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Expanding a successful community-based obesity prevention approach into new communities: Challenges and achievements

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Summary

Objective: A previously successful community-based obesity prevention intervention with a focus on school settings was expanded into new communities with varying contexts. In order to understand the complexities involved in implementing health promotion activities in schools, this study examined experiences of school staff and project officers including barriers, contextual factors and achievements.

Methods: School environment assessments were conducted in schools across four Victorian communities with school staff ($n = 1-5$ staff plus a trained researcher per group in 9 primary and 8 secondary schools) 12–18 months post-intervention. Process reports from project officers were also reviewed and analysed ($n = 4$).

Abbreviations: CBI, community-based interventions; HPC:BAEW, Health Promoting Communities: Being Active Eating Well; BAEW, Be Active Eat Well; IYM, It's Your Move!; EFT, Equivalent Full Time.

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Results: School staff commonly reported time pressures as a barrier to implementation and project officers working within schools reported competing priorities and limited health promotion experience of staff; lack of stakeholder engagement; low participation in some activities and insufficient implementation time. Contextual factors included community socioeconomic status, student ethnicity and living rurally. Achievements included student and staff enjoyment from programme activities, staff capacity building, partnerships, embedding activities into existing infrastructure and programmes, and having consistent health-related messages repeated through a variety of strategies.

Conclusions: Community-based interventions with a focus on school settings need to consider system level, organisational and contextual (i.e. socioeconomic, ethnicity, family and town characteristics) factors when expanding previously effective strategies into new communities. Implementation benefits may have added whole of school benefits in addition to child health. Focussing on overcoming the challenges experienced in this complex initiative is required for future interventions.

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Introduction

Childhood obesity and the long term consequences associated with it are an increasing public health concern internationally, and within Australia. On an international and national level, initiatives are currently being developed by governments to promote healthy behaviours with the hope of reducing overweight and obesity at a population level. On a local level, community-based interventions (CBI) and school-based interventions have shown promise as being an effective strategy to influence risk factors for the development of overweight and obesity within the communities and population groups involved [1,2]. Results vary as much as the intervention approach, time period and dose, ranging from significant positive anthropometric outcomes and decreased risk of developing overweight and obesity [1,3–7] to small, modest effects in behaviours, knowledge and attitudes [2,8–15]. The latest update of the Cochrane systematic review of the effectiveness of obesity prevention interventions demonstrated that, relative to a comparison group, children participating in obesity prevention interventions had a reduced risk of developing obesity through activities implemented to improve healthy eating and physical activity, and reduced body mass index [16].

Successes in an Australian context with regards to obesity prevention within schools stems from the Colac *Be Active Eat Well* (BAEW) initiative (primary schools) [1] and *It's Your Move!* (IYM) (secondary schools) [17]. Results from evaluations of these projects indicated reduced unhealthy weight gain (BAEW) and a decreased prevalence of overweight

and obesity (IYM) in intervention students [1,17]. In 2008, an expansion of BAEW into new communities was funded by the Victorian government and implemented over the following three years. This was the *Health Promoting Communities: Being Active Eating Well* (HPC:BAEW) initiative [18].

Regarding design, the HPC:BAEW approach expanded the single-site BAEW demonstration project conducted in one small rural community into four new communities of varying levels of socioeconomic disadvantage and ethnicity in Victoria, Australia. Involvement in HPC:BAEW was by a competitive tender approach from lead agencies within interested communities. Representatives from the lead agency consulted community stakeholders (e.g. from local government, health sectors, early education, public housing estates, multicultural services), examined statistical evidence (e.g. Australian Bureau of Statistics data regarding prevalence of overweight/obesity, dietary and physical activity-related behaviours, socio-economic status, migration status) and considered alignment of local strategic plans to determine the target population. Two communities chose to focus their intervention on primary school-aged students (6–12 year olds), and two communities chose to focus on secondary school-aged students (13–18 year olds). The intervention was developed around a multi-setting, multi-strategy approach, as per the original BAEW design [18]. The multi-site HPC:BAEW intervention communities shared a common goal of promoting healthy body weight at a community level by increasing healthy eating and physical activity. Intervention strategies were tailored and

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