

# Introduction to School Wellness Policies

## Overview

With the rising interest in farm to school programs in Iowa and the recent school wellness policy mandate, this publication is created to offer examples to create and improve local school wellness policies featuring farm to school programs.

The new mandate required all schools participating in federally funded school meal programs to comply with federally set guidelines for local school wellness policies by June 30, 2017. This publication offers examples from local, state and federal projects for communities to consider for updating and improving their own local school wellness policy.

The publication also highlights how farm to school programs can assist in successfully fulfilling the federal guidelines and requirements of local school wellness policies in Iowa, and provide an easier, creative way to provide nutrition education, including hands-on activities, in schools.

This resource has been written and developed from the Community Food Systems Program within Iowa State University Extension and Outreach, Agriculture and Natural Resources – Local Foods Program, and the Iowa State Community and Economic Development Department.

This publication is written through the lens of community food systems development. The following sections will highlight how school wellness policies are affected by Community Food Systems values of wellness, economy, education, policy, environment and equity.

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## What is a school wellness policy?

“A local school wellness policy is a written document that guides a local educational agency or school district’s efforts to create supportive school nutrition and physical activity environments” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017).

Local school wellness policies are used by schools to promote student and staff wellness, prevent and combat



childhood obesity, and to make sure school nutrition guidelines are meeting the minimum federally placed school meal standards (United States Department of Agriculture, 2017).

## What are the requirements of school wellness policies?

Requirements below are taken directly from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention:

- Include goals for nutrition promotion and education, physical activity and other school-based activities that promote students wellness. In developing these goals, local educational agencies must review and consider evidence-based strategies.
- Include nutrition guidelines for all foods sold on each school campus during the school day that are

consistent with federal regulations for school meals and Smart Snacks in School nutrition standards.

- Include policies for foods and beverages made available to students (e.g., in classroom parties, classroom snacks brought by parents, other foods given as incentives).
- Include policies for food and beverage marketing that allow marketing and advertising of only those foods and beverages that meet the Smart Snacks in School nutrition standards.
- Permit parents, students, representatives of the school food authority, teachers of physical education, school health professionals, the school board, school administrators and the general public to participate in the development, implementation and update of the local school wellness policy.
- Identify one or more school districts or school officials who have the authority and responsibility to ensure each school complies with the policy.
- Inform and update the public (including parents, students and others in the community) about the local school wellness policy on an annual basis.
- At least once every three years, measure the extent to which schools are in compliance with the local school wellness policy, the extent to which the local education agency's local wellness policy compares to model local school wellness policies, and the progress made in attaining the goals of the local wellness policy — and make this assessment available to the public.

Schools were required to comply with all of these requirements by June 30, 2017 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017).

### **Who creates the guidelines?**

Federal law requires all schools participating in federal nutrition programs to create and implement a school wellness policy that follows the requirements stated above. Federally subsidized school meals are required by Congress and the US Department of Agriculture to meet specific nutrition standards and comply with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

However, an important element of these guidelines is that the specifics of wellness policies are determined by the local school district (Story, Nannery & Schwartz, 2009). Schools have the flexibility and opportunity to individualize their school wellness policies in order to address specific needs and characteristics of their unique school system.

“About half of all states (27) have adopted competitive food policies that are more restrictive than the USDA regulations, although the restrictions differ greatly in type and extent” (Story, Nannery & Schwartz, 2009). This is because “schools are given room for freedom and creativity when implementing their school wellness policies” (Krist, 2017). In addition, schools often create place-based action plans that are specific to their individual school, which can include changes to the building or landscape in order to promote school wellness (Jenkins, 2017).

### **School wellness policy goals and perspectives on community food system values**

As mentioned, this publication is written through the lens of community food systems development. The following sections highlight how school wellness policies can express the related values of **wellness, economy, education, environment, equity and policy**.

#### **Wellness**

Research consistently shows that the majority of American children do not consume diets that meet recommendations of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, nor do they achieve adequate levels of daily physical activity (Story, Nannery & Schwartz, 2009). Local school wellness policies play an important role in combating poor nutrition and lack of physical activity by ensuring schools meet the minimum federal standards and promote student and staff wellness (United States Department of Agriculture, 2017).

School wellness policies can include components for staff and students in order to model healthy patterns. For example, implementing staff wellness plans can be just as important as student wellness plans to create a model of healthy behaviors for students. These plans can incorporate policies on healthy lifestyle behaviors, eating, and physical activity (Kaiser Permanente, 2016).

In 2014, the US Centers for Disease Control reported that 37.4% of children aged 6 to 19 were obese. Research shows that overweight children are at a higher risk for mental and physical health problems and social and academic challenges throughout their lifetimes compared to their healthy-weight peers (Berk, 2012).

Schools can offer different options to develop strategies to prevent obesity. SHAPE America recommends that elementary school students receive 150 minutes and secondary students receive 225 minutes of physical education each week. During the 2012-2013 school year, fewer than 4 percent of district policies met the SHAPE America-recommended time.

Creating policies that create environments in which children eat healthfully and engage in the recommended amount of physical activity is an opportunity for schools through the new mandate (Story, Nanney & Schwartz, 2009).

### **Community and Economic Development**

Community awareness, acceptance and participation in school wellness policies are important. It is recommended that parents, students, representatives of the school food authority or council, the school board, school administrators and the public be a part of the school wellness policy development, adoption and implementation processes (Fruits & Veggies More Matters).

School wellness policies can engage the community by emphasizing the need for consistent health messages between the community, home and school environments. For example, the Los Angeles Unified School District promotes and provides tips and resources for healthier diets through the school and district websites by facilitating health and wellness events to engage all community members. They also encourage their schools to create partnerships with community-based organizations and the city and county to increase access to safe spaces for the community and provide additional resources and services that promote wellness (Los Angeles Unified School District, 2014). Keeping schools active in community life furthers the opportunities for success in student and staff behavior change promoted by school wellness policies.

### **Education**

State standards for nutrition education are broadly defined to include nutrition components. In curriculum, this may include: nutrition-related lessons and learning activities outside of the classroom, including the cafeteria in promotion, and through community-based efforts (Belandsky, Chriqui & Schwartz, 2009).

The median number of hours per year that schools devote to teaching nutrition education and dietary behavior is 3.4 hours for elementary schools and 5 hours for middle and high schools (Story, Nanney & Schwartz, 2009). This is an unfavorable statistic, as nutrition education is an important component of a coordinated school health approach. Eating patterns are more likely to improve when changes in the school environment are integrated with classroom nutrition education (Story, Nanney & Schwartz, 2009).

Heuss' thesis on farm to school relates to this subject and school wellness policies in elementary schools. The research indicated that Farm to School programs can play a positive role in helping meet the school wellness policy objectives while also providing connections to local

producers for student meals and snacks (Heuss, 2014). Through this thesis research, a survey that was sent to all elementary school principals in Iowa, found that half the respondents perceived noticeable positive behavior changes in students since implementing Farm to School activities.

Schools should ensure proper training and professional development for staff. This training can include age-appropriate nutrition education curriculum, tactics for integrating nutrition in multiple core curriculum, as well as procurement and preparation techniques for healthy and appealing school meals (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Bridging the Gap Research Program, 2014).

### **Environment**

School wellness policies can include programs like the National Farm to School Program that provide curriculum that focuses on the environment. An example of Farm to School curriculum that concentrates on the environment is school gardens. School gardens are areas of land where fruits, vegetables and other plants are grown by students and community members for recreation and as an educational aid. School gardens can increase school meal acceptance, enhance the educational process, supplement meals, and be a valuable nutrition education tool (Hohenshell, 2017). School gardens also enhance aesthetics and can build leadership in students from caring for the garden.

### **Equity**

“Schools play an important role in equity and education. Having a successful school wellness policy and having access to other opportunities removes barriers to learning. School wellness policies help to create a culture of health for all students and when done well looks at cultural equity and diversity.” (Jenkins, 2017).

In their 2008 publication *Evaluating the Distribution of School Wellness Policies and Practices: A Framework to Capture Equity among Schools Serving the Most Weight-Vulnerable Children*, Nanney and Davey propose the need for awareness around the prevalence of school nutrition policies and practices and whether there are differences based on school level, race, income, and geographical location.

A study done in Utah supports the need to evaluate the equity in policy distribution among schools. Researchers identified that schools with the highest free and reduced lunch enrollment and those located in rural settings were significantly less likely to offer healthful snacks and more likely to serve unhealthy snacks during meal times due

to the lack of availability of healthful items. (Nanney & Davey, 2008). This is typically due to a lack of availability to healthy food sources. It is important for all schools to consider how to appropriately, equitably and sustainably provide students with the most nutrient-dense foods as possible for their meals.

## Policy

What is the impact of school wellness policies based on goals? How are school wellness policies evaluated?

Federal legislation requires that school food authorities comply with school meal program requirements if they participate in the programs. It also requires that schools evaluate their programming and wellness policies every three years. If the programs and policies are not meeting the federal requirements, schools are required to take corrective action. Reviews that receive corrective action stay open until the issues are resolved (Scheidel, 2017).

The US Food and Nutrition Service website provides comprehensive information and tools for schools to evaluate their wellness policies at this link: [www.fns.usda.gov/tn/local-process-how-develop-implement-and-evaluate-wellness-policy](http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/local-process-how-develop-implement-and-evaluate-wellness-policy)

Keep in mind that feedback from students, parents, teachers, and administrators is also important.

Links to more school wellness policy evaluation tools:

- [www.educateiowa.gov/documents/nutrition-learning-tools/2016/08/does-your-district-wellness-policy-measure](http://www.educateiowa.gov/documents/nutrition-learning-tools/2016/08/does-your-district-wellness-policy-measure)
- [www.educateiowa.gov/documents/team-nutrition/2017/06/school-wellness-policy-progress-report](http://www.educateiowa.gov/documents/team-nutrition/2017/06/school-wellness-policy-progress-report)
- [www.wellsat.org/resources.aspx](http://www.wellsat.org/resources.aspx)
- [www.indianola.k12.ia.us/pdf/2016/12-14/School-Wellness-Assessment.pdf](http://www.indianola.k12.ia.us/pdf/2016/12-14/School-Wellness-Assessment.pdf)
- [www.doe.in.gov/sites/default/files/nutrition/evaluation-checklist.pdf](http://www.doe.in.gov/sites/default/files/nutrition/evaluation-checklist.pdf)
- [www.nj.gov/agriculture/divisions/fn/pdf/Form357WellnessPolicyAssessmentTool.pdf](http://www.nj.gov/agriculture/divisions/fn/pdf/Form357WellnessPolicyAssessmentTool.pdf)

## Who is impacted by school wellness policies?

School wellness policies impact all schools, private and public, that participate in federal school meal programs. Those that participate must align with the federally placed requirements and guidelines. In the case of public schools, early comparative analyses of local school wellness policies

suggest that the strongest policies are found in larger districts and districts with a greater number of students eligible for a free or reduced-price lunch (Story, Nanney & Schwartz, 2009).

Public schools that promote healthy eating behaviors tend to use more marketing materials to promote healthy eating than private schools not enrolled in national school lunch programs. Private schools may develop their own wellness policy, or as in the case of parochial schools, the governing board could develop one for all their schools. A private school could also adopt the wellness policy of the local educational agency (Fruits & Veggies More Matters).

School wellness policies often impact families and community members, both directly and indirectly. For example, wellness policies that incorporate school gardens are often supported by volunteer community members for the continuance and maintenance of the garden during times students and staff are not available (especially summer).

According to Heuss' research survey, 41 percent of elementary principals surveyed about farm to school and school wellness policies noted an increase in parental involvement at their schools. Having the support of families is another dynamic that contributes positively to the school environment and the need for school wellness policy adoption. All of these relationships show the probability that a healthier food environment can have positive benefits to students and their families (Heuss, 2014).

School wellness policies also have the potential to encourage students to try different fruits and vegetables they may not have access to at home. This can lead to students encouraging parents to try new foods or purchase items at the grocery store as well. Students who participate in nutrition education programs in school are encouraged to talk about what they are learning with their families, which gives an opportunity to create conversation around health and nutrition in their homes.

## How do schools create school wellness policies?

At the national level, some of the most frequently discussed model policies were from:

- National Alliance for Nutrition and Activity (<https://cspinet.org/national-alliance-nutrition-and-activity#Maryland>),
- The Center for Ecoliteracy ([www.ecoliteracy.org](http://www.ecoliteracy.org)),
- Action for Healthy Kids ([www.actionforhealthykids.org](http://www.actionforhealthykids.org)), and

- USDA Team Nutrition ([www.fns.usda.gov/tn/local-school-wellness-policy](http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/local-school-wellness-policy)).

Additionally, some individual states have developed model and sample policies, and many created toolkits to aid school districts. State-level model policies are likely to be used the most often because they help districts ensure compliance with both the federal and their own state regulations.

The sources of state-level guidance are most often the state department of education, the state board of education, the state Action for Healthy Kids team, and state universities with departments interested in school nutrition (Story, Nanney & Schwartz, 2009).

#### **Links to resources and information for creating or enhancement of school wellness policies:**

- [www.educateiowa.gov/pk-12/nutrition-programs/school-wellness](http://www.educateiowa.gov/pk-12/nutrition-programs/school-wellness)
- [www.californiaprojectlean.org/doc.asp?id=168&parentid=20#Case\\_Studies](http://www.californiaprojectlean.org/doc.asp?id=168&parentid=20#Case_Studies)
- [www.doe.in.gov/nutrition/school-wellness-policy](http://www.doe.in.gov/nutrition/school-wellness-policy)

#### **Link to model and sample wellness policies:**

- [www.educateiowa.gov/documents/school-wellness/2016/09/sample-school-wellness-policy](http://www.educateiowa.gov/documents/school-wellness/2016/09/sample-school-wellness-policy)
- [www.schoolwellnesspolicies.org/WellnessPolicies.html](http://www.schoolwellnesspolicies.org/WellnessPolicies.html)

#### **Link to non-public school model wellness policy:**

- [www.holyfamilydbq.org/file/Wellness-Policy.pdf](http://www.holyfamilydbq.org/file/Wellness-Policy.pdf)

#### **Link to successful implementation examples:**

- [www.californiaprojectlean.org/doc.asp?id=168&parentid=20#Case\\_Studies](http://www.californiaprojectlean.org/doc.asp?id=168&parentid=20#Case_Studies)
- [www.healthiergeneration.org/about\\_childhood\\_obesity/wellness\\_stories](http://www.healthiergeneration.org/about_childhood_obesity/wellness_stories)

### **Funding**

Funding can be a major concern when implementing school wellness policies. Many schools receive funding for programs by applying for specific grants related to child nutrition and physical activity (US Department of Agriculture, 2017). Grant opportunities commonly come from the government, state organizations or private foundations.

Schools can seek funding through government grants such as:

- USDA's Team Nutrition Training Grants, which assist state agencies that administer federal food programs;
- USDA's Farm to School Grant Program, which helps connect schools with local producers and teaches kids where their food comes from ([www.fns.usda.gov/tn/team-nutrition-training-grants](http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/team-nutrition-training-grants));
- Safe Schools/Healthy Students Grant from the US Department of Justice, which support the development and implementation of activities, services and strategies to promote the healthy development of children and youth ([www.samhsa.gov/safe-schools-healthy-students/about](http://www.samhsa.gov/safe-schools-healthy-students/about)); and
- Carol M. White Physical Education Program (PEP) from the US Department of Education, which is intended for local educational agencies and community-based organizations to initiate, expand or enhance physical education programs (<https://www2.ed.gov/programs/whitephised/applicant.html>; USDA Specific Grants: Government).

Schools can also seek funding from foundations such as:

- Voices for Healthy Kids, which provides grants for advocacy and programs to reverse the childhood obesity epidemic in their six priority areas, which include schools (<http://voicesforhealthykids.org/grant-opportunities>);
- Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Healthy Eating Research programs, which provides funding for research on promoting healthy eating among children to prevent obesity (<http://healthyeatingresearch.org/funding/current-call-for-proposals>; USDA Specific Grants: Foundations)

The San Diego County Master Gardener Association provides a list of grants across the US that are available for school gardens and other life science programs ([www.mastergardenerssandiego.org/schools/grants.php](http://www.mastergardenerssandiego.org/schools/grants.php)).

Note: An analysis of 256 school districts from across the country found that only 2 percent addressed how funding will be made available for implementation and evaluation of the local school wellness policy (Belandsky, Chriqui & Schwartz, 2009).

### **School wellness policies and connections to farm to school programs**

The National Farm to School Network, a program that focuses on nutrition education, procurement and school gardens, provides unique ways for kids to learn about the foods on their plate and the importance of healthy eating.

## Current state of farm to school programs in the US

Farm to school programs connect schools and local farms with the objectives of serving healthy meals in school cafeterias, improving student nutrition, providing agriculture, health and nutrition education opportunities and supporting local and regional farmers.

Farm to school programs can provide many facets of nutrition education for not only students, but also families and community members, through hands-on learning activities such as school gardens, field trips to local farms and cooking classes. Farm to school can be easily integrated into standards-based curriculum.

The National Farm to School Network ([www.farmtoschool.org](http://www.farmtoschool.org)) is a non-profit organization that focuses on nutrition education, procurement and school gardens provides unique ways for kids to learn about the foods on their plate and the importance of healthy eating.

## How farm to school can inform wellness policies

Farm to school can be incorporated into local school wellness policies in a wide variety of ways, including procurement, school curriculum and additional activities that engage the whole community. Incorporating farm to school curriculum into school wellness policies can benefit students by improving student health behaviors, willingness to try new foods and healthier options, consuming more fruits and vegetables and improvement in student engagement and academic achievement (National Farm to School Network website).

If a new farm to school initiative is beginning, the ISU Local Foods Program staff can help facilitate the startup by providing information and holding educational and informational public meetings or classes to help schools find local sources of food. Lyn Jenkins, a nutrition education specialist for the Des Moines Public School system, explained that farm to school language is written into their school wellness policies as part of supporting student wellness and school wellness goals.

The school district received a farm to school planning grant, which supports about 23 school gardens in the district. The USDA's *Farm to School Planning Toolkit* shares best practices for schools regarding startup and sustenance of farm to school programs (US Department of Agriculture). See the bibliography for a link to this resource.

## Do we need a template for school wellness policies?

While the creation of a federal school wellness policy template would seem to create a framework for consistent evaluation and accountability, it could potentially restrict wellness policies on the local level.

In a study done on the effects of using standard templates to develop school wellness policies, it was found that in a smaller sample, locally developed policies were stronger than federal template-based policies and that if replicated in large studies. These findings suggest that further research is needed on how to best support schools that wish to develop school wellness policies (Capogrossi, Estabrooks & Smith, 2012).

Carrie Scheidel, the USDA Team Nutrition co-director, describes how having a state-created wellness policy to provide consistency at a state level seems most effective.

State-level sample policies can be less overwhelming and they can help established a loose framework for local policies. For example, Iowa's sample local school wellness policies are customizable at the local level and provide implementation goals that are optional but not required. Schools are able to take pieces here or there based on their individual school's needs and characteristics (Scheidel, 2017).

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*Students at a northeast Iowa elementary school walk to class as part of their school wellness program.*

*Photo courtesy of Northeast Iowa Food and Fitness Initiative.*