

EVALUATION OF DEMONSTRATION PROJECTS TO END CHILDHOOD HUNGER (EDECH):
THE VIRGINIA 365 PROJECT (SUMMARY)

Background

The 2010 Child Nutrition Reauthorization provided funding to test innovative strategies to end childhood hunger and food insecurity. Demonstration projects were funded in Chickasaw Nation, Kentucky, Navajo Nation, Nevada, and Virginia. This report provides the results of the Virginia demonstration project, The Virginia 365 Project (VA 365 project), that was implemented by the Virginia Department of Education.

Description of the VA 365 Project

Objective: To reduce hunger 365 days a year in households with schoolchildren by transforming schools into food hubs and providing nutrition education to parents.

Target Population: Elementary (n=30), middle (n=6), and high schools (n=2) in rural and urban VA. All schools had low academic performance and at least 50 percent of children eligible for free and reduced-price (FRP) meals.

Intervention: Schools were randomly assigned to either a treatment or control group. Children in treatment schools received: (1) three meals during the school day and food packages for weekends and school breaks; (2) \$60 monthly Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) benefits during summer months if they were eligible for FRP meals; and (3) nutrition education for their parents. The control group operated under “business as usual.”

Methods

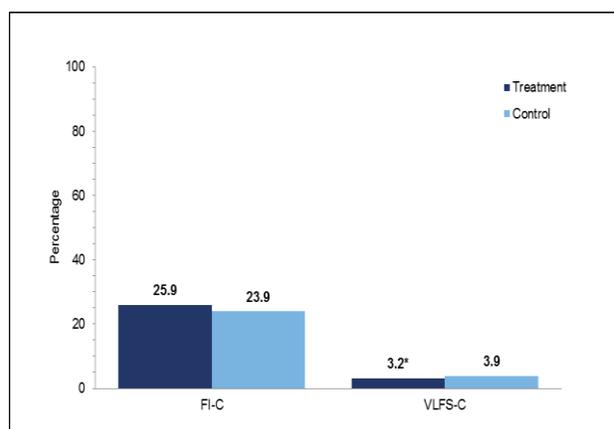
The project operated from summer 2016 through the end of the 2017–2018 school year. The evaluation used a rigorous randomized controlled trial design to estimate the impact of the VA 365 project on food insecurity among children, and

secondarily, on household and adult food insecurity. Households with at least one child eligible for FRP meals were eligible to participate in the evaluation. Data were collected via baseline and follow-up telephone surveys and administrative records. The evaluation focused on school year 2016–2017 benefits only and not the \$60 summer EBT benefits, as summer EBT was evaluated via the Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer for Children (SEBTC) Demonstration.

Findings

The VA 365 project reduced very low food insecurity among children (VLFS-C) by 18 percent. At follow-up VLFS-C in treatment households was 3.2 percent compared to 3.9 percent in control households, a -0.7 percentage point difference (Figure 1). However, the project did not have a significant impact on food insecurity among children (FI-C), which is less severe than VLFS-C.

Figure 1. Impact of the VA 365 Project on Food Insecurity Among Children

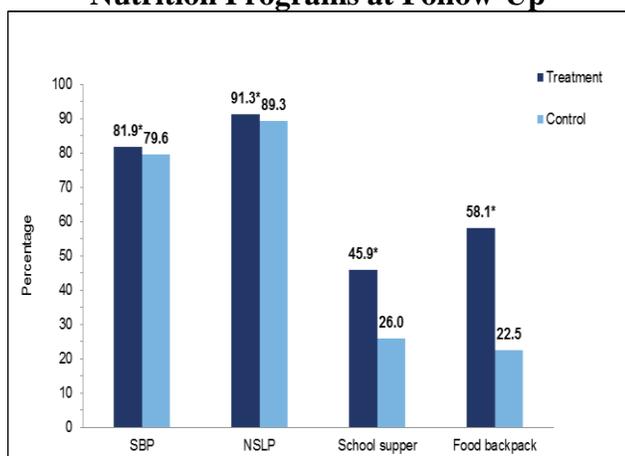


Note: Evaluation sample for treatment group=1,392 and control group=1,242. * Treatment-control difference is statistically significant (p<0.05); FI-C=food insecurity among children; VLFS-C=very low food security among children.

The Virginia 365 project negatively impacted adult and household food insecurity. Adult food insecurity was 4 percentage points higher in treatment households compared to control households (36 percent versus 32 percent). Similarly, 39 percent of treatment households experienced food insecurity, compared to 34 percent of control households. Possible explanations for these findings include health concerns being greater in treatment households; project benefits falling short of expectations resulting in negative adjustments by adults; or adults perceiving a sense of relative deprivation as their children are being better fed.

The VA 365 project accomplished its goal of providing children with access to three meals a day during the school year but was less successful in providing nutrition education to parents. The project increased participation in child nutrition programs in treatment schools at follow-up (Figure 2). In particular, integrating school supper and backpack programs into school operations was a key operational success and resulted in higher uptake in treatment schools, however, uptake was still less than 60 percent. The project did not achieve the objective of delivering nutrition education, with less than 1 percent of treatment households attending a class series.

Figure 2. Reported Participation in Child Nutrition Programs at Follow-Up



Note: Evaluation sample for treatment group=1,393 and control group=1,243. *Treatment and control differences are all statistically significant ($p < 0.05$); SBP=School Breakfast Program; NSLP=National School Lunch Program.

The VA 365 project did not have a large impact on household food expenditures. Since the project provided extra meals to children, it was possible that households would reduce food expenditures. Treatment households median out-of-pocket food expenditures per month were \$289, compared to \$300 in control households, a small but significant difference of \$11 ($p < 0.05$). The project did not impact eating family dinners together. It is possible that school suppers may have functioned more as a snack, given they were served between 2:30–4:00 pm. This would result in children being better fed and reducing the risk of VLFS-C, but not necessarily reducing the number of family dinners.

Because control schools delivered many of the same programs and services as treatment schools, this may have affected the VA 365 project’s ability to have a measurable impact on food insecurity among children. Control schools, although operating under “business as usual,” had flexibility in their school nutrition program operations. This resulted in many control schools providing the same kinds of nutrition assistance programs as treatment schools. For example, over half of control schools participated in the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) At-Risk Afterschool Meals program, alternative school breakfast models, and/or backpack programs, key components of the VA 365 project.

Most of the project costs went towards providing meals to students. The project’s total paid cost for startup and school year 2016–2017 was \$6,905,686, with the largest share spent on federally reimbursed suppers and summer EBT benefits (77 percent), partner or contractor costs (12 percent), labor (9 percent), and other direct costs (2 percent). The average cost per student was \$729 in the project’s first year.

For More Information

Cabili, C, Caronongan, P, Gleason, P, et al. *Evaluation of Demonstration Projects to End Childhood Hunger (EDECH): The Virginia 365 Project*. Prepared by Mathematica Policy Research for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, April 2019. Project Officer: Michael P. Burke. Available online at: www.fns.usda.gov/research-and-analysis.