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## The Role of Extension in Assisting School Districts to Implement and Monitor Their Local Wellness Policies

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## The Role of Extension in Assisting School Districts to Implement and Monitor Their Local Wellness Policies

### Abstract

This article explores the role of Extension in assisting school districts to implement and monitor Local Wellness Policies. The authors include an outline of the basic requirements of the law and a description, based on their experience, of how school districts can implement and support their wellness policies. Information on various research-based resources available to schools and teachers are provided.

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## Introduction

To help combat childhood obesity, the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004 was signed into law (Section 204 of P.L. 108 - 265), requiring each local educational agency/school district participating in USDA's school meals programs to establish a local wellness policy. The legislation places the responsibility of developing a wellness policy at the local level, so that the individual needs of each district can be addressed. According to the requirements for the Local Wellness Policy, school districts must set goals for nutrition education, physical activity, campus food provision, and other school-based activities designed to promote student wellness. Additionally, districts are required to involve a broad group of individuals in policy development and to have a plan for measuring policy implementation.

This article explores the role of Extension in assisting school districts to implement and monitor Local Wellness Policies. First, we outline the basic requirements of the law. By this time most districts should have established their policies in compliance with the law, therefore our focus is on continued compliance into the future. The primary purpose of this article is to describe what we have learned from our experience developing and implementing Local Wellness Policies in several school districts in our state and to provide information on the various research-based resources available to schools and teachers at little or no expense.

## Basics of the Local Wellness Policy Law

Not all school districts need to establish a Local Wellness Policy; however, those that receive funding through what is generally referred to as the "Free and Reduced Lunch Program," must comply. The guidelines for developing the policy and then monitoring its progress are outlined below and should include:

- Goals for nutrition education, physical activity, and other school-based activities that are designed to promote student wellness in a manner that the local educational agency determines is appropriate;

- Nutrition guidelines selected by the local educational agency for all foods available on each school campus under the local educational agency during the school day with the objectives of promoting student health and reducing childhood obesity;
- Guidelines for reimbursable school meals, which are no less restrictive than regulations and guidance issued by the Secretary of Agriculture pursuant to Subsections (a) and (b) of Section 10 of the Child Nutrition Act (42 U.S.C. 1779) and Section 9(f)(1) and 17(a) of the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act (42 U.S.C. 1758(f)(1), 1766(a)), as those regulations and guidance apply to schools;
- A plan for measuring implementation of the local wellness policy, including designation of one or more persons within the local educational agency or at each school, as appropriate, charged with operational responsibility for ensuring that each school fulfills the district's local wellness policy; and
- Community involvement, including parents, students, and representatives of the school food authority, the school board, school administrators, and the public in the development of the school wellness policy.

## **Implementing the Policy**

Writing a policy is one thing, but, as they say, the proof of the pudding is in the eating (sugar-free and using low-fat milk, of course). And so the proof of the policy is in its implementation.

Some policies use broad language to describe the intention of the policy and then charge staff in the school district with the responsibility of developing specific guidelines. Other policies are quite specific to the point of stating precisely the percent of calories from fat that is permissible. In either case, Extension faculty can inform local school superintendents, principals, food service managers, and teachers about the many programs and resources available through land-grant institutions. Below we have listed some tips on helping schools implement their School Wellness Policies.

### **Identify the Champions**

Change agents, those identified "champions" within the school system, are essential to helping usher you through the bureaucracy and connecting with the appropriate people. Parents, students, teachers, administrators, or various community leaders are great facilitators for creating awareness of the issues and make great change agents. We were fortunate to have existing relationships with some key PE teachers and family wellness coordinators.

### **Get the Facts**

Some schools may not have adequate information on specific subjects such as the prevalence of disease or obesity in the community. Self-assessment tools, such as the School Health Index: Self-assessment and Planning Guide <<http://apps.nccd.cdc.gov/shi/default.aspx>> and the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System <<http://www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/yrbs/index.htm>> are valuable resources.

### **Build Capacity**

Building capacity can take many forms. One way we were able to build capacity was by demonstrating to decision-makers the strategies we had to offer. To do this we trained a cadre of administrators on how to conduct nutrition and physical activity mini-lessons during breaks at the administrators' summer retreat (for example, Energizers <<http://www.ncpe4me.com/energizers.html>>).

### **Emphasize the Importance of Wellness Policies**

Stakeholders will be more likely to embrace a new policy if they have a good understanding of why it is important. One way to do this is to disseminate the policy along with implementation strategies through the superintendent's or principal's office. We put together packets including a cover letter from the superintendent, as well as 1-page fact sheets on healthy celebrations, healthy fundraisers, and alternatives to food as rewards (for example, see <[http://www.state.ct.us/sde/deps/student/NutritionEd/Healthy\\_CelebrationsBW.pdf](http://www.state.ct.us/sde/deps/student/NutritionEd/Healthy_CelebrationsBW.pdf)>).

### **Provide Ongoing Support**

Once a policy is developed and implemented, it needs to be supported. To do this we invited teachers and administrators to attend workshops to learn more about the topic of school wellness and to become familiar with research-based programs and curricula available through Extension. We also created a matrix describing programs already available locally at little or no cost through Extension, Public Health, and other government and non-profit agencies, such as the tool kit Changing the Scene: Improving the School Nutrition Environment

<<http://www.fns.usda.gov/TN/Resources/changing.html>>.

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