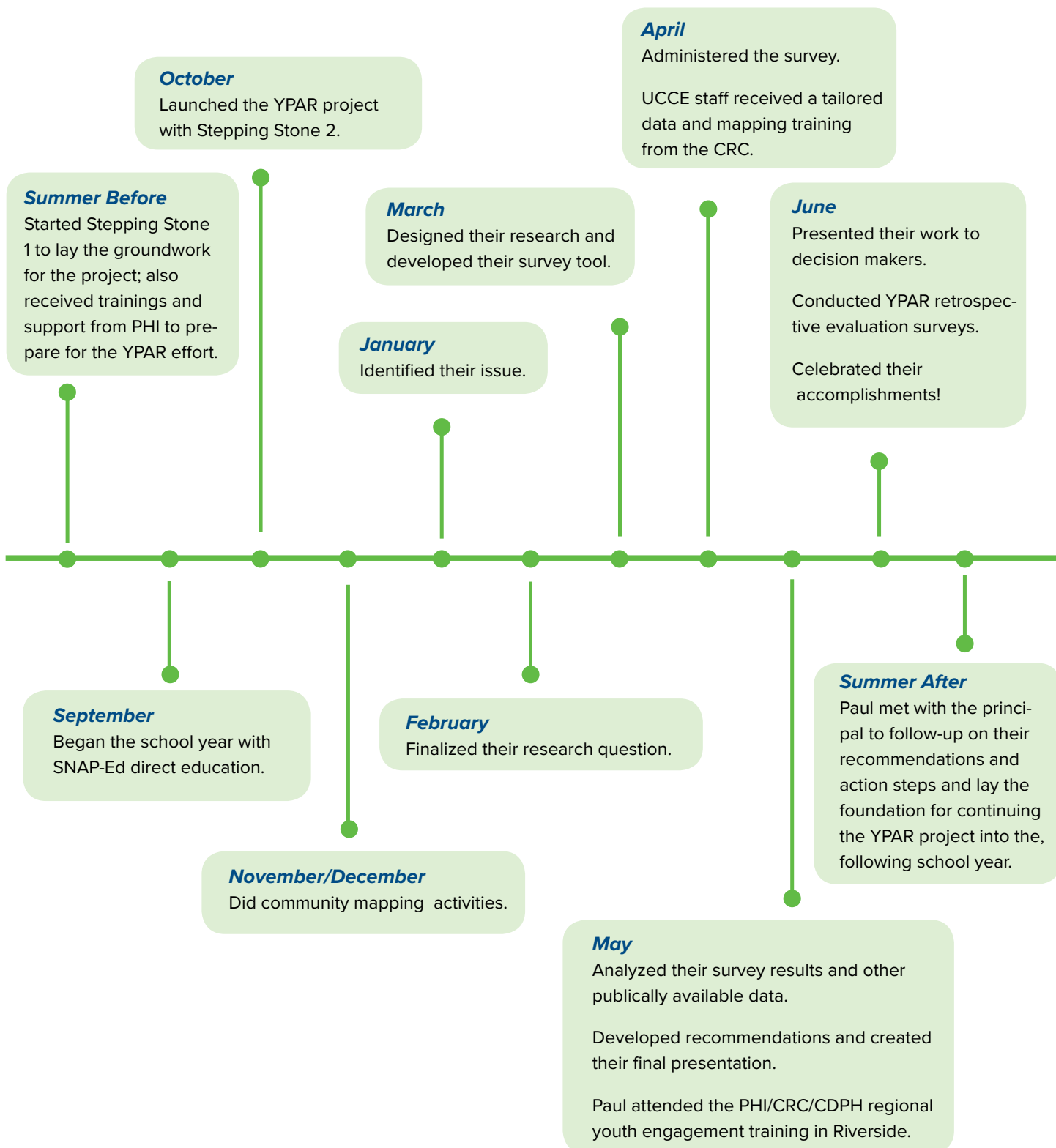
Integration with other SNAP-Ed programming/activities

- Paul started the school year doing nutrition and physical activity education before introducing the idea of a YPAR project to the youth; however, once the YPAR group launched, direct education was not incorporated specifically into the project.
- UCCE staff were also involved in Local School Wellness Policy efforts, including plans for a WellSAT analysis of the school conducted along with the superintendent. While an attempt was made to involve youth in this process it is not clear what the final outcomes were from this effort.

Lessons Learned

- In Paul's opinion, it would have been more beneficial for the group to meet twice a week from the beginning, since a YPAR project often takes a lot more time than expected. Setting up the meeting location with ASES and the principal ahead of time would have made things easier, since they had to jump around a lot at first to find a good, productive meeting space.
- It is important to follow through and be consistent as the adult ally, so youth hold you accountable and can rely on you as well. According to Paul, "Leave a little bit of yourself to build a connection with your participants." This entails being genuine, and allowing yourself to open up as well to build authentic, real relationships with your youth participants.
- Paul felt the youth had "a lot" of control over the program this year and he always let them "bring their ideas." He sometimes had to gently steer them back to more productive routes, but they were the ones who ultimately made the decisions.
- Doing this YPAR project helped Paul get into the school site and plan and implement other activities and projects as well.

CALENDAR & SCHEDULE OF ACTIVITIES



TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE, COACHING & SUPPORT FROM PHI & CRC

Paul was very interested in training and always sought out resources and support. He had very regular contact with PHI and CRC beyond just the monthly check-in calls, including additional phone conversations, regular email contact, and in-person meetings whenever he was in Davis for a SNAP-Ed training or event.

- In addition to general technical assistance with planning, reflecting and troubleshooting, PHI and CRC provided tailored training workshops, sample activities, feedback on their research design and survey tool, data entry support for their survey results, and feedback on their final presentation.

Lessons Learned

- According to Paul, the Stepping Stones YPAR curriculum was a useful guide because it clearly laid out the entire YPAR model and provided helpful activities for every step in the process. The technical assistance and support provided by PHI and CRC staff was “super helpful”, as was being able to contact them at any time.
- For those who have not done a YPAR project yet, you often do not know exactly how to get things going at the beginning of the school year and tend to end up starting later in the year as a result. So assistance with strategic planning before the school year started was really helpful. As Paul learned from his previous attempt to facilitate a YPAR project, he had different outcomes when he didn’t have technical assistance or support and tried to start a project at the end of the school year.

ISSUE IDENTIFICATION

To identify their focus area of concern, the group did a school mapping activity, looking at places and resources that did or did not promote health on the school site. They also utilized tools and strategies from the PhotoVoice project model, taking photos around their school to highlight areas and issues of concern and to prompt reflection and discussion. These and other Stepping Stones activities led them to initially identify 3 potential issues to work on:

- Physical activity: Lack of physical activity equipment in the playground, lack of engagement and options for 6th-8th graders in particular, and unsatisfactory PE classes.
- Water access: The need for water/hydration stations at school.
- Healthy food and food waste in the cafeteria

After doing the “Choosing an Issue” activity and working through a research question development activity for all 3 potential issues, they decided to focus on physical activity.

Research question: “Why aren’t 6th-8th grade students playing during recess?”

DATA COLLECTION & ANALYSIS

YPAR members conducted a paper survey of their peers, asking about their physical activity levels, recess habits and feelings about existing physical activity opportunities and equipment. They prepared for it by doing activities from the YELL curriculum and Stepping Stones, analyzing sample surveys and questions. After developing the survey tool, they also did a dry run with their own group members to test it out.

- The group conducted the survey in conjunction with a lunchtime tasting of real fruit punch from the Rethink your Drink program, so students who took the survey got the tasting as an added incentive. They surveyed 61 4th-8th grade students out of a pool of 257 4th-8th grade students. They primarily surveyed 6th, 7th and 8th graders, though (58 of the 61 respondents).
- PHI helped with data entry to put the results in SurveyMonkey. Then Paul analyzed the results with the youth.
- Overall, 70% of respondents felt physical activity during school time was very important, 71% rated the school's physical activity equipment as medium to low quality, and 74% said they would be more physically active during recess if new physical activity equipment was available.

Lessons Learned

- Youth participants were a little dismayed with some of their survey results and questioned the validity of some of the answers they received related to some unexpectedly high physical activity levels at their school. However, the data was still mostly in-line with what they expected to see. Paul also helped them understand and frame the results to support their message and narrative.

USE OF DATA & MAPPING

- Paul used a community mapping exercise with youth to support issue identification, critical reflection and discussion. The group also collected its own primary data at the school through their survey.
- Paul was trained to use CRC's Regional Opportunity Index and Putting Youth on the Map online tools, which he used to research physical fitness data in the area. He also was trained to conduct activities from the CRC's Making Youth Data Matter curriculum.
- After a targeted training with CRC, Paul found and utilized obesity and physical activity data from KidsData and EdData that were specific to his school site and district. He presented this information to the youth after analyzing their survey results to give them additional data supporting their recommendations.
- The final PowerPoint presentation for the project included data from their survey results paired with obesity and physical activity data from publicly-available online sources.



Lessons Learned

- They did not have computer access in their meeting space, so it was challenging to fully incorporate the CRC online mapping tools into their youth meetings. This barrier can be overcome by researching and printing out relevant maps and data ahead of meetings and bringing them in to spark discussions with youth participants.
- Since Meadows Union is a K-8 school, it was a challenge to find relevant physical activity data for their grades on the Putting Youth on the Map Youth Well-Being Index, which relies on California Healthy Kids Survey data at the high school level. However, this data can still be used to highlight general trends in the district/area and the future that younger youth may have ahead of them if current conditions are not improved. Additionally, this data can be used in conjunction with primary, youth-collected data and other publically available online data sources specific to the school and elementary district.

RECOMMENDATIONS & ACTION

- After conducting their research and analyzing the results, youth members recommended that the school purchase new physical activity equipment: basketballs, soccer balls, jump ropes, hula hoops, nets, volleyballs, and a freshly painted playground. Youth also proposed doing a playground stencil project to support the school's kindergarteners.
- Paul helped youth create a PowerPoint presentation, which included photos they had taken, key results from their survey, additional publically-available school-wide data, personal testimonies, and their recommendations for change. Youth did a practice run of the presentation to role play and get comfortable with it, and they were assisted by the ASES Coordinator.
- They gave their presentation to school and district administrators, including the principal, superintendent, ASES Coordinator, and other key adults. The group also presented to the 5th grade class to highlight their findings and as a recruitment tool to inspire them to join the YPAR effort next year.
- Overall, both Paul and the youth felt really good about how they did in the presentations. The principal said everything they asked for was achievable and new physical activity equipment would be purchased. HHAK youth would also be in charge of helping to plan out how to maintain the new equipment. Additionally, the group received the administration's approval to do the stencil project in the fall.

Lessons Learned

- It took the group a little while to develop a firm, clear ask for school officials, but Paul worked closely with them to solidify their ideas and build their case.
- While Paul could have just brought CATCH and other resources to the school on his own to address some of their physical activity needs, he helped youth become an integral part of this PSE change and gain ownership over the project and process while developing their own skills and sense of efficacy. His efforts also helped normalize and institutionalize youth leadership efforts in the district.

OUTCOMES

- Paul has been in contact with the principal over the summer to stay on top of communication with her and make sure things get done as promised. The principal is very excited about the continuation of the YPAR program and wants to be more involved during the coming school year.
- Some of the physical activity equipment has already been purchased and the youth will work with the administration to make sure the rest of the items are acquired. They are moving forward with plans for the playground stencil project this coming year, too. Youth also already started discussing strategies for maintaining the equipment, such as color-coding items for each different grade.
- The group got some great recognition of their efforts from the Imperial County Office of Education as well and their efforts were included in a ICOE promotional video about school culture.

NEXT STEPS & PROGRAM SUSTAINABILITY

- Paul conducted the UC CalFresh YPAR Retrospective Surveys to evaluate the project's impact and plan for the coming year's effort.
- Since the group was comprised mostly of 6th graders and their school is K-8, all of the current members are looking to stay involved next year. Youth also want to implement more of an application process and interview process for recruitment of new members.
- For their next potential YPAR issue, the group is interested in focusing on water/hydration stations during the coming year. This was their second choice this year and there also could be some possibilities for collaboration with high school students in a community health worker class at nearby Southwest High School. This high school already has champion teachers and is SNAP-eligible, and students there might be able to help the YPAR group test the quality of their water and advocate for change.

IMPERIAL YOUTH REFLECTIONS

“Meadows Union Elementary School’s Helping Hands Active Knights came together to give back to their community.”

ONE THING ABOUT THIS PROJECT THAT REALLY STOOD OUT FOR ME

**“Was how I learned
about leadership.”
“How healthy fruits
can be.”**

**“That I know now
I have a voice to
speak.”**

SAN MATEO

PESCADERO HIGH SCHOOL'S YOUTH FOOD ALLIANCE



PROJECT OVERVIEW



San Mateo County UCCE staff facilitated an in-school YPAR project with 8 high school students at Pescadero's joint high school-middle school. They met every other week on campus during lunch and focused on improving the school meals program and communication between students and decision makers. Youth surveyed their peers and conducted taste tests before advocating to add smoothies to the lunch menus at all district schools. After presentations to school and district officials, their peers and attendees at the Childhood Obesity Conference, their recommendations were approved and smoothies were served starting in May.

MAIN ADULT ALLIES & PROJECT FACILITATORS

Melissa Morris, UCCE Community Educator

Strategized overall youth engagement programming and the YPAR project, including planning and facilitating all youth group meetings and activities. Also oversaw the 4-H Healthy Living Ambassadors garden site and programming.

- Melissa worked with Project EAT in Alameda County and helped pilot YPAR work through UC CalFresh and CDPH. Facilitating yearly YPAR projects through their preexisting youth programs gave her a wealth of experience in this field prior to joining the efforts in San Mateo.

Michaela O'Conner, La Honda-Pescadero Unified School District Community Liaison

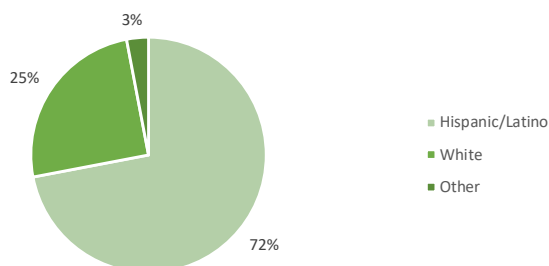
Helped run the youth group with Melissa and secured donated food from local family farms.

SETTING

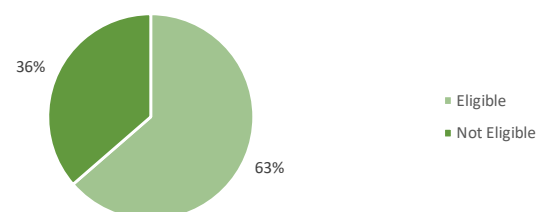
This project took place at Pescadero's combined high school and middle school facility in the La Honda-Pescadero Unified School District. Both the high school and middle school students share the same cafeteria at the small, rural campus.

- 46% of students were Spanish-speaking English Language Learners in the 2015 to 2016 school year.

Pescadero High School Students by Ethnicity in the 2015–2016 School Year



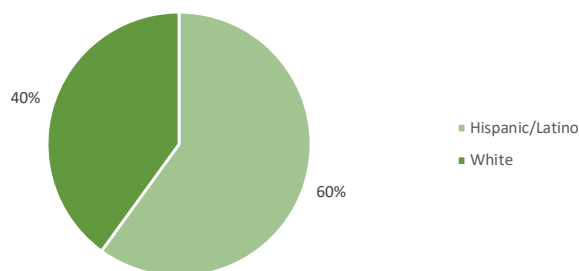
Pescadero High School Students by Eligibility for Free or Reduced Price Meals in the 2015–2016 School Year



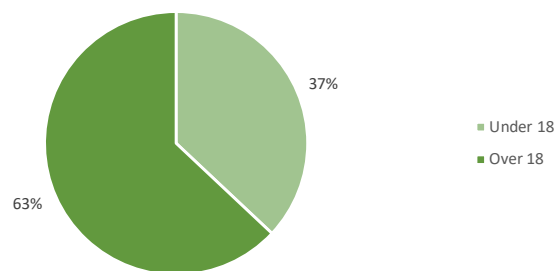
N=96; Source: CDE

“Our school, Pescadero High School, is very small, everyone knows everyone. We are in the country, about one hour from San Francisco.”

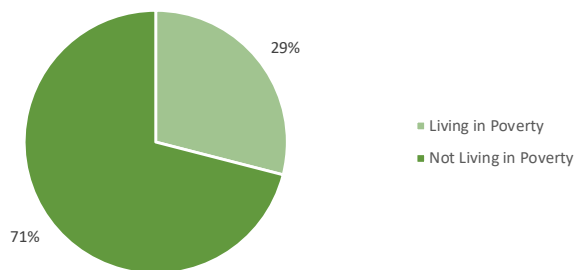
Pescadero Residents by Ethnicity in 2015



Pescadero Residents by Age in 2015



Pescadero Residents by Poverty Level in 2015



N=1,026; Source: ACS 5-Year Estimates

SCHOOL/COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP(S)

The La Honda-Pescadero Unified School District (LHPUSD) actively sought youth input for their school meals program because they were losing money, so they helped provide an opportunity and support for the initiation of a youth engagement effort.

- Melissa initially established relationships with the school and youth as a student teacher working towards her master's degree and teaching credential at Pescadero High.
- The LHPUSD Adult Food Alliance—a group comprised of adult stakeholders in the district's school meals program—held monthly meetings before Melissa started her YPAR effort. Melissa started attending these meetings at first to get the lay of the land and to help inform the needs and supports for the YPAR group. They were looking to improve the school meal program with local produce and were already involved in Harvest of the Month.
- The Center for Ecoliteracy Food Lab was involved on campus as well. Students cooked a lunchroom item once a week and provided feedback on the recipe. They also designed specialty menu items. This youth group prepped the tastings for Youth Food Alliance members to promote.
- Food donations were received as in-kind support from local family farms.

Lessons Learned

- The principal and teachers at Pescadero High School were not really involved in the YPAR project, beyond having to sometimes pull students out of class to participate. However, Melissa coordinated her work with a number of other district staff members and managed to take advantage of preexisting efforts focused on nutrition and food access.
- The small size of the school and district meant the group had more opportunities for impactful work and allowed them to have closer relationships with staff members.

YOUTH RECRUITMENT & DEMOGRAPHICS



To recruit participants, Melissa used fliers, classroom announcements, daily bulletin announcements, schoolwide intercom announcements, and direct outreach to specific students that were identified by their teachers.

- Students received community service hours for their involvement in the group.
- The group was comprised of 8 students, with 5 seniors, 2 juniors and a sophomore. 7 participants identified as Latino and 1 identified as White. There were 4 female members and 4 males.

Lessons Learned

- Melissa initially considered working with the youth from the Ecoliteracy Food Lab to do a YPAR project, but she wanted students to elect to be in the group and not just be forced to participate. This led her to recruit students she got to know through her student teaching instead.
- Melissa indicated it would have been beneficial if she could have provided the youth with a stipend to compensate them for their time. Youth were paid for other activities they were involved in in the community and it helped them stay committed, and this benefit might also motivate them to stay afterschool. It would have also been nice to have additional funding to support field trips and foster connections to other schools and youth-led efforts, such as having youth visit other schools' cafeterias and connect with other youth groups.

PROGRAMMATIC STRUCTURE

This youth engagement effort was organized as an in-school YPAR project with high school students at Pescadero's joint school-middle school campus.

- The group met every other week at the school site for 30 minutes during lunch and also used independent study time for research work and survey data collection. They chose lunch time because there were no afterschool programs other than sports and there was no culture of afterschool participation. Additionally, they could not pull students out of their classes during the school day.
- Melissa reported to LHPUSD Administrator Kristen Lindstrom and LHPUSD Community Liaison Michaela O'Conner every week after each youth meeting so they could coordinate all the different food-focused efforts at the school. Administrators also wanted to make sure they had realistic goals for the youth project.

- Melissa acted as a go-between from the YPAR group to the adults, and ideas would travel from the youth, to Melissa, to administration, and then back again. Logistically it was not possible for any youth group members to attend these meetings because of timing conflicts between youth schedules and adult schedules.

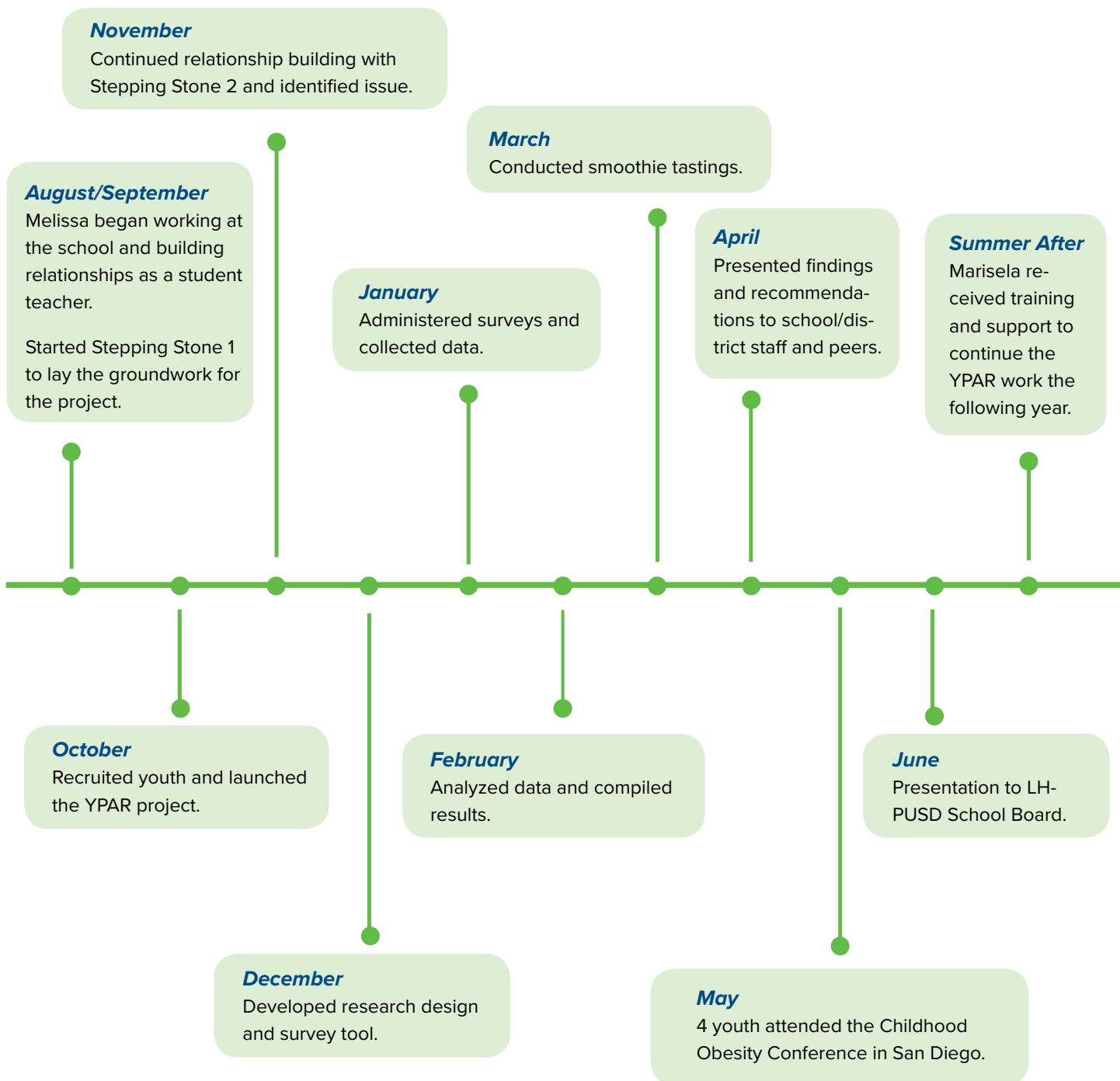
Integration with other SNAP-Ed/ANR programming/activities

The Healthy Living Ambassadors (HLA) program started again in the spring with middle and high school students from around the county teaching nutrition lessons and garden activities to students at El Granada Elementary School in Cabrillo Unified School District. However, the HLA garden site was not located in LHPUSD, so there were not any opportunities for coordination with the YPAR group.

Lessons Learned

- Having Melissa serve as a go-between for communication between the youth and adults turned out to be a successful arrangement, but it could have been better if LHPUSD Administrator Kristen Lindstrom or Food Service Director Regina Silveira attended at least a few of their YPAR meetings instead. This arrangement resulted in a great deal of back and forth, so having them attend meetings could have resulted in clearer messaging so youth better understood the limitations of their requests.
- With youth and administrators not speaking directly with one another, there were too many opportunities for filtering or miscommunication. This was also a missed opportunity to build youth capacity to productively interact with adults. If separate meetings must be held between the adult ally and school administrators, perhaps a youth liaison can be designated to attend these meetings on the group's behalf and spearhead coordination with key decision makers?
- It was hard to get everything done when meeting during lunch in such a limited time period. Melissa recommended facilitating the program with a specific class or using a combination of lunchtime and independent study to get adequate time for the project.
- In addition to working with high school students, Melissa also attempted to coordinate a separate YPAR effort with middle school students at the joint campus. However, they stopped meeting after winter break due to lack of adequate meeting time and Melissa's competing responsibilities. High school and middle school schedules also did not really match up, so working together as a combined group would have been great but was not possible.
- Youth participants lacked a solid foundation in nutrition education, which became apparent in some of their early discussions regarding healthy school food. So, it would have been beneficial to incorporate direct ed programming into the group before they started their YPAR effort to establish a common baseline from which to build. Melissa recommended approaching a teacher and doing nutrition lessons in a class first to recruit for the YPAR group while also developing critical nutrition knowledge.
- The UC 4-H HLA program might have some expanded opportunities for collaboration with the YPAR effort in the coming year. Their goal for the program is to work with the teens year-round and build in more opportunities for youth leadership and ownership of the program.
- Melissa had to take on more roles because of time limits and not wanting to pull youth out of classes to do things. Within the limits of their scope, though, youth had a great deal invested in the project.

CALENDAR & SCHEDULE OF ACTIVITIES



TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE, COACHING & SUPPORT FROM PHI & CRC

Melissa had regular contact with PHI and CRC staff through monthly check-in calls and additional phone conversations. In-person meetings were also conducted with Interim County Co-Director and NFCS Advisor Wei-ting Chen whenever she was in the Davis or Sacramento area for other SNAP-Ed trainings or events.

- In addition to general technical assistance with planning, reflecting and troubleshooting, PHI and CRC provided sample activities, feedback on their research design and survey tool, data entry support for their survey results, and logistical assistance before and during their participation in the Childhood Obesity Conference in San Diego.
- During the following summer, PHI and CRC also assisted San Mateo County staff with a debrief and planning session for their HLA program and supported the personnel and programmatic transition for the YPAR program in Pescadero with the departure of Melissa and most of the youth group members.

ISSUE IDENTIFICATION

Since the school district actively sought youth input for their school meals program, this project focused on an issue that had already been identified by adults from the beginning; however, even though the impetus came from the adults, the young people agreed with the issue and got passionate about it themselves.

- Through the group's own analysis and discussions, they chose to focus on school meal presentation and options, along with doing outreach at the elementary school.
- The issue of food presentation came up in an initial discussion with youth and provided them with an early campaign win and some positive momentum to build upon. Youth were unhappy with the fact that school meals were being served directly onto food trays without any plates or dishes. When Melissa shared this feedback during a regular meeting with school administrators, a change was implemented almost immediately. But they quickly realized there was not a system in place for handling the new dishes, students did not know what to do with them when they were finished eating, and they often just threw them away. So, administrators went back to the youth group to help figure this out and youth made signs to advise their peers on what to do with their plates. After this win, the youth became the go-to group for school officials to help them figure out their meal program concerns.

From there, the group's main concerns became:

- Improving school meals and securing more locally-sourced food. This included getting students more involved in creating menu items and developing more culturally relevant menu items for the school's large Latino population. Also involved promoting new seasonal menu items to the entire school district, based on a request from food services staff.
- Improving dialogue between school administration, foodservice staff and students. This included learning how to navigate complex bureaucracies and rules at the school and district level.

Research questions:

“What do people think of our school food?”

“What do people like and dislike about school food, and what foods do people want to eat?”

Lessons Learned

- While having a predetermined focus worked for the program's first year, Melissa felt it would be better to go through the whole YPAR process with youth next year to identify their own issue and be more youth-driven from the beginning.

DATA COLLECTION & ANALYSIS

The group designed a survey for their peers and younger students to investigate food preferences, levels of cafeteria food consumption, and the perceived quality of school meal options. Surveys were administered to high school, middle school and elementary school students—as well as teachers—at Pescadero and La Honda.

- At Pescadero High/Middle School, they surveyed 87 students out of 162 total students, a 54% response rate.
- The group combined their survey at the elementary schools with monthly tastings they conducted. Elementary schools got a slightly different survey to reflect the differences in their school meal programs. They interviewed the youngest students (grades kindergarten through 2nd grade) using the same questions as the survey, since those students were too young to fill it out themselves.
- The group used Survey Monkey to collect and compile the data, with data input assistance from PHI, and then they did their own data analysis. Their overall conclusion: “People aren’t eating the school meals because they don’t like the menu options.” Also, 95% of respondents wanted more drink options at lunch—rather than just water or milk—and were interested in smoothies in particular.

Lessons Learned

- According to the youth participants, “It was hard to get the teachers to give the survey to the students on Survey Monkey instead of paper. When they did it on paper, we had to input all of that information online after. Also, the teachers were not always supportive of letting us go and do the tastings at the elementary schools and middle school. We really all wanted to do this because it was an important part of our project.”
- According to the youth participants, “We think that if this were to happen again, it would be better to know what their limitations were before we went and asked people about certain things on our survey.”
- Students receiving the surveys expressed frustration that assessments are often done but nothing changes and no actions tend to result from them. This tends to be a common criticism of participatory projects involving youth and underscores the importance of the action phase of a YPAR project.

USE OF DATA & MAPPING

- The group collected its own primary data at the school sites through their surveys and interviews. Data from their survey results was included in the project's final report, as well as in presentations to school board members, school officials, and attendees at the Childhood Obesity Conference in San Diego.
- Melissa was not able to incorporate the CRC's mapping and data tools into the group's work this year, but she was interested in exploring how they could be utilized with the group in the future. In particular, she was interested in maps and data that could highlight local racial/ethnic disparities between the community's pre-dominant Hispanic/Latino and non-Hispanic White populations. She was also interested in maps and data that could support a campaign focused on access to clean drinking water at the school site.

Lessons Learned

- Since Pescadero is located in a very rural, sparsely populated region with large census tracts, Melissa was concerned about finding relevant, disaggregated data for their community that did not encompass a wider geographic scope. Mapping and data can still effectively support a rural community, though. Larger census tracts provide youth participants with opportunities for ground-truthing (i.e. comparing publicly available data about an area with the lived experiences and knowledge of people on the ground to see what rings true and what gaps may exist in the official database). For example, youth can compare the boundaries of a rural census tract with the areas where people actually live to see who is and is not represented in the data.

RECOMMENDATIONS & ACTION

- Based on their survey results, the group focused on getting smoothies added to lunch menus as a healthy drink option. They did tastings of different flavors using a smoothie bike with all 3 schools and it was a huge hit, with mango/strawberry being the clear winner across all of the sites.
- Youth developed an action plan, identifying allies and possible solutions to get smoothies added as a menu item at both schools in Pescadero.
- The group presented their survey and tasting results to school administrators, food service staff and their peers to try and implement their proposed changes to the school lunches this year.
- Following these presentations, though, youth had to work through a number of initial setbacks: School staff initially only planned to serve smoothies one time—rather than make them a regular menu item—due to a number of logistical and bureaucratic barriers: they lacked sufficient funds, the district kitchen did not have blenders, and the monthly lunch calendar was already built out. Additionally, although staff at the high school and middle school were supportive of their recommendations, elementary school staff were hesitant to adopt the changes.
- Melissa organized a separate retreat at the UC Cooperative Extension facilities at Elkus Ranch to do a deeper reflection session with the youth and craft their project's final report, along with their presentation and poster for the Childhood Obesity Conference.
- 3 youth from their group were able to join the Youth Advisory Council for the 9th Biennial Childhood Obesity Conference in San Diego as well. They created a poster about their research, presented the poster at the conference, and gave feedback to the event planners about the conference's structure and its accessibility and relevance for youth attendees.
- At the end of the project, Melissa gave a presentation to the LHPUSD School Board, reporting back on what they did, the contents of their final report and what was presented at the conference in San Diego. Although the presentation went well and the school board was very impressed with their work, none of the youth could make the meeting because they had to work or were out of town.



Lessons Learned

- For the group retreat and drafting of the final report, they could only get 5 of the 8 group members to attend. So, they did not get input from everyone and the whole process felt a little bit thrown together in Melissa's opinion. She recommended having all members present for this critical activity and allowing enough time for it at the end of a project so it does not feel rushed.
- Regarding their participation in the Childhood Obesity Conference, having youth attend a big event at the end of the year was a great way to wrap it all up, reflect on what they did and tell peers and adults about their accomplishments. Some logistical elements required additional staff planning, though, including the coordination of chaperoning duties between multiple staff members to avoid overtime and the purchasing of youth meals while traveling.

OUTCOMES

- As a result of youth's advocacy work with school administrators and food service staff, they ended up selling smoothies every Friday in May and sales increased each week; however, they were not able to serve the flavors they initially taste-tested because the school got different fruit donated.
- Smoothies had to be ordered with lunch orders in 1st period and they charged an extra \$1.50 for them, but the youth group helped coordinate this process. Youth also helped create an avenue for communication between the students and decision makers.
- While youth were initially disappointed and lost some of their motivation as a result of earlier challenges following their presentations, they persevered and were ultimately pleased with their accomplishments and the success of their project.
- This was a solid first year for the program at a school that had never had a YPAR project before. The adult allies were able to follow through on commitments with the youth and youth followed through on their commitments to the program.



Lesson Learned

- While the district said it was open to youth input and encouraged students to participate in and contribute to the process of improving their school meals program, adults were still a bit hesitant to fully and authentically share power with young people when it came down to actual decision making. Even if a situation seems tailor-made for youth involvement, youth participants and adult allies should still be prepared to receive pushback from decision makers when it is time to advocate for and implement youth recommendations for change.
- Youth learned some valuable lessons about navigating bureaucracies and how decisions are made, which is often hidden and inaccessible to young people. The key is to then find out where and how they can be involved in and influence these decision-making processes moving forward.

NEXT STEPS & PROGRAM SUSTAINABILITY

- Although Melissa left her position at the end of the school year and most of the youth participants graduated, San Mateo County staff would still like to continue the YPAR program in Pescadero.
- Marisela Ceron was able to join Melissa and the youth at the Childhood Obesity Conference to help with chaperoning but also to continue building relationships for a smooth staff transition. Melissa had a unique position in and relationship to the school to help facilitate the process but Marisela does not have all of those relationships yet, so they have to get reestablished for the coming school year.
- Perhaps 2 students from last year's cohort will be returning to the school—providing some continuity and opportunities for expanded leadership—and Melissa helped identify 2 key teachers to reach out to.
- Possible issues for the next YPAR cohort to focus on include implementation of the Local School Wellness Policy and poor water access for students.

Lessons Learned

- When handling staff turnover with adult allies, it is important to have a transition period so community partners and, above all, youth can slowly develop a level of comfort and trust with a new person. Marisela was involved throughout the year, first getting to know youth participants through tastings and then building relationships with them over an extended period of time, culminating with her involvement in the San Diego conference trip.

SAN MATEO YOUTH REFLECTIONS

“It was a way to have my opinion heard.”

“I got involved with the Youth Food Alliance because they were serving healthy food, and I stayed involved because I was making the community healthier.”

“It is important that we did this research rather than adults because we are the students and we are the ones that eat the food and most of it gets thrown away.”

“I got involved with the Youth Food Alliance because it gave me a chance to change and give my opinion about our school food.”

“I am a Youth Food Alliance member because I like to make food taste and look better. I like the Food Alliance because it gave me healthy food and community service.”

ENDNOTES

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