

Insights from the Cancer Control Field

# Nutrition Pathfinders in Riverside County, CA

## Public Health Challenge

Good nutrition and physical activity help prevent overweight and obesity. They may also help people avoid health problems such as heart disease, diabetes, and cancer. Many nutrition and physical activity programs start with young children to encourage healthy lifelong choices. These choices include eating healthy foods (e.g., fruits and vegetables) and exercising regularly. In an elementary school in Riverside County, CA, a fourth-grade teacher uses the Nutrition Pathfinders education program to teach her students the importance of making healthy food choices and engaging in physical activity.

## At a Glance

The fourth-grade teacher uses the EBCCP program Nutrition Pathfinders to combat barriers to healthy eating and physical activity among her classroom students. Read this success story to learn how she uses Nutrition Pathfinders and how you can use Nutrition Pathfinders in your setting.

## The Setting

Located in Riverside County, CA, this fourth-grade classroom is part of an elementary school with 850 primarily Hispanic students. Many students are learning English as a second language, and 100% of the students receive free or reduced-price lunch. The classroom teacher wears many hats—she is the coordinator for the fifth-grade physical fitness test, the head of the health and wellness program, and the Nutrition Pathfinders champion, and she serves

in a few other roles as well. She uses Nutrition Pathfinders with her classroom students each year.

## The Approach

The Riverside County elementary school does not mandate use of the Nutrition Pathfinders program. Instead, teachers decide whether and how to use the curriculum. The Dairy Council of California provides the required program materials to the school and follows up frequently with individual teachers to replenish their materials as needed. Materials are provided in both English and Spanish. The fourth-grade teacher in Riverside County has been teaching for 19 years and using Nutrition Pathfinders for the past 10 years. As the program champion at her school, she encourages teachers

“My goal for the students is to see the rate of childhood obesity decline at the school, through eating healthier foods and getting the proper amount of exercise. To give students the education to make wise choices on which foods they put in their body for maximum output—this is why I use Nutrition Pathfinders.”

Classroom Educator

to find alternatives to giving children sugary snacks as rewards, and she promotes making healthier food choices and drinking water throughout the school day.

She begins teaching Nutrition Pathfinders at the beginning of each school year to set healthy expectations right away. She educates her students about good nutrition and encourages them to bring healthy snacks to school. The teacher uses Nutrition Pathfinders year after year because of the need for nutrition education in her community. According to the teacher, much of the foods some students have at home are “low-cost, high-bulk filler foods” with little nutritional value.

Modifying the original 4- to 10-week Nutrition Pathfinders program, the teacher conducts the lessons for 3 weeks, with each taking 30 to 45 minutes. Sometimes she changes the lessons to make them shorter and easier to understand for students with academic challenges. After completing all the lessons, she reinforces the Nutrition Pathfinders curriculum throughout the year. For example, she asks students what they are eating for a snack. If they show her a container brought from home with apple or pineapple slices, she reaffirms their choice by announcing, “Good job, that is a great snack!” If students bring an unhealthy snack, they review the nutrition label together and discuss the serving size, which reinforces math skills. The teacher educates the students’ parents as well. She asks them to pack their children healthy snacks and bring pencils or other non-edible items to school to share at parties. The Nutrition Pathfinders physical activity components are also reinforced by the teacher. She encourages her students to be physically active during their recess time and at home.

Over the years, the teacher learned that some students did not have access to enough food. Some students could not complete their food log because they missed meals at home. To increase the students’ access to healthy food, she began

working closely with a food bank. The food bank now visits the school once a month during the school year and six times over the summer. At each visit, the food bank gives each child a bag of food that consists primarily of fresh produce, as well as some non-perishable foods, such as crackers and boxed goods.

Using the pre- and post-assessment included in the Nutrition Pathfinders materials, the teacher consistently sees improvement in her students’ nutrition knowledge and awareness. Students learn how many servings they should eat in each food group every day, how to classify food, and how many minutes of daily active play they need.

Although she received no formal training on the program, the teacher was able to use the program materials without any problems. She has since shared her methods and practices with other teachers in the school. She says that she will use Nutrition Pathfinders in her lessons as long as she is teaching in the classroom.

## Challenges and Lessons Learned

### Partnerships and Collaborations

To address barriers to accessing healthy foods, consider partnering with a local food bank. This teacher in Riverside County collaborated with her local food bank to provide children with fresh fruits and vegetables throughout the year, even during the summer.

### Promoting Healthy Foods

To change the culture of providing children with unhealthy foods at your school, influence your peers to opt for healthier rewards. Instead of bringing cupcakes to a party, make yogurt parfaits. Promote drinking water and eating healthy snacks, such as fruits and vegetables, during the school day. Also, extend this education to parents and ask that they do not bring unhealthy foods to school.

## Questions and Answers

### Can Nutrition Pathfinders be implemented at the school level?

Yes, Nutrition Pathfinders can be implemented at various levels. This Insights from the Cancer Control Field story describes one teacher using the program within her classroom, but some users implement the program more broadly, such as at the school or county level.

### Where can I get the program materials?

The Nutrition Pathfinders materials are available on the developer's website: <https://ebccp.cancercontrol.cancer.gov/productDownloads.do?programId=31528235>



## Find Out More

To learn more about Nutrition Pathfinders and how to use the program at your organization, view the program summary at: <https://ebccp.cancercontrol.cancer.gov/programDetails.do?programId=31528235>

## Contact

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## About EBCCP

The Evidence-Based Cancer Control Programs (EBCCP) website has a searchable database of programs, plus resources that planners and public health practitioners can use to help prevent cancer and support cancer survivors and their caregivers in community and clinical settings.

EBCCP is the recently refreshed version of Research-Tested Intervention Programs (RTIPs). The new website includes improved navigation and search capabilities, case study narratives, program summaries, and more. Visit us at [ebccp.cancercontrol.cancer.gov](https://ebccp.cancercontrol.cancer.gov) for the latest resources today!