

A Stakeholder-Informed Model to Improve School Food Environments in Urban Pakistan: Findings and Solutions from Karachi

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BACKGROUND

The health behaviors of adolescents are significantly influenced by their living environments, with schools serving as crucial settings for promoting healthy behaviors. The school food environment, encompassing areas where food is provided and consumed within and around schools, plays a key role in shaping adolescents' dietary choices.

This study aimed to understand the food environment in and around low-resource schools in Karachi, Pakistan, and to gather insights from all key stakeholders to identify potential solutions for promoting healthier eating among students.

METHODS

The study followed an interpretive descriptive qualitative approach within a concurrent mixed-methods design. Seven purposively selected schools (three government, four private) in District Central, Karachi, participated.

Qualitative data were gathered through:

- 14 FGDs with 95 adolescents (Grades 6–7)
- 7 IDIs with school vendors,
- 5 IDIs with school principals
- 5 FGDs with 21 teachers
- 5 FGDs with 35 parents
- 2 IDIs with policymakers

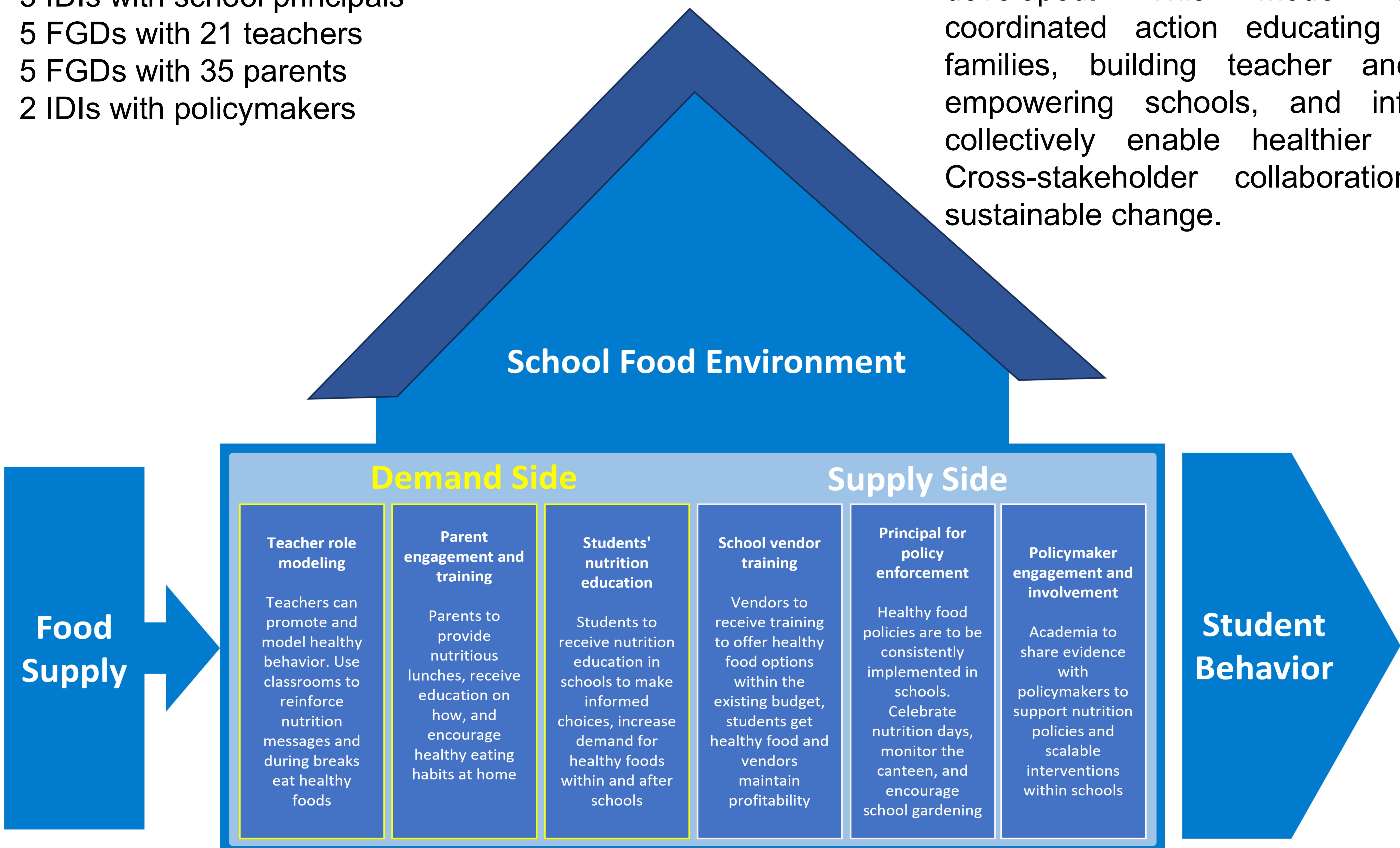
RESULTS

The findings revealed that the school food environment was largely unhealthy. Students reported using the canteen daily and primarily consuming processed and fried snacks with sugar-sweetened beverages daily due to affordability, convenience, and lack of healthier alternatives. Vendors reported a high demand for these options only.

The interviews and discussions with 100+ relevant stakeholders informed the development of a model addressing both the demand and supply sides. On the demand side, educating children to make healthier choices, encouraging parents to do so at home, and having teachers model healthy behaviors at school are key. Additionally, introducing educational activities like nutrition days and school gardening can also play a role. On the supply side, training of vendors to provide healthier options, principles to provide a platform, and policies in schools and among policymakers to act based on the local evidence..

CONCLUSION

Using insights from all the stakeholders a model was developed. This model demonstrates how coordinated action educating students, engaging families, building teacher and vendor capacity, empowering schools, and informing policy can collectively enable healthier food environments. Cross-stakeholder collaboration are critical for sustainable change.



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