

**CRITICAL INSIGHTS**  
RESEARCH FOR PRECISE PRAGMATIC DIRECTION

***Creative and Messaging Platform Research:  
Physical Activity & Nutrition***

**Report of Findings**

Prepared for:

Maine Center for Disease Control  
CD&M Communications

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Focus Groups • Surveys • Public Opinion Polling

120 Exchange Street, Portland, Maine 04101  
Telephone: 207-772-4011 • Fax: 207-772-7027

[www.criticalinsights.com](http://www.criticalinsights.com)



# Introduction



## Background and Purpose

- Over the past several years, Maine CDC and Healthy Maine Partnerships and the organizations' communications partner, CD&M Communications, have developed a number of health promotion collateral pieces designed to build residents' awareness of the importance of maintaining a healthy weight.
- More specifically, campaign efforts have focused on informing Mainers – especially parents – about topics such as:
  - The health benefits of walking
  - Easy steps and tips for increasing physical activity
  - Recommended portion sizes at mealtime
  - Tips and ideas for consuming the recommended amounts of fruits and vegetables
- Moving forward, both agency and client expressed interest in obtaining feedback from members of the campaign's typical target audience of Maine parents concerning several revised campaign pieces, as well as other collateral being considered for future efforts.
- CD&M Communications partnered with Critical Insights to conduct an exploratory, qualitative research effort to address the above aims.



## Method

- Given the need to expose research participants to various campaign pieces, a qualitative solution was employed whereby a series of focus groups were convened with an appropriate cross section of Maine residents.
- Eligible participants were required to be:
  - At least 18 years of age;
  - Have children living at home who are age 18 or younger;
  - Be the household-level decision-maker concerning food choices and meal preparation; and
  - Have an annual household income which – in conjunction with the number of household members – places the family in a pre-determined income classification, based on a percentage above pre-defined poverty levels/eligibility for Food Stamps.
- Additionally, interested respondents were also required to pass appropriate exclusion criteria for past participation in focus groups and willingness/comfort in participating in candid group discussions.



## Method

- Group locations were determined by CD&M Communications, based on the incidence within the population of likely eligible respondents – based on income – residing within or in the vicinity of a given venue.
- As a result, groups were held with residents from the following areas:
  - Lewiston/Auburn
  - Augusta
  - South Paris/Norway
  - Presque Isle
- Overall, a total of 30 Maine parents took part in the sessions.



# Recruitment and Group Protocols

- Potential group participants were contacted directly by Critical Insights personnel and screened for eligibility using scripts and protocols developed by Critical Insights, with input from CD&M Communications.
  - Eligible respondents were invited to take part in a pre-scheduled discussion session in their residential area.
- The sessions themselves lasted approximately 90 minutes, during which respondents were asked to comment on a variety of collateral pieces.
  - The line of questioning used in the groups was developed collaboratively among Critical Insights, CD&M Communications, and Maine CDC.
  - All sessions were facilitated by Critical Insights analytical staff and were observed by staff from both CD&M Communications and Maine CDC, respectively.



# Summary of Findings



## *General Health Issue Delineation*



# Thoughts on Personal Health Issues Affecting Mainers

*To begin the discussion, participants were asked to identify what they consider to be the major health-related issues facing people in the State of Maine.*

- Consistent with findings from previous HWA initiatives, while individual responses were somewhat fragmented, comments typically fell into one of the following thematic areas:
  - **Preventable public health issues**, including tobacco use, alcohol use, substance abuse, as well as obesity/weight issues/lack of exercise;
  - **Chronic diseases and conditions**, such as cancer, heart disease, MS and diabetes; and
  - **Other issues**, such as mental health, autism/learning disabilities, as well as limited access to care were cited on a more limited basis.
- Notably, over time, there appears to be a favorable trend observed in qualitative efforts conducted among this audience with regard to the salience of healthy weight as a public health issue in Maine.
  - Indeed, when asked to comment on the relevant health issues of the day, more and more Maine parents are citing PAN-related issues such as obesity, poor diet, lack of exercise, excessive screen time, etc.



# Observations on Obesity in Maine

*As a follow-up, participants were then asked to comment specifically about the issue of obesity in Maine.*

- The following roster of inter-related factors remain top-of-mind among residents having to do with obesity rates in Maine.
  - **Perceptions of lack of time:**
    - Virtually all parents (particularly single parents) noted the challenges of juggling work, often multiple children, and other associated life pressures as the principal factors contributing to the perception of not having enough time for exercise.
  - **Inaccessibility and expense of “healthy” foods:**
    - Parents expressed frustration with the high cost of fresh produce and other items central to a healthy diet. High fuel costs have added to costs of food that were already seen as inaccessible by some.
    - Additionally, while more financially-accessible, there remains a lingering perception that canned and frozen fruits and vegetables are less nutritious (i.e. high levels of sodium) and do not taste as good, and are thus not an option.
  - **Climate/community challenges:**
    - As has been noted repeatedly in past qualitative research, a number of parents noted the challenge of staying active during winter or in rural areas.
      - A seemingly causal result of Maine’s colder climate is excessive screen time, with parents finding it difficult to place restrictions on TV/video games when the weather does not allow for alternative activities that might engage children.
    - Also, in some communities – particularly in rural Maine – an additional challenge for parents is thinking of creative ways to be physically active in communities where “*there is not a lot to do*” or places to go throughout the year.

*“When money is tight, people in Maine get by on what is available and cheap in order to survive...a bag of potatoes can last a lot longer than fresh vegetables.”*

*“I think our culture has a lot to do with it... we are constantly on-the-go and have learned to eat fast food because it’s quick and easy, and is relatively inexpensive.”*



# Top-of-Mind Awareness of HMP Collateral Initiatives

*As an organization in Maine working in the area of health promotion, participants were asked if they recalled receiving any materials from Healthy Maine Partnerships and – in particular – anything regarding nutrition and/or physical activity.*

- A majority of participants across all sites are aware of HMP and many recall having received collateral materials either through the mail, or through community-outreach initiatives.
  - While some parents noted that they recalled having received “something” in the mail on the topic of PAN, many were unsure about specific information presented in the collateral.
  - Among parents who recalled receiving items in the mail, they cited materials on portion control – often a magnet or brochure – as well as materials on the health benefits of walking.
- Comments on the utility of HMP materials were largely favorable.
  - While respondents often appear to dismiss some of the messaging as “*common sense*,” they also feel that the information frequently serves as a useful reminder to stay physically active and make healthy food choices.
  - Encouragingly, receptivity was particularly strong with respect to pieces which parents felt like they could easily incorporate into their daily lives, an ongoing challenge for HMP in the development of this collateral.
    - For example, parents indicated that the portion size magnets are ideal because they present nutritional information quickly, can be conveniently displayed on refrigerators, and serve as a regular reminder.
- Interestingly, it appears that parents in more densely populated areas – such as Lewiston/Auburn – are more likely than those in rural areas to have had exposure to multiple sources of information dealing with similar PAN-related issues.
  - Indeed, the volume of similar or related information being provided by local hospitals, schools, and social service providers in such areas could be contributing to a lack of breakthrough and recognition of HMP-sponsored collateral.
  - Specifically, several Lewiston/Auburn participants noted interactions with nutritionists, case workers, and others where they believe they received similar, if not identical, materials.



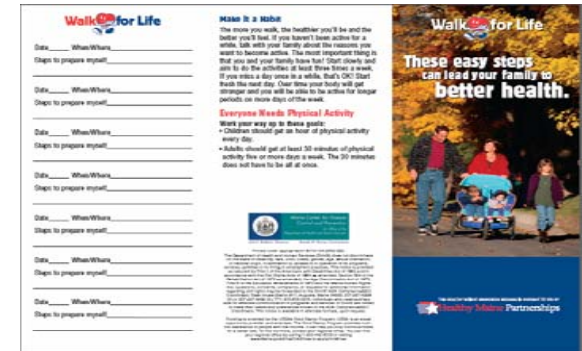
## *Reactions to Campaign Collateral*



# Reactions to “Walk for Life” Brochure and Posters

*Parents were shown a brochure and two versions of posters related specifically to walking.*

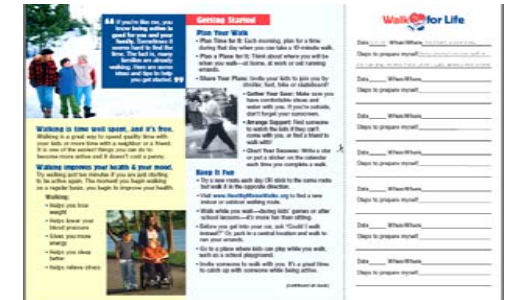
- Parents who took part in the groups represented several different stages along a continuum based upon their disposition toward and engagement with physical activity and, as a result, tended to respond differently to the “Walk for Life” brochure and posters.
- Since some parents have much stronger levels of baseline awareness of the relevance of PAN, they found the pieces to be a bit remedial and lacking in new information.
- However, those who appeared more aware of the relevance and importance of PAN, but who have just begun to overcome some of the barriers that prevent Maine families from being more active had a preference for the more concrete, tactical tools included in the piece.
- Indeed, many thought it is helpful to see a listing of the positive benefits that walking can have both physically and mentally.
  - *“It seems that many people struggle with some of the physical symptoms that walking can help alleviate – stress, sleeplessness – and I feel that this message should be more prominent – that taking a small, simple step to walk a few minutes a day can truly make a big impact on your health.”*





# Reactions to “Walk for Life” Brochure and Posters

- Aggregated across the sessions, parents had a moderately favorably reaction to the “Walk for Life” information.
  - Parents who had noted earlier in the discussion that it can be quite expensive to be physically active, liked the brochure and posters because they illustrate how an entire family can engage in a fun activity...without spending a lot of money.
  - Many also reacted favorably to the notion that physical activity can be a cumulative event, and that every bit of exercise – even if it is only a 10 minute walk – adds up.
    - This was encouraging to many parents, a critical element in maintaining enthusiasm and preventing people from becoming discouraged.
- As has been noted in past research, where participants noted an affinity for quick, digestible nuggets of information, parents here liked the bulleted presentation which delivered simple tips and easy to understand information.
  - “The recommendations are helpful and easy to understand.”
  - “Having the short paragraphs – you can read it very quickly.”
  - “Park at the back of the lot and walk to the store – simple, easy things that we all can do, but often times need a reminder.”
- While some found the idea of a tear-off card to be helpful to plan walking and thought the resource imparts a sense of accomplishment on the days when families actually engage in the activity, most noted that they would not take the time to use the card in its current configuration.





# Reactions to “Walk for Life” Brochure and Posters

- Regarding the tear-off card, only more engaged parents could envision incorporating the card into their daily routine. Others instead found the tear-off card something that could remind them of their failures.
- A challenging in the ongoing development of materials in this space is the ability to incorporate compelling information relevant to more engaged parents, while at the same time not overwhelming those parents still facing challenges in becoming engaged.
- Concerning the posters, participants were a bit confused by the references to “*this is your pathfinder*” and “*take a look, then take a walk,*” and noted that the creative materials more overtly highlight the program’s web-based resources where residents may log-on and obtain specific information about walking routes.
  - Many thought the information could be more actionable if actual options for some local trails and walking paths were provided on the brochure or poster to give people a flavor for the site’s content and entice people to visit...instead of just referring people to the website for more information.
    - “*The way that the information is presented right now makes it too easy to not take action...At least if the poster showed with a few ideas of local trails I would already have some of the information.*”
- A few other participants noted that incorporating ideas on what to do once on the trail or route, things to look for, ideas for engaging kids, etc., would also be welcome.
  - “*Besides just the trails, some ideas for activities would be good. I do like a scavenger hunt to get my kids interested, things like that.*”





# Reactions to “Walk for Life” Brochure and Posters

- A few other parents offered suggestions about incorporating other related themes into the material, such as nutrition (i.e. what foods to pack for a hike, etc.).
- Parents had differing opinions about the visuals in the posters.
  - Some participants noted that the visuals in the posters appear to be trying too hard to be “politically correct” in depicting a range of people.
  - By contrast, some disagreed and thought that the image gives a strong indication that walking is really for everyone, and that regardless of what stage of life a person is in, it is very important to be active as much as possible.
    - “It doesn’t have to show the perfect family...it could be as simple as showing a pair of feet walking down a path...that would give us the same message.”
  - Overall, feedback was more favorable than for images in past efforts, where the images were frequently criticized as depicting people who were too old, thereby relegating walking to an activity not for younger families.
- Suggested venues for where parents would expect to see these posters distributed included: grocery stores, schools, employee break rooms, WIC offices and similar service providers, and hospitals and doctors’ offices.
  - Some still think a mass mailing to individual households is the best method to reach people, since there are transportation and access issues to people being able to acquire the information on their own within the community.





## Observations on Concept of Portion Sizes

*Prior to being shown the actual creative execution, parents were asked to discuss meal preparation in their household and how they determine appropriate serving or portion sizes.*

- Participants have a fairly strong perception that many Maine residents – including themselves – are over-eating and regularly exceeding recommended portion and serving sizes.
  - *“People don’t really have a clue what they should be eating and how much of it.”*
  - *“It’s not just about what we are eating, but how much of it we are eating...Maine and the rest of America thrives on excess.”*
  - *“A lot of the stuff we eat wouldn’t have such a horrible impact if everyone didn’t eat so much of it at one sitting.”*
- Many commonly referenced that the suggested serving size for meat is equivalent to a deck of cards, but also candidly admitted that they regularly exceed this suggestion serving size.
  - *“I’ve heard that you are only supposed to eat a serving of meat that is the size of a deck of cards, but I rarely have that amount...I usually will eat twice that much.”*
- A few others referenced other mnemonic devices that they had picked up from other sources promoting healthy eating, such as WIC programs and area nutritionists.
  - *“If you think of a plate, all your food should fit inside the rim of the plate.”*



## Observations on Concept of Portion Sizes

- Quite a few noted behaviors rooted in traditions, such as *“following the guidelines and recipes of their mothers”* concerning meal preparation and presentation – most commonly, that meals are served *“family style”* at the table.
  - Despite convenience, it was fairly apparent from the ensuing discussion that those dining *“family style”* do tend to be over-eating.
  - Parents who *“fix plates”* for their household members noted utilizing the *“scoop”* technique, where they will ladle servings of foods such as potatoes, rice and casserole type meals directly onto plates.
- Further, participants noted that they use the same general *“scoop”* measurement for all sorts of different foods – with little regard to nutritional recommendations and content.
  - Some noted that they will serve less of certain foods if the person does not like particular things, which often means fewer vegetables for children who are more picky eaters.
    - *“I think a lot of people take this style and approach towards serving food for their family with them when they leave home and go out on their own.”*
    - *“In our house, you get the big spoon and you take a big scoop of whatever you like and plop it on the plate, and that’s it. For the kids, you might just do half of a scoop.”*
- Ultimately, while not all are compliant, most parents recognize that people should focus more on appropriate serving sizes, but unfortunately feel that it often takes a health-related crisis – such as a diagnosis for high blood pressure, or diabetes – to convince people to change their eating habits.
  - Key obstacles appear to be entrenched family traditions, family requests (husbands, children, etc.), and a general lack of interest in making dietary changes.



# Reactions to “Portion Size” Placemat

*Participants were next shown a version of a placemat that provides information about portion sizes on a plate at mealtime.*

- Feedback on the portion size placemat was exceedingly positive, and most indicated that they liked how the information is presented and organized through the use of an actual dinner plate and quick tip-style bullets. Parents found the overall message to be encouraging and – importantly - not overtly preaching.
  - Specifically, many noted that the visualization of what their plate *should* look like is easy to understand, remember, and implement – especially compared to frequently referenced guidelines relating food portions to common objects (i.e., deck of cards, dice, etc.).
    - “I am so shocked at this visual...I think it is fantastic. I thought at my house we are eating pretty well, but after seeing this I guess not...I don’t think we eat enough fruits and vegetables as we should.”
    - “How much room certain foods take up on your place is a lot easier to understand and relate to than guidelines that suggest a servings size is equal to a cup of cooked rice...I wouldn’t know what this would look like.”
  - Several parents indicated that the placemat also introduced them to key new information – a key component in maintaining relevance for more engaged parents – such as serving meals from the kitchen counter, or offering dressings and sauces on the side.
  - Looking forward, some participants did note that an additional tip should be included encouraging people to sit down, relax, and take their time while eating a meal – with information related to pace of chewing and additional benefits of family meals.





## Reactions to “*Portion Size*” Placemat

- Notably, parents commented that the placemat concept would be particularly helpful for children and would encourage healthy habits from an early age.
  - Many suggested that the placemat should be laminated in order to protect and preserve it against spills and food debris, particularly if intended for child use.
  - Others suggested placemats printed on paper pads, similar to a *Post-it* note, which their kids could color and draw on while waiting for dinner to be served.
  - To make it more “kid-friendly” – as well as educational and to provide a sense of scale – one mother suggested incorporating images of utensils in order to show children where knives and forks are to be placed when setting the table.
- Many thought that the portion size information could be most compelling if the message was delivered via a magnet rather than a placemat.
  - Indeed, when presented with the portion size placement, many quickly – and enthusiastically – noted that they have the magnet version at home and have had it on their fridge for some time.
  - Participants believe that the message about portions needs to be communicated and delivered prior to food preparation, meal placement, and consumption, and that a location in the kitchen prior to consumption is the most appropriate place to display this type of information.
    - *“I actually have this... We keep it right on our ‘lazy susan’ so it’s right there on our kitchen table and we see it every day.”*



# Reactions to “Healthy Picnic” Collateral: Brochure, Shopping List and Recipe Cards

*Next, parents were presented with materials related to making healthy food choices this spring and summer. Specifically, two variations of brochures were shown, and participants were informed that each has the exact same copy, but that the photos are different. Also, one is designed as a three-panel brochure, while the other contains four-panels with a larger font size. Both versions will include grocery shopping lists and recipe cards.*

- Parents responded quite favorably to the brochure’s attempts to offer recommendations about how to live healthier, such as ideas for being more physically active, tips for consuming more locally grown fruits and vegetables, safety tips, and recipes.
  - A few even offered how the concept of a picnic could be linked to the *Healthy Maine Walks* site.
- Parents also commented that the materials meet several criteria that are important in engaging both children and adults:
  - Information is easy-to-follow and understand, and looks interactive and fun for the whole family.
  - Shows a variety of fun, healthy, and inexpensive strategies for families to become more engaged and mindful of their diet, a key issue for those who noted financial limitations as a significant barrier to proper nutritional consumption.





# Reactions to “Healthy Picnic” Collateral: Brochure, Shopping List and Recipe Cards

- Although participants agree that there is a lot of information included in the brochure, most saw it as important and helpful, and thus would rather have see information than less.
  - For this reason, most preferred the four-panel version with the larger font size and print layout.
  - “I keep all this stuff I get, so I’d hold onto it, file it. I could pick out what I could use.”
- Similar to the walking brochure and tips included in the portion size placemat, participants again noted that they like the bulleted presentation and simple and straightforward presentation style.
  - Continued presentation in this manner (vs. the more narrative style of very early collateral concepts) is encouraged.

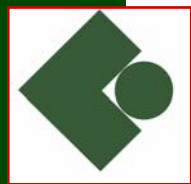




# Reactions to “*Healthy Picnic*” Collateral: Brochure, Shopping List and Recipe Cards

- Many parents responded positively to the shopping list, and offered that they would be likely to use it while grocery and meal planning.
  - Again, tactical and pragmatic tips are important for many parents, particularly those who are more engaged and seeking new information, as well as those less engaged who are looking for a place to start.
- Many thought that the inclusion of the shopping list reinforced some of the positive messages and tips in the accompanying brochure, and provided financially-accessible options, particularly for households with lower incomes.
  - *“I like the idea that there are a lot of suggestions, but you don’t have to buy them all – just by adding a few of these things to my cart, I’m going to be making the picnic or any meal for that matter more healthy.”*
- Some parents suggested that the recipe cards and shopping lists should somehow be combined into a more comprehensive tool, such as displaying notations on the shopping list alerting which recipes could be made with certain ingredients.
- Participants also thought the shopping lists might also be available in sticky-note pad format, perhaps with a magnet for convenient placement on the refrigerator.
- Others commented that while they knew the focus here was summer, seasonally-appropriate lists (and recipes) would be a nice idea.





# Reactions to “*Healthy Picnic*” Collateral: Brochure, Shopping List and Recipe Cards

- Parents most enjoyed the fact that the included recipes are easy and simple to understand, require few ingredients, and are affordable to make.
- Notably, while the brochure is focused on picnics, a few participants did note an inconsistency in that the recipe ingredients call for items that are not ideal for outdoor picnic environments – especially if outside on a hot summer day (i.e. mayonnaise, milk, whipped cream, etc.).
- Some thought that recipe ideas could be more “*kid-friendly*,” such as adding ideas that incorporate different colored food ingredients, and possibly different shapes, textures and sizes, all with the overarching goal of using healthy ingredients.
  - Incorporating easy preparation tips that can involve kids was also suggested.
  - Participants seemed most likely to prepare the Boatloads of Fruit Salad for their family, while the Broccoli Salad recipe garnered the lowest levels of interest.
- Much like they were for the lists, seasonality plays a role, as participants were receptive to the idea of having different and new menu cards for each season – perhaps, each surrounding a theme.
- Many noted that they would save the recipes and anticipate the arrival of new cards via the mail, suggesting ongoing engagement.
  - “*I’m always looking for new stuff to make. I’d use it.*”





# Observations on Nutritional Labels

- While many parents who took part in the study report that they regularly inspect food labels before placing items into their grocery carts, others candidly admitted that certain barriers, such as cost, lack of time and confusing content, deter closer monitoring of labels.
  - Indeed, the most knowledgeable parents were those who were forced into acquiring greater awareness due to a recent medical diagnosis (i.e. heart condition, diabetes, etc.).
  - As with meal prep problems, lack of time in the store to focus on nutritional needs is a significant barrier for many.
    - *“I wish I had the time to read all these, but I need to get in and get out. Who has time?”*
- While there appears to be an increasing level of awareness surrounding the issue of nutritional ingredients, especially with respect to artificial ingredients used to stabilize products and preserve them to have longer shelf-life, general knowledge and comprehension of the “nutrition” facts label remains a challenge for many.
  - Examples include references to checking labels for presence of high fructose corn syrup, and monosodium glutamate (MSG).
  - Specifically, a few participants noted the dangers of “food syrup” and how this has become a primary ingredient in many processed foods.
- Another principal source of confusion is fat content and the different types of fats – saturated, trans, polyunsaturated, monounsaturated, etc.
- Also, many noted that they do not understand suggested caloric intake, and how the reported numbers and percentages correspond to recommended serving sizes and daily nutritional value calculations.



## Observations on Nutritional Labels

- Most parents also shared the feeling that labels are complicated and confusing to a grocery shopper today, and suggested that a list of recommended foods by category would be helpful – food options that have the highest nutritional content and the least amount of artificial ingredients, fats, etc.
- What seems to be missing for parents today is the absence of a “quick tips” set of guidelines available for other content areas.
  - Indeed, quite a few parents indicated a wish for a ‘handy list’ or something similar to assist them.
  - *“If I had something in the store to remind me what to look for, it would help.”*



# Observations on Whole Grains

*In the Lewiston/Auburn area session, the concept of whole grains was discussed briefly. At the direction of CD&M Communications, this line of questioning was largely culled from the discussion due to time.*

- At this juncture, there is limited awareness among parents concerning the specific distinctions between processed grains and whole grains.
  - Some thought that within the first few ingredients a product needs to list “whole wheat flour” to qualify as being made from “whole grains.”
  - A few expressed the perception that whole grains are simply unprocessed and unbleached.
  - In reference to the packaging stimuli shown to parents in the sessions, a few also noted that portrayal of grain content in various products is misleading.
- Most parents do possess a general sense and perception that “*whole grains are better for you,*” but when asked specifically why, many were unable to report any specific reasons or health implications.
  - Greater clarity of benefits appears necessary in order to give parents a compelling reason to value and consider whole grains.
- A few parents did express awareness that unbleached flours and whole grains tend to be more expensive, again raising concerns among participants about the overall affordability of eating healthier.



# Summary Observations



# Summary Observations

- Over time, a favorable trend is observed among the target audience in terms of the salience of healthy weight, nutrition, and physical activity.
- As a result, as an increasing proportion of the target becomes engaged with PAN-related issues, consideration must continue to be given to developing informational content that is not overwhelming to those, but is not seen as redundant or boring to those who are already more engaged.
  - Indeed appeals to multiple audiences appear necessary (i.e. a mix of motivational material, information on how to get started, as well as tactical tips for maintaining momentum).
- **Healthy Maine Walks**
  - Both visually and in copy, continue to promote walking as an activity for both young and old, and especially for families.
  - If possible, consider boosting site visitation by including teasers on the posters which provide a flavor of the type of content and useful information available on the website.
  - In addition to routes and trails, consider incorporating fun “on the walk”-type activities and family engagement ideas into both collateral and the website.
- **Healthy Picnic**
  - While the lists and recipes were well-received, given the volume of information in both brochures, consideration might be given to additional “quick” nuggets of information.
  - The lists and recipe cards were so well-received, parents offered that seasonal variations would be welcome and would provide ongoing engagement.
  - In the context of shopping lists and recipe cards, additional thoughts on ways to involve children in meal planning/list making and food preparation would be welcome among parents regularly seeking ways to engage their children in these areas.
- **Food Labels and Whole Grains**
  - Quick, easy-to-digest reminders or cheat sheets/cards might be useful in reinforcing core themes like cholesterol, fat content, sugar, and additives in food labels, as well as tips on distinguishing whole grains from non-whole grains.