

IMPROVING SCHOOL PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND NUTRITION ENVIRONMENTS ONE MINI-GRANT AT A TIME: LESSONS LEARNED

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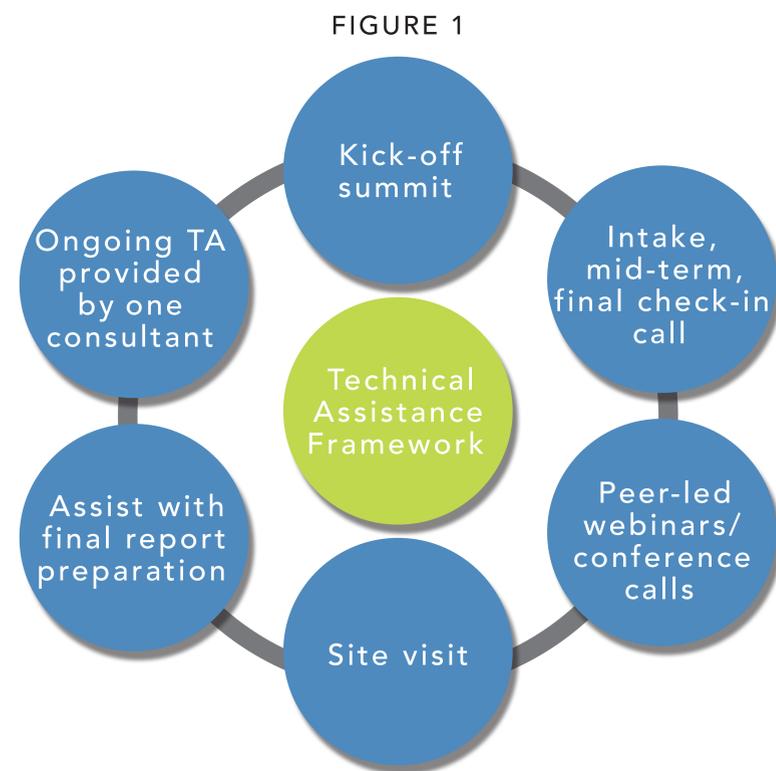
BACKGROUND

Georgia Shape, Governor Nathan Deal's statewide initiative to address childhood (0 to 18 years) obesity in Georgia, was established in 2011 to work towards increasing the number of students in the Healthy Fitness Zone for body mass index. Various strategies have been implemented in schools, early care and education centers, healthcare settings, and the community to achieve this goal.

Beginning in 2012, the Georgia Shape School Physical Activity and Nutrition Grants Program was established to help schools build capacity to achieve policy, system, and environmental improvements that impact student and staff health. Mini-grants in the amounts of \$3,000 (nutrition only) or \$5,000 (nutrition and physical activity) are provided to schools to implement programs and policy, system, and environmental (PSE) changes. Awardees also receive training and technical and partnership development assistance from the Georgia Health Policy Center (GHPC).

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE FRAMEWORK

An evidence-informed technical assistance (TA) framework (Figure 1) was developed by GHPC based on 14 years of working with health grantees throughout the United States. Understanding that schools fall in a spectrum of readiness for change, the framework provides access to various services and resources throughout the grant period to support each school. Grantees are assigned a dedicated consultant to support them in working through the TA framework and grant deliverables.



PARTICIPANTS

Since 2012, seven rounds of funding have provided 159 grants to 136 Georgia public schools totaling \$688,000.

METHODS

The Shape grant year starts October 1 and ends June 30. Grantees are provided a checklist and timeframe for completing specific actions. They are required to submit a final report at the end of the grant period containing a summary of activities and spending detailing challenges, outcomes, success stories, partnerships and communications/promotional activities. A process evaluation was conducted to assess themes in program and policy, system, and environmental changes as well as barriers and facilitators to achieving grant deliverables.

OUTCOMES

Funding and TA has helped schools to:



Grantee schools have made sustainable nutrition and physical activity changes such as:

- Creating before or after school physical activity sessions;
- Establishing "exercise labs" for use by teachers and students;
- Hosting student taste tests to add new lunch or breakfast menu items;
- Building school garden beds to support learning and exposure to new foods;
- Adopting a daily recess policy;
- Building paths to support student participation in Safe Routes to School; and
- Redesigning lunchrooms (Smarter Lunchroom) to promote and encourage consumption of healthier food choices.

BARRIERS AND FACILITATORS

Shape grantee schools identified the following barriers and facilitators to developing program, policy, system, and environmental changes:

Barriers:

- Time constraints due to numerous and varying priorities in the school setting
- Engaging school staff in health/wellness efforts
- Navigating challenges of using grant funds, especially when school district oversees spending

Facilitators:

- An engaged and supportive administrator (principal, assistant principal, etc.) at the school
- A dedicated health/wellness champion(s) to spearhead efforts and delegate tasks
- Establishment of a wellness council that actively participates in health and wellness initiatives at school
- Participation in training and technical assistance opportunities throughout the grant year
- Development of strategic partnerships (internal and external to the school) to assist with health/wellness activities

CONCLUSION

A mini-grant initiative to improve physical activity and nutrition in public schools can be successful in improving health-related programs and PSE changes if certain strategies are adopted.

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