



**Local School Wellness Plans:
A Key to Improving Child Health**

Edward M. Cooney
Executive Director
Congressional Hunger Center
hungercenter.org
December 20, 2011

The Congressional Hunger Center gratefully acknowledges the generous support of the ConAgra Foods Foundation for The CHILD Project (Children's Hunger Initiative on Learning and Development) for which this paper was prepared.

Introduction

In its report, **Bridging the Evidence Gap in Obesity Prevention**, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) of the National Academies cited data from the 2007-2008 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey indicating that: “among children and adolescents, aged 2 to 19, nearly 17 percent were obese and close to 32 percent were overweight or obese.” This epidemic is costly to children’s health and the nation’s budget. Medical expenses attributed to obesity for the overall population exceed \$100 billion yearly. School wellness policies are a tool that can be used by parents, students, teachers, school food service staff, school administrators, and local communities to address this important nutrition and health crisis. But this legislative directive got off to a rocky start.

Background

All child nutrition programs are either part of the National School Lunch Act of 1946 or the Child Nutrition Act of 1966. School lunches are covered by the 1946 Act and school breakfasts are covered by the 1966 Act. Normally, Congress “reauthorizes” (reviews) and updates these programs every five years. These programs were up for review in 2003, but the Senate Agriculture Committee and the House Education and Workforce Committee (the committees charged with conducting program reviews) were unable to find the funding necessary for program improvements sought by the anti-hunger and nutrition community. So, the legislative review was delayed until 2004. Representative John Boehner, then Chair of the Education and Workforce Committee, decided to commit approximately \$200 million in unspent funds within his committee’s jurisdiction to the reauthorization of child nutrition programs. This decision made it possible to include section 204, among other improvements, in Public Law 108-265, the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004. Section 204 required all local educational agencies participating in the school meals programs to establish a local “school wellness policy” by the 2006-2007 school year. This provision was not in the Senate bill. So, it was the leadership of Chairman Boehner and Ranking Member George Miller, and their staff, Kate Houston and Denise Forte, which made the inclusion of a school wellness policy provision possible.

Local wellness policies are seen by Congress as an important tool for parents, local education agencies (LEAs) and school districts in promoting student wellness, preventing and reducing childhood obesity, and providing assurance that school meal nutrition guidelines meet the minimum federal school meal nutrition standards. The initial legislation provided only \$4 million to the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) in technical assistance funds for implementing school wellness policies nationwide. So, many local school officials were somewhat skeptical of the potential impact of these policies. However, Section 204 of PL108-265 has turned out to be a “sleeper amendment” in that it is a piece of legislation that has minimal cost, but has a potentially dramatic impact on improving children’s health.

The Congressional Hunger Center (CHC) played a role in advancing the inclusion of school wellness policy in the final legislation. At a meeting of the Child Nutrition Forum in early 2004, a dispute arose between the Society for Nutrition and the School Nutrition Association regarding the appropriate approach for implementing a sound school wellness policy plan. CHC hosted a meeting among the parties and other interested groups and worked out a compromise proposal that was submitted to committee staff.

What Action Steps Did Congress Require Local Educational Agencies to Include in Their Local Wellness Policy?

Congress required school wellness policies to include:

- goals for nutrition education, physical activity, and other school-based activities;
- nutrition guidelines for all foods available on the school campus;
- an assurance that guidelines for school meals are not less restrictive than those set by the Secretary of Agriculture;
- a plan for measuring implementation of the local wellness policy; and
- a plan for involving parents, students, school meals staff, school board members, school administrators and the public in the development of the local wellness plan.

While most schools incorporated the components of PL 108-265, schools were not actually required to report on policy compliance and implementation. They only had to have “a plan.” So, in the 2010 reauthorization of child nutrition programs, the Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act of 2010, (PL111-296), Congress strengthened the wellness policies by emphasizing the need to include wellness policy implementation and assessment and goals for nutrition promotion. Congress also saw a need to foster more broad-based community support for the development and implementation of effective wellness policies. Hence, a new requirement for schools is to include more members from the community in establishing their school wellness policy. New partners also could include teachers of physical education and school health professionals. Finally, local education agencies are now required to measure their progress periodically and make available to the public an assessment of the local wellness policy, including:

- the extent to which schools are in compliance with the local wellness policy;
- the extent to which the LEA’s local wellness policy compares to model local wellness policies; and
- progress made in attaining the goals of the local wellness policy.

Each LEA also must appoint an official responsible to ensure compliance with all of the elements of the local school wellness policy.

What are the Components of a Quality School Wellness Policy?

In the Appendix to this paper, the reader will find an annotated list of resources detailing:

- where model school wellness policies can be found;
- how to locate helpful national nutrition organizations with expertise in crafting school wellness policies; and
- websites for USDA and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), which provide a wealth of information and technical assistance on how to establish, implement and monitor school wellness policies.

A well-designed school wellness policy engages all key players in the school meals community (students, parents, teachers, school food managers and staff, school administrators) in the task of developing and implementing sound nutrition and physical activity policies. Taking into consideration which nutritious foods children will actually consume is important. Public schools are a melting pot of unique ethnic groups with different religious backgrounds and cultural eating preferences. Successful school wellness policies will incorporate nutritious foods that reflect the makeup of their student bodies. One effective mechanism to ensure student “buy-in” is to include students in menu planning for school meals. Long before the requirement for school wellness policies, innovative school lunch directors established student advisory committees which met regularly to discuss and plan school meals that were healthy and that they and their fellow students would enjoy eating.

A well-constructed school meals policy should ensure that food and beverages available in school meals programs are consistent with the recommendations for improving the nutrition quality of school meals of the IOM. Those recommendations, now being incorporated into a new school lunch regulation by USDA, require more:

- fruits and vegetables;
- whole grains; and
- low-fat dairy products.

Parents and community groups should examine the location in which school meals are consumed, usually the school cafeteria. Is it an environment in which a child can relax and have time to enjoy a meal with friends, or is the cafeteria a place that is poorly lit, without cheerful decorations, which children are hustled in and out of with little time to consume their meals and talk with their friends?

School wellness policies should encourage school administrators to maximize participation in all child nutrition programs. Nationally, over 30 million children participate in the School Lunch Program, but only 10 million children eat a breakfast at school. School breakfast is an important meal for all children, but it has a special meaning for low-income children, as many of these children may not have sufficient food at home to meet their nutritional needs. Breakfast at school helps children to better

interact with their classmates and has been shown to increase academic performance. Participation in the Summer Food Program will help children have access to nutritious meals year round. Yet, currently approximately 85 percent of the low-income children eligible for this program do not participate because schools and other potential program sponsors do not offer the program in their communities. USDA also offers before- and after-school nutritional programs that schools can offer their students. There is a relationship between nutrition and learning. A hungry child can not learn or focus on educational activities. So, participation in these federal nutrition programs should be encouraged as part of any school wellness policy.

Wellness requires more than the increased consumption of healthy foods. There needs to be a strong commitment to physical activity. Computer games, street violence and watching television all conspire to reduce a child's opportunity to get needed physical activity. School wellness policies should encourage school administrators to plan activities that keep children moving whether it be before school, during the school day or after school. Children need at least 60 minutes of physical activity each day. Physical education classes can be helpful, but are not enough exercise for a growing child. Teachers can emphasize the necessity of a life-long commitment to physical activity and demonstrate the importance of this idea by providing physical activity breaks between, and sometimes during, classes.

Model School Wellness Policies

The two communities described below have developed policies that are illustrative of what can happen when the entire school community works together to improve children's food and physical activity environments. (See also <http://www.schoolnutrition.org/Content.aspx?id=2166> for a variety of model local wellness policies.)

San Francisco (California) United School District (SFUSD)

One of the most interesting components of the SFUSD school wellness plan is its emphasis on ensuring that all eligible children receive the opportunity to participate in school meals programs. All school principals are required to make participation and return of school meal applications a top priority. It is not widely known, but millions of eligible children nationwide do not participate in school meals. There are many reasons why some eligible children do not participate, ranging from fear of being stigmatized as "poor" to sudden loss of income during the school year (without realizing that a school meal application can be filed) to failure of a parent to complete the required application. Ultimately, the child suffers by not receiving nutritious meals and schools lose needed revenue. SFUSD allows families with multiple children to file one application, thereby reducing paperwork and increasing the likelihood of capturing the participation of all children. SFUSD also employs direct certification procedures, ensuring that children in SNAP households will automatically be added to school meals programs. Another unique

aspect of this program is its commitment to outreach to eligible migrant, homeless, and runaway children.

SFUSD meets or exceeds all nutrition standards recommended for beverages, calories from fat (including saturated fat), sugar and salt. Fruits and vegetables are required to be served at any school site where food is sold. Non-dairy vegetarian meals are also required to be offered in the weekly vegetarian meal. Whole wheat products that have been minimally processed are favored and products using trans fat are to be avoided. Another unusual feature of this wellness plan is that no products containing peanuts or peanut residue may be sold or offered in the school meals program.

In the arena of improved menu choices, school food service directors must communicate with students and student advisory groups about foods that they would like to be served in school meals programs. Menu choices must be improved by increasing inclusion of foods that students indicate—initially, at least 40 percent of students must report liking the food with the eventual goal of reaching 100 percent. Student advisory groups have a voice in what products are made available through vending machines. School health program staff work with school food service staff to incorporate “best practices” of nutrition education models so that children will learn about the value of consuming healthy foods.

The SFUSD also has an impressive physical education component. It requires physical education staff to work with local school administrators to ensure that children get the exercise that they need to live healthy lives. Elementary school children must receive 200 minutes of physical education activity every 10 days while middle school students must receive 400 minutes in the same time period. High school students have higher limits that they must meet. Finally, an evaluation process, including a student satisfaction survey, must be completed biannually.

Manchester (Connecticut) Public Schools

Manchester schools have a wellness policy that commits local schools to establishing a healthy learning environment that positively influences students’ general well being, eating behaviors, physical capacity and learning ability so that students can succeed academically. The Manchester School District created a standing School Wellness Committee. Membership on this committee includes the usual stakeholders (such as students, parents, teachers, school food service directors and school administrators), as well as school health staff, physical education instructors, school board members, and representatives of town health and recreation departments. The plan is unique in its emphasis on involving town agencies in the implementation of the school wellness plan. Schools are required to collaborate with health and recreation town agency departments so that a consistent message is sent to the entire community about the value of nutrition education, healthy food, and physical activity for school age children.

The Manchester school wellness plan specifically establishes “wellness breaks”. Schools are required to increase daily recess at elementary schools from 15 minutes to 20 minutes. The plan also highlights the need to increase physical activity opportunities before,

during and after school. Schools are encouraged to offer a variety of extracurricular programs including sports and group activities that include physical exercise. After-school education enrichment programs are required to promote periods of moderate to vigorous physical activity for all participants. Another innovative approach to increasing physical activity among schoolchildren is that schools are expected to work with local public works, public safety and/or police departments to make it safer and easier for students to walk and bike to school.

The Manchester school wellness plan adopts the recommendations of the IOM report to USDA on improving the nutritional quality of meals served in school. In addition, the plan recommends increasing vegetarian meals and limiting oil-fried foods. The plan encourages schools to recognize any dietary concerns relating to religious practices and any concerns of students with food allergies. Since the Manchester wellness plan has a focus on positively influencing students' general well being, schools are prohibited from using food as either an incentive or a reward for good behavior or academic performance. Withholding student access to snacks as a punishment is strictly forbidden.

An important part of the wellness plan requires local schools to participate in the Summer Food Service Program. Nationally, over half of the 30 million children that currently receive a school lunch for nine months of the year are low-income. These children get anywhere from one-third to one-half of their total daily nutrients from school lunches. Yet only approximately three million children participate in the Summer Food Service Program. Participation is low because the program requires a sponsor. Schools make ideal sponsors, as they have kitchens and recreational facilities. So, the Manchester plan to include schools in this program provides a real benefit to the schoolchildren of their community.

The Manchester School Wellness Committee is charged with the responsibility of evaluating all aspects of the wellness plan including all nutrition education curriculum and materials.

Appendix

Model School Wellness Policies

www.nanacoalition.org

The National Alliance for Nutrition and Activity (NANA) is an organization that advocates for federal policies and programs that promote healthy eating and physical activity with the goal of increasing child health. Their website has extensive materials on model school wellness policies including specific goals of a school wellness policy, suggestions on the nutritional quality of foods and beverages that should be offered in school, recommendations on how to promote nutrition and physical education for school children, and suggestions on how to monitor what progress is being made under a local school's wellness policy.

Federal Agency Support

US Department of Agriculture (USDA)

USDA, Team Nutrition

teamn nutrition.usda.gov/healthy/wellnesspolicy.html

fns.usda.gov/tn/Healthy/wellnesspolicy.html

Team Nutrition is an initiative of the USDA Food and Nutrition Service to support the Child Nutrition Programs through training and technical assistance for foodservice, nutrition education for children and their caregivers, and school and community support for healthy eating and physical activity. The Team Nutrition website has a local school wellness component. It has extensive materials on how to create, implement, evaluate and fund a local wellness policy.

Health and Human Services (HHS)

Centers for Disease Control (CDC)

cdc.gov/healthyyouth/npao/wellness.htm

The focus of CDC is on health. The agency strongly believes that school wellness plans can be used to fight childhood obesity. In addition, CDC has created a helpful tool for schools, parents and students to promote better health in schools, the School Health Index (SHI). CDC lists three purposes for SHI:

- engaging schools to identify strengths and weaknesses of health and safety policies and programs;
- engaging schools to develop an action plan for improving student health, which can be incorporated into the School Improvement Plan; and
- engaging teachers, parents, students and the community in promoting health-enhancing behaviors and better health.

SHI has two components: eight self-assessment models on school health and a plan to improve the health environment of your local school. The self-assessment process involves members of the local school community coming together to discuss what their local school is already doing to promote good health and to identify strengths and weaknesses. Then a plan is developed to address the school's unmet or unique health activities.

Nonprofit Nutrition and Health Organizations

Action for Healthy Kids (AFHK)

actionforhealthykids.org

AFHK is committed to reducing and preventing childhood obesity and undernourishment. The organization works with schools, families and communities helping young children learn about good nutrition and healthy foods so that they are ready to learn when they arrive at school. AFHK provides state profiles on how to improve the health and educational performance of children through better nutrition and physical activity in schools.

School Nutrition Association (SNA)

schoolnutrition.org

SNA works to ensure that all children have access to healthy school meals and nutrition education. SNA represents over 50,000 local school lunch directors along with all 50 state directors of child nutrition. The SNA website can direct interested readers to examples of model school wellness policies in over 30 states.

Food Research and Action Center (FRAC)

frac.org

FRAC is a nationally recognized leader on working to improve public policies to end hunger and under-nutrition in the United States. FRAC has a nationwide group of hunger leaders that can provide assistance on developing, implementing and monitoring of school wellness policies. (See frac.org/foodnutrition-programs/school-breakfast-and-lunch/local-school-wellness-policies/)