



School Wellness Policies

By Amy Winterfeld

Schools can play a vital role in children's health.

With 98 percent of 5- to 17-year-olds in school on any given day in the United States, schools are the perfect place to encourage good health. By encouraging healthy eating and a physically active lifestyle, teachers can help prevent childhood obesity, which puts children at risk of developing Type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol that can lead to heart disease. Currently, 17.1 percent of U.S. children are overweight, and almost 30 percent do not exercise on three or more days per week. During the past 30 years, obesity rates have more than quadrupled for children ages 6 to 11 and more than tripled for youth ages 12 to 19.

Local wellness policies now are required in nearly every school district.

Federal Action

This year, however, schools nationwide have a new opportunity to help pupils achieve healthy lifestyles. Beginning with the 2006-2007 school year, federal law requires each local school district participating in federally funded school meals programs—nearly every school district in the country—to establish a local wellness policy. At a minimum, wellness policies must include:

- Goals for nutrition education, physical activity, campus food provision, and other school-based activities designed to promote student wellness;
- Nutrition guidelines for all foods available on school campuses during the school day, with the objectives of promoting student health and reducing childhood obesity;
- Assurances that reimbursable school meals—full meals for which states receive federal cash reimbursements—meet the program requirements and nutrition standards set by the U.S. Department of Agriculture; and
- A plan for measuring the implementation of the local wellness policy.

In developing the wellness policies, school districts must seek community involvement from a broad group of stakeholders, including parents, students, representatives of the school food authority, the school board, school administrators and the public.

Proper nutrition enhances academic performance.

Research backs the effectiveness of key strategies required as part of school wellness policies such as providing nutritious foods at school, nutrition education, and school-based physical education that increases students' physical activity. For example, many studies confirm that proper nutrition enhances academic achievement, while poor nutrition impedes academic performance. In pilot studies, schools can make as much money selling healthy foods as they do from the sale of foods of minimal nutritional value. A USDA-contracted review of 217 studies found that nutrition education is a significant factor in improving dietary habits. The *Guide to Community Preventive Services*, a federally sponsored initiative, "strongly recommends" school-based physical education programs to increase physical fitness.

State Action

Washington was the first to enact statewide legislation calling directly for local wellness policies in 2004. In 2005, either independently or in response to the federal requirement, Colorado, Illinois, Mississippi, Ohio, Rhode Island and Tennessee enacted similar policies. In 2006, Florida, Indiana, Kentucky and Pennsylvania also adopted legislation addressing wellness policies. These direct state efforts to support school and state wellness policies include approaches such as:

- Encouraging or requiring local school districts to adopt wellness policies that comply with the requirements of the federal law, the Child Nutrition and WIC (Women, Infants and Children) Reauthorization Act of 2004, Public Law 108 - 265, or with recommendations of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
- Establishing state multidisciplinary wellness or advisory councils with members from schools, industry, parents, teachers, medical associations, school boards, physical education associations and other stakeholders.
- Facilitating cooperation among state agencies for wellness policies by creating a School Wellness Policy Task Force to identify barriers to implementing wellness policies and recommend how to reduce those barriers.
- Establishing a specific, dedicated state office or an interagency council to coordinate wellness activities.
- Directing local school districts to establish wellness councils with broad stakeholder participation.
- Establishing mechanisms for state oversight of wellness policy implementation.
- Establishing statewide information clearinghouses for wellness policies and information.

Legislators also have acted on individual policies that are part of school wellness goals, such as improving the nutritional quality of school foods, providing greater opportunities for physical activity, and ensuring that adequate nutrition education is part of the school curriculum. In the 2005 legislative session, 18 states enacted legislation or resolutions related to school nutrition quality and two states put nutrition standards in place through their departments of agriculture. Efforts to refine or increase physical education requirements or encourage positive physical activity programs for students during and after the school day were reinforced in 2005 through legislation enacted in 21 states. At least eight states passed legislation on nutrition education in 2005.

In addition to policy, successful implementation of school wellness policies will require clear planning to establish specific goals, excellent management skills and adequate resources to carry out the plan, consistent oversight and concrete evaluation and feedback on the effectiveness of the plan, widespread buy-in by school staff and local communities, and continuing quality improvement efforts.

Selected References

Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004 (Public Law 108 - 265).

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration.

The National Survey of Children's Health, Overweight and Physical Activity Among Children: A Portrait of the States and the Nation. Washington, D.C.: HRSA, September 2006.

Contacts for More Information

Amy Winterfeld
NCSL—Denver
(303) 364-7700, ext. 1544
amy.winterfeld@ncsl.org

U.S. Department of Agriculture
<http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/Healthy/wellnesspolicy.html>

Several states have enacted wellness policy legislation.

At least eight states enacted legislation on nutrition education in 2005.