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## Empowering Youth to Take Charge of School Wellness

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## Empowering Youth to Take Charge of School Wellness

### Abstract

Youth Advisory Councils (YACs) ensure that students are represented in school wellness discussions. YACs empower students to present ideas, insights, and input on nutrition and physical activity; work alongside peers to assess wellness needs; and develop recommendations for enhancing/expanding the school wellness environment. YACs provide a platform for students to make positive impacts on their school's wellness policy. The YAC described in this article provided recommendations to increase fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat dairy foods on the cafeteria menu; expand opportunities for physical activity; and enhance the school lunch experience in the cafeteria.

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## Introduction

The impacts of childhood overweight and obesity are far-reaching, with long-term consequences such as Type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and other chronic diseases. (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012; Biro & Wien, 2010). There are academic consequences linked to obesity, as well. Overweight and obese children tend to miss more school, which may affect academic performance (Chriqui et al., 2013). There is strong evidence linking healthy nutrition and physical activity with improved academic performance and classroom behavior among school-age children (Geier et al., 2007). Schools are recognized as a fundamental setting for providing children with a healthy environment where they can consume nutritious meals, snacks, and beverages; get regular physical activity; and learn about the importance of healthy behaviors (Story, Kaphingst, & French, 2006; Pekruhn, 2009).

The Healthy Hunger Free Kids Act of 2010 (HHFKA) outlined new, stricter nutrition standards for school cafeterias, while requiring schools to adopt a local wellness policy and convene an active council to assess the wellness environment, develop a school-wide plan, and measure policy implementation. (USDA Food and Nutrition Service, 2014). Youth can play an active role in establishing, assessing and implementing the school wellness policy and council. In fact, the voices of students can offer a valuable perspective to support schools in achieving wellness goals.

Extension professionals can assist school districts with developing and supporting their local wellness policies by providing leadership, and information about programs and resources available through land grant institutions (Chriqui et al., 2013; McDonald & Whitmer, 2007). The BEE Healthy! Eat Smart and Exercise program (BEE Healthy) was developed as a result of one such collaboration between Rutgers Cooperative Extension (RCE) and the Paulsboro School District in Paulsboro, NJ. See Figure 1.

**Figure 1.**

BEE Healthy Logos



## Project Overview

BEE Healthy was developed with an Action For Healthy Kids (AFHK) Team Grant. BEE Healthy targeted two limited-resource elementary schools in Paulsboro, NJ, where the free/reduced lunch rate was 74%. Phase I of BEE Healthy combined nutrition education, school- and community-based nutrition projects, taste-testing new foods featured in the cafeteria, and opportunities to become more physically active to create a school-wide wellness initiative. Phase II of the project targeted enhancing the school wellness environment via a wellness assessment and establishing a Youth Advisory Council (YAC).

During Phase II, the team first conducted a wellness assessment with school administration using the nutrition, physical activity and overall school environment sections of the AFHK Wellness Policy Evaluation Tool (Action For Healthy Kids, 2012). Next, the team used the Massachusetts AFHK Students Taking Charge toolkit (STC) to establish a YAC to empower students to present input, insights, and ideas about nutrition and physical activity recommendations at their school. Finally, results of the assessment were used to help the team and YAC identify ways to enhance wellness activities, expand the lunch menu, link classroom and cafeteria, and promote physical activity.

For the purpose of this article, we review the process of working with a YAC and the outcomes and process employed to involve students in the school wellness process.

## Methods

Because of time, budget, and scheduling constraints, the YAC was integrated into the Student Council and PAC (Paulsboro Active Learning Center) after-school program, rather than recruiting faculty and students for a separate YAC. A total of 15 students and three faculty participated in the YAC. The YAC met four times over 12 months.

STC, developed by Massachusetts AFHK, was used as the basis for forming an active YAC. STC equips students with a youth survey they conduct with the student body to assess youth opinions and beliefs regarding the school wellness environment. While this kit is geared toward secondary students, the team piloted the kit with students in grades 3-6.

The six modules in the STC toolkit were adapted from the Centers for Disease Control's School Health Index and were designed to examine various aspects of the school's health environment. The modules include:

1. School Health and Safety Policies and the Environment
2. Health Education
3. Physical Education and Other Physical Activity Programs
4. Nutrition Services
5. School Health Services
6. Family and Community Involvement

Prior to the onset of Phase II, the team identified the Physical Education/Other Physical Activity Programs and Nutrition Services modules as priorities, given time and funding limitations and the younger student ages. The student survey was modified to include questions that requested feedback on student satisfaction with school nutrition services, physical education class (PE), and other physical activity programs. YAC members made copies of these sections and distributed the surveys to classmates in grades 3-6. Students were encouraged to answer questions honestly and seriously. The YAC then collected surveys and submitted to RCE's grant project manager.

## Results and Discussion

Two hundred forty-seven students completed the surveys. Key findings include the following.

1. During Phase I of BEE Healthy, the school district's foodservice was privately managed. A contracted foodservice company was hired before the start of Phase II. The student body expressed concerns that improvements made to the cafeteria menu during Phase I (increasing fruit/vegetable variety and featuring more fresh produce) were lost with the addition of the foodservice company. Administration shared these concerns.
2. Students suggested that a greater variety of fruits and vegetables should be incorporated into the

menu. The four most requested items were grapes, apples, bananas, and oranges.

3. Student complained of long cafeteria lines and delay in receiving lunches.
4. 96% of the students reported that they enjoyed PE class.
5. 70% of the students felt that the school did not have adequate recess equipment or supplies for outdoor recess. When asked to identify what they want to play with, top suggestions were playground balls, basketballs/new backboard, and jump ropes.

Based on survey responses, the YAC members and their faculty advisors outlined an implementation plan and realized successful results. These are outlined in Table 1.

**Table 1.**  
YAC Implementation Plan and Results of Recommendations

YAC Implementation Plan	Results of Plan's Recommendation
Prepare a report to the Food Service Director, summarizing outcomes of the student survey, and requesting that school foodservice examine the feasibility of reinstating more of the Phase I advancements that enhanced the lunch menu.	School foodservice considered the request and returned most of the foods to the menu.
Conduct an observation of the serving line to determine if process could be revised to expedite service and give students more time to eat.	Observation noted that an insufficient number of trays was delaying lunch service. The YAC sought donations and purchased additional trays, which decreased wait time and gave students more time to eat.
Prepare a report to the PE teacher to relay students' strong positive feedback from survey questions.	The YAC felt it was important to convey that such a large portion of students reported enjoying PE classes and liked to exercise, play games and learn new things.
Based on the answers to the questions regarding recess equipment and supplies, YAC members and their faculty advisors worked with administrators, the PE teacher and playground aides to develop a list of equipment that would assist the school with reaching the wellness policy goal of increasing the amount of time students were physically active during the school day.	Their recommendations resulted in the purchase of a basketball court, a <i>Dance Revolution</i> group game system, balls, jump ropes, baseball equipment, footballs and so forth with grant funds provided through the AFHK grant.
The YAC spent a significant amount of time generating a plan to keep the equipment in good	The YAC felt it was imperative, therefore, to purchase storage materials and locks to help

<p>shape and prevent it from being lost, damaged or stolen. This was significant. While not a wellness priority, per se, the YAC identified these issues as major contributors to the lack of equipment available at the school.</p>	<p>maintain the equipment and supplies.</p>
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## Conclusion

YACs are a valuable asset to support the school wellness environment. Students have important opinions and good ideas that can enhance nutrition and physical activity at school. By inviting their opinions and engaging them in the wellness conversation, they take ownership of school wellness projects. Extension plays an important role in facilitating this process, by guiding schools to develop YACs and giving students a voice in supporting the school wellness environment. When given the opportunity, students can contribute valuable, insightful ideas to promote health and wellness.

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