Learning Care Group (LCG), a leading early childhood education and care provider, made a 3-year commitment with the Partnership for a Healthier America (PHA) to implement several evidence-based nutrition and physical activity policies in more than 900 child care centers. As part of its pledge, LCG teamed with the UConn Rudd Center to assess its Grow Fit Program. The goal was to ensure compliance with these objectives at all 900+ centers and to complete the first large-scale, mixed-methods study yielding findings to inform the implementation of other early care and education wellness policies. Below is a look at the impact of implementing several of these objectives.

Serve healthier food:
Served at least 2 fruits and vegetables daily (up from 63%)

Serve healthier beverages:
By compiling resources into one place (LCG’s Health and Safety Manual), centers were better-equipped to implement changes in all five goal areas: physical activity, screen time, food, beverages, and infant feeding. The comprehensive nature of these goals also created synergy; for example, policies on physical activity helped to reinforce policies on screen time.

One of LCG’s biggest challenges was changing the way that birthdays and other special events are celebrated. Parents were hesitant to give up the old ways that birthdays were celebrated and continue to send in unapproved items. In response, LCG created a “Grow Fit Celebrations Guide” to highlight that every celebration should involve movement and healthy foods and to provide resources for healthy snack ideas.

Early care and education leaders should create and track compliance with comprehensive policies that address wellness in order to support healthy eating and physical activity for children in their care.

The healthier celebration policy was the most controversial with parents; therefore, future research should test which messaging strategies are the most persuasive for parents of young children.

A year of change by the numbers:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Serve healthy food</td>
<td>100,000 children and infants served</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1,894,740 pieces of fresh fruit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>953,820 gallons of milk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serve healthier beverages</td>
<td>69 million meals provided</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 semi trucks of sugar cut from meals</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Implications**

- **Practice:**
  - Take a comprehensive approach
  - Provide structural supports
  - Build the initiative over time
  - Replace old practices with new ones
  - Communicate transparently with parents and teachers

- **Research:**
  - Early care and education leaders should create and track compliance with comprehensive policies that address wellness in order to support healthy eating and physical activity for children in their care.
  - The healthier celebration policy was the most controversial with parents; therefore, future research should test which messaging strategies are the most persuasive for parents of young children.

**Objectives & Strategies**

1. Serve healthier food:

   1. Served at least 2 fruits and vegetables daily.

2. Serve healthier beverages:

   1. Provided access to water freely throughout the day.

**Methods**

1. Surveyed directors across 900+ centers at 6, 18, and 36 months.
2. Conducted interviews with organizational leadership.
3. Reviewed policies and other key documents distributed to support policy implementation.

**Results**

- 95%
- 99%
- 80%
- 100%
- 96%

**Impact**

- 100,000 children and infants served
- 69 million meals provided
- 1,894,740 pieces of fresh fruit
- 953,820 gallons of milk
- 5 semi trucks of sugar cut from meals

- **Policy:**
  - Early care and education leaders should create and track compliance with comprehensive policies that address wellness in order to support healthy eating and physical activity for children in their care.

- **Research:**
  - The healthier celebration policy was the most controversial with parents; therefore, future research should test which messaging strategies are the most persuasive for parents of young children.

**Serve healthier food:**

Centers were expected to serve at least 2 fruits and vegetables each day, eat meals family-style, and introduce healthier celebrations. No more than 4 ounces of 100% juice was permitted to be served each day, and centers aimed to decrease whole milk, increase 1% skim milk for children over 2, and increase access to water. This policy evolved, and juice was totally eliminated in the final year of the commitment.

**Serve healthier beverages:**

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One of LCG’s biggest challenges was changing the way that birthdays and other special events are celebrated. Parents were hesitant to give up the old ways that birthdays were celebrated and continue to send in unapproved items. In response, LCG created a “Grow Fit Celebrations Guide” to highlight that every celebration should involve movement and healthy foods and to provide resources for healthy snack ideas.

**Take a comprehensive approach**

- By compiling resources into one place (LCG’s Health and Safety Manual), centers were better-equipped to implement changes in all five goal areas: physical activity, screen time, food, beverages, and infant feeding.

**Provide structural supports**

- LCG centers order all foods and beverages from one national vendor, and the options available through that vendor are determined by LCG at the corporate level. By making only whole milk, 1%, and fat-free milk available choices on the vendor’s platform, center directors were not forced into one variety of milk, but they were structurally guided towards healthier options.

**Build the initiative over time**

- LCG centers have been working on health initiatives from one national vendor, and the options available through that vendor are determined by LCG at the corporate level. By making only whole milk, 1%, and fat-free milk available choices on the vendor’s platform, center directors were not forced into one variety of milk, but they were structurally guided towards healthier options.

**Replace old practices with new ones**

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**Communicate transparently with parents and teachers**

- Awareness and understanding are the first steps to implementing change. By educating teachers, who served as the front-line of communication with parents, LCG was able to recruit more supporters of its new policies.

**Early care and education leaders should create and track compliance with comprehensive policies that address wellness in order to support healthy eating and physical activity for children in their care.**

The healthier celebration policy was the most controversial with parents; therefore, future research should test which messaging strategies are the most persuasive for parents of young children.