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Stakeholder Engagement to Inform Strategies for Improving Breastfeeding Education in Manitoba Schools: Preliminary Results

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Background:

Breastfeeding has many benefits for maternal and child health, yet over 75% of Canadian infants do not achieve the international recommendation of 6 months exclusive breastfeeding. Social stigma and lack of public support contribute to early breastfeeding cessation.

Objective:

Educating school children could help normalize breastfeeding by fostering the perception that breastfeeding is a normal way to feed infants. We engaged with educators and health care professionals (HCPs) to explore ways to integrate breastfeeding education in Manitoba schools.

Methods:

Focus groups and online surveys were conducted to explore needs, perceptions and anticipated barriers related to school-based breastfeeding education. Educators were recruited at Manitoba Teachers Society Professional Development Day and via email circulation. HCPs were recruited through email by the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority.

Results:

4 educators and 8 HCPs participated in separate focus groups, and 95 surveys were completed. Educators spanned all grade levels and multiple subject areas; HCPs included nurses, doctors, dietitians, and midwives. Nearly all educators (97%) and HCPs (94%) supported the idea of teaching students about breastfeeding, most commonly for the purposes of normalizing and “de-sexualizing” breastfeeding, preparing students as future parents, and providing accurate information about the benefits, challenges, and choices associated with breastfeeding. There was roughly equal support for having teachers or HCPs provide this education. Perceived barriers included lack of teaching time and resources, inadequate training or discomfort of educators, cultural and religious sensitivities, and concerns that students who were not breastfed may feel stigmatized. The few participants who were not supportive, cited competing priorities in the curriculum and concerns about shaming mothers who do not breastfeed.

Conclusion:

Engaging with educators and HCPs has provided critical information on how to integrate breastfeeding in the school curriculum. Ultimately, this initiative will help encourage societal support for breastfeeding, improve breastfeeding rates, and enhance maternal-child health in Manitoba.