



“Bring Back Healthy Sideline Snacks” Minor Sport Project: Review and Recommendations

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Introduction and Review:

During the spring/summer of 2016, 16 soccer teams participated in the Healthy Kids Community Challenge (HKCC) Minor Sport Project! The children involved ranged in age from 4 to 10 years and included both boys and girls. The following associations were represented: Strathroy United FC, West Middlesex Youth Soccer League, Lucan Soccer Association and Ilderton Minor Soccer.

The goal of this project was to encourage parents and coaches to lead the change and “bring back healthy sideline snacks”. This project was based on evidence that children who play sports are more likely to eat sugary foods & drinks than children who do not play sports. One of the factors is that team sideline snacks have become overrun with sugary and salty treats. Participating teams were challenged to provide only water and fruits or vegetables for team snacks throughout the season.

In order to determine the Minor Sport Project’s feasibility and sustainability, two feedback surveys were created. One survey was for the parents and coaches that participated in the project and one was for all the soccer and baseball sporting associations that received the initial Minor Sport Project information. Some participating coaches were contacted for further discussion over the phone or in-person discussions.

The purpose of these feedback surveys were to gather parents’, coaches’ and associations’ perceptions on the successes and barriers of the Minor Sport Project and to identify any potential areas of improvement for the future. By addressing the barriers, we can aim to increase the appeal of the project to other youth sporting teams, thereby increasing participation.

The feedback was summarized into an infographic to be used in future recruitment and advocacy efforts. The following are some highlights from the feedback received from parents, coaches and associations and along with recommendations for the project.

Findings and Recommendations for the Future:

More Advertisement and Promotion:

Almost all of the parents, coaches and associations thought the Minor Sport Project was a great initiative. This was evident with one coach describing it as a “*Fantastic Program*”. Further evidence of the project’s popularity can be seen in the recruitment of 16 youth sporting team when there was only an original goal of 5 teams.

The demand for the project and its guidelines could depict the desire for change from parents and coaches. It was also found that with the youth soccer teams that participated 98% were willing to continue with these practices for future seasons and 87% were willing to recommend the Minor Sport Project to other teams. Associations also displayed a high willingness with 75% stating they will continue or encourage their teams to participate in the future.

However, many parents, coaches and associations identified the need for more advertisement and promotion of the project especially well before the sporting seasons begins. This need for earlier advertisement is apparent in this one association’s comment:

“I believe we would have had more coaches involved if we had more advance notice. If I remember correctly our season had either just started or was about to start when we became involved.”

Therefore, it is recommended that a Minor Sport Project marketing plan should be created for the upcoming youth sporting seasons including local hockey, soccer and baseball teams. These sports seem to be the most popular amongst children in Middlesex County.

Items that should be distributed in this Minor Sport Project marketing plan include:

- The original Minor Sport Project information packages to association and coaches
- The Minor Sport Project infographic displaying the experience of teams this year
- Lead the Change video visually depicting real participants and their enjoyment.

This marketing plan should also incorporate a social media strategy to further advertise and promote these materials. This social media strategy can work alongside the current HKCC Theme 2 “*Water Does Wonders*” social media strategy with the Minor Sport Project being promote and advertised on “*Minor Sport Mondays*”.

Further feedback from parents, coaches and associations suggested having promotional materials and packages available during league registration and coach training days. In order to initiate this suggestion, league registration dates and training days will need to be determined from the applicable associations and incorporated into the overall marketing strategy. These strategies will most likely also assist in the Minor Sport Project’s future goals of recruiting other youth sporting leagues outside of soccer, such as baseball and hockey.

Education on Current Misconceptions:

When reviewing the feedback from all stakeholders, there were two potential identified barriers that kept emerging regarding the Minor Sport Project that were not reported as barriers upon completion of the project. These two barriers were that the project would be difficult or a burden for coaches to implement

and the kids would oppose the changes to only healthy snacks and water. One association voiced this potential concern by stating:

"Kids want junk, so it might not be 'as fun' to provide healthy snacks".

The results from the Minor Sport Project parents' and coaches' feedback survey disproved both of these concerns. It was reported that 95% of children were satisfied with the healthy snacks with 70% of parents reporting that the children were very satisfied. One coach expressed her surprise by stating:

"I wasn't sure the parents or the kids would go for it, but thought it was a good idea. They ALL went for it though!"

It was also apparent this project was not difficult to implement with almost all the participants reporting minimal difficult and 67% stating it was not difficult at all. The simplicity of this project was also apparent with 95% of teams participating meeting the project's snack guidelines on every week or on most weeks during the season. One parent expressed their surprise by stating:

"I thought we would feel restricted in our choices but there were so many great choices and it was super easy!"

In fact, for the parents and coaches that participated in the project, almost half of the parents stated that they experienced no barriers when implementing the project!

It is recommended that in future promotion of the Minor Sport Project, these misconceptions should be addressed through education based on the findings found from this pilot project. This education should be provided by the Minor Sport Feedback Survey's infographic and the Lead the Change videos that were created during this past season. Both materials should be provided to associations and coaches in their information packages they receive at the beginning of the season. If teams know how easy it is for them to participate, it is believed that they will be more open to the project in the future. This opinion was shared by one coach that stated the best way to recruit teams in the future is to provide:

"A little more promotion of the project and reiterating how simple it really is!"

Reducing Barriers of Time and Money

Two barriers that seemed to be apparent among parents and coaches participating in the project were the cost and the time it takes to prepare fruits and vegetables as snacks for children. One parent described the cost issue by stating:

"Making a special trip to get fresh fruit enough for the team and the cost"

Another parent described the real life time constraints by stating that

"Time to prep the snacks with a busy family of 5"

Unfortunately, we cannot control the rising cost of vegetables and fruits which makes resolving this barrier more difficult. However, it is recommended that HKCC continue to provide subsidises through grocery store gift cards to teams participating in the Minor Sport Project to try and reduce this barrier.

It is also recommended that HKCC should provide more information through social media and print materials about simple, healthy snack ideas for parents. Not only would these simple ideas save parents' time when preparing the snack but it will also save them time thinking of a snack idea for the week. Thinking of snack ideas seemed to be the bigger concern with one parent stating:

"Thinking of a completely healthy snack that hadn't been done that many times".

In consultation with one of the coaches, it was mentioned that perhaps the parents felt they needed to be more elaborate in what they offered as their snacks than what was truly needed. For example, a simple snack would be cut up watermelon as opposed to an elaborate fruit kabob, which has more preparation time.

It is recommended that HKCC address this barrier by making simple snacks the standard in promotion for the Minor Sport Project. This can be done by replacing the images of the more elaborate snacks on the parent information letter with simple pictures of orange or watermelon slices. HKCC can also focus on making the majority of their snack ideas they promote to parents in the Minor Sport Project marketing material and marketing as simple to further imply that "simple" is the standard. Parents can choose to be more elaborate but would not be the expectation.

Policy Efforts, Still Seem Out of Reach:

Youth soccer teams that participated this year in the Minor Sport Project seem very enthusiastic to continue to follow the Minor Sport Project guidelines in the future with 80% stating that they were "very willing" to continue. As well, 87% of participants were willing to recommend this project to other teams. One parent shared her enthusiasm by stating:

"It was a great program and I already know I will be contacting our soccer association and encouraging them to enforce a healthy snack for every team!"

Although having an association-wide healthy snacks policies is the long-term goal, it does not seem realistic in the short-term as of yet. When associations were asked if they would consider implementing an association wide healthy snack policy, 75% responded with they were unsure or would consider it possibly in the future. The other 25% stated they would not initiate such a policy. Although associations like the idea, they realize that this is a multiple stakeholder decision that requires a lot of thought. Also, there was a concern about how such a policy would be monitored and enforced. One association described this issue by stating:

"I like it in theory, however, making a policy is only useful if we have a way of monitoring and enforcing it. We have no way to oversee such a policy".

This feedback from associations is not surprising as these are common concerns with any policy. As well, if healthy eating is not a priority this could further act as a barrier. The associations surveyed ranked the healthy eating behaviours of their youth athletes as only "moderately" important.

In the meantime, it is recommended that HKCC continue to recruit more youth sporting teams on a volunteer basis to build up a stronger body of evidence to present to sporting associations on the value and acceptance of the project. For each new sporting season, it is also recommended that parents and coaches

on the partaking teams participate in a post-project evaluation. The post-project evaluation can be done through the already created feedback survey and modified to meet the needs of the current participants.

In the meantime, results from the initial feedback surveys presented in the infographic should be shared with prospective teams and associations to encourage involvement and initiate discussions for future policy efforts.

It is also recommended that HKCC should consider using the word “standard” as opposed to “policy” in future advocacy efforts. Based on the feedback provided by the associations, “policy” seems to be interpreted as a very restrictive term requiring associations to engage in extra efforts to monitor and enforce. By using the word “standard” it is the hope that this will avoid the restrictive connotation and allow associations to endorse this “standard” without feeling the need to monitor and enforce. By endorsing the desired behaviour, these associations would be role modeling to young children the value of healthy eating for health and performance.

Finally, it is recommended that HKCC approach one of the more active youth sporting associations to see if they would be willing to pilot an association-wide “standard endorsement” for the next sporting season. Suggestions of possible associations to approach would be ones that were associated with the teams that participated in the pilot of the Minor Sport Project. These associations may be more likely to consider the pilot if there is evidence that their own teams participated successfully.

Summary of Recommendations:

- Engage in more advertising and promotion of the Minor Sport Project and start early.
- Incorporate a Minor Sport Project social marketing plan into the current “Water Does Wonders” social marketing plan.
- Provide parents, coaches and associations with information on recent findings surrounding the misconceptions of the project’s difficulty and “push back” it might receive from children.
- Continue to provide incentives in the form of financial subsidies to participating teams.
- Provide more information to parents regarding simple, healthy snack ideas in print and electronically.
- Encourage simple snacks as the standard to avoid .time and cost barriers of more elaborate snacks.
- Continue to recruit individual teams voluntarily and have them complete post-project evaluations to build to the body of supporting evidence.
- Avoid using the word “policy” and use the word “standard”.
- Aim to recruit one association to pilot an association-wide policy and evaluate.