

Reflection on Smarter Lunchrooms

Brianna L. Johnson

In connection with the Applied Experience Display “Smarter Lunchrooms”

Faculty Advisor Teresa W. Heck

School lunches are commonly to blame for the rising obesity rates in youth, which pushed lawmakers to enforce stricter regulations on what schools were able to offer their students. However, with these regulations in place many schools saw a drop in their rate of lunch participation, making many people question what else can be done? This led to the creation of The Smarter Lunchrooms Movement, which aims to making the healthy choice the easy choice, without taking the options away. Smarter Lunchrooms originates at Cornell University where Dr. David Just and Dr. Brian Wansink are experts in the science of consumer behavior and food psychology. The initial movement began in 2009 where examination of how principles of behavioral economics, the study of how the social and physical environment influences decision-making, can influence students’ food selection and consumption in school cafeterias. The initial thought of using behavioral economics in the lunchroom led to the partnership with multiple elementary, middle, and high schools for the opportunity to field-test the principals of behavioral economics within the school cafeteria. All of this information, including research articles, free online training, and school resources can be found on their Smarter Lunchrooms Website (smarterlunchrooms.org). This source was my main go to as I started this movement towards Smarter Lunchrooms within the Monticello School District with their free two-hour online training. The training gave me insight into the research supporting the movement, free tools available to begin my own movement, and success stories on how these no to low cost changes can benefit students’ nutritional health. The available scorecard was a major resource that provided guidelines to follow as I assessed each individual lunchroom, and encouraged gathering multiple perspectives in order to best understand the school’s needs. Once the assessments were complete, the availability of printable resources was beneficial as an action plan for each school began to form.

Smarter Lunchrooms originates from a vision two professors at Cornell University, Dr. David Just and Dr. Brian Wansink who are experts in the science of consumer behavior and food psychology, created. The sources are stepping-stones giving the opportunity to adapt based on the results obtained through multiple channels. This framework allows professionals to assess specific needs of a student body, implement changes the target group agrees upon, and evaluate changes while making adjustments as necessary in a time efficient and effective manner. During this process, I am constantly reminding myself, every community is different, every school is different, and every student is different. Remembering this allows me to take my knowledge and available resources and transform them in order to benefit the individuals I aimed to assist, the students. During this movement, a problem was not necessarily solved, but an issue was beginning to be assessed. I saw this initiative and immediately was grasped by its very concept of behavioral therapy. Smarter Lunchrooms understood that merely taking away the unhealthy option would not nudge students into making the healthy choice. The undoubtedly successful research behind this movement persuaded me to implement it within my own community, tackling five schools over the course of 2 months. I was determined to make an action plan for each lunchroom to be a fun, warm, and inviting environment where students want to be while

providing staff with the resources needed to nudge students towards the healthier choice. I am excited to hear how these newly implemented changes influenced the community, the school, and the students.