



INTRODUCTION

THE CASE FOR A SCHOOL WELLNESS AGENDA

Today, 75 years after the Great Depression, a time when many Americans worried about putting their next meal on the table, we ironically are faced with the contrasting and significant public health issue of obesity. U.S. society has moved from the Industrial Age, when physical activity was a necessary part of everyday life, to the Information Age, in which passive activities requiring minimal physical exercise (watching television, playing video games and using a computer) have become the habitual and sometimes necessary aspects of everyday working and living. Exercise from everyday activities such as walking to work or school is less prevalent and in fact, there are fewer sidewalks available for people to use. Many commuters drive their cars from doorstep to doorstep because there is no conveniently available public transportation.

Compounding the problem with inactivity are issues surrounding food choices and nutrition. The fast food industry has doubled in size from 1972 to 1997, increasing access to quick and affordable, but often high-calorie but low-nutrient choices. Some families and schools have mirrored this trend, offering children food and drink choices that are easy and inexpensive but of little nutritional value to meet students' basic needs. Researchers are now finding that many children from very low socioeconomic backgrounds are undernourished and obese. As a result, students are gaining weight because their fat and sugar intake is excessive and because their physical activity level is too low.

Additionally, eating disorders are particularly prevalent among adolescents. Some students develop unhealthy, unbalanced eating habits in order to reduce their body weight, boost self esteem, and achieve an idealized, though often unattainable, model-like appearance. Ultimately, being either underweight or overweight puts students at risk for diseases and, more immediately, may contribute to attendance and behavioral problems that keep them from academic achievement.

A study released in 2005 found that Ohio had the 13th highest level of adult obesity in the nation at 24.4 percent, the fourth highest overweight high school student level at 13.9 percent and the 30th highest overweight level for low-income children ages 2 through 5 at 11.6 percent. The state spent an estimated \$289 per person (\$3.3 billion) in 2003 on medical costs related to obesity, which was the 11th highest amount spent in the nation (Trust for America's Health, 2004). Since 1990, the rate of overweight Ohio adults (ages 18+) has remained steady, while the rate of the more severe problem of obesity has more than doubled (Healthy Policy Institute Issue Report, 2005).

Schools can partially address these staggering figures by offering healthy, nutritious food and drink options; opportunities for physical activity during the school day; and education for students about making healthy choices.

NEW FEDERAL LEGISLATION ON SCHOOL WELLNESS

Congress addressed these national health issues by passing the following law (P.L. 108 - 265): "Each local educational agency participating in a program authorized by the Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act (42 U.S.C. 1751 et seq) or the Child Nutrition Act of 1966 (42 U.S.C. 1771 et seq) shall establish a local school wellness policy by School Year 2006."



According to the federal legislation, the local school wellness policy must 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;
- An assurance that guidelines for reimbursable school meals shall not be less restrictive than regulations and guidance issued by (the U.S. Department of Agriculture [USDA]);
- 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 the school meets the local wellness policy; and
- The involvement of 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 (P.L. 108-265).

OHIO LEGISLATION ON SCHOOL WELLNESS

In June 2005, the Ohio General Assembly, recognizing the responsibility this new federal law places on school districts, passed legislation through House Bill 66 to form a School Physical Fitness and Wellness Advisory Council. The purpose was to support school districts in implementing the federal legislation. The council, formed in August 2005, was comprised of members representing educational, business and governmental organizations that have demonstrated leadership in the area of health education and wellness. More specifically, the charge of the council was to develop guidelines for best practices regarding nutrition education, physical activity for students, school-based activities and school-business partnerships that promote student wellness. In addition, the council was asked to provide districts with strategies for evaluating their local implementation of wellness policies to determine whether goals and objectives are met.

THE WORK OF THE ADVISORY COUNCIL

The council met in person five times between September and December 2005 and had additional communications between meetings to determine how best to support school districts through the best practice guidelines and evaluation strategies. In order to produce guidelines that would be most helpful to school districts, the council listened to opinions from a number of key stakeholders, including students. Following a research review, the council formulated a guiding framework with core themes that schools can use when creating their own wellness plans. These initial steps led to creating a wellness logic model that includes desired school and student outcomes and that leads to the ultimate goals of creating lifelong healthy behaviors and attaining higher academic achievement for all students. From that logic model, the council established action objectives for reaching the desired school and student outcomes. Evidenced-based best practices supporting these objectives were gathered from throughout Ohio and other states, with particular emphasis on what can be learned from other states.



VOICES FROM SCHOOLS, WELLNESS ADVOCATES AND STUDENTS

Meaningful input to inform the council’s efforts was gathered from as many key stakeholders as possible. Council meetings included presentations from food service directors, students, school nurses, teachers, school board members, school administrators, business leadership, evaluation experts, nutrition educators and a former NFL football player. These stakeholders are strong advocates for adopting wellness plans in Ohio schools and their feedback informed the council.

To gain perspectives from high school students, scholars from the University of Akron and Ohio University conducted four focus group sessions in Summit County and four additional sessions in southeastern Ohio (rural Appalachia). Students within each focus group were all of the same gender and included a moderator, also of the same gender, in order to allow for maximum comfort during the discussion. The students volunteered to participate and obtained parental consent.

Each focus group session lasted one hour. Sample questions included: What are your perceptions of healthy food choices? Do your friends make healthy choices? Why or why not? What types of foods do you traditionally eat for meals (breakfast, lunch, dinner or snacks)? Do your eating habits differ between home and school? What does physically fit mean to you? What types of physical activities are you now participating in (formal sports or other school-based or community-based athletics)?

The focus groups provided many consistent responses. Students reported that they ate two to three meals per day. During evenings and on weekends, because of their families’ busy schedules, meals were reported as “catch as catch can.” During the school day, the majority bought their lunches at school and ate the food that was available to them. They expressed the belief that if schools wanted them to eat healthier foods, they should offer healthier options. They also mentioned the effects of adult role models (e.g., coaches and teachers) as well as the important role that courses, such as health classes, have in teaching nutrition and making healthy food choices. A number of students suggested that access to schools’ weight rooms with supervision after school would be more useful than many other after-school activities. Students felt that they would benefit from ongoing, consistent programs in making healthy choices and becoming more physically fit if they believed that schools demonstrated a commitment to the issue. Most of the students indicated that they were satisfied with their current level of physical fitness. None of the students linked being physically fit today with their respective future well-being.

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE COUNCIL MEETINGS

In addition to the focus groups, the council brought in guest speakers to each meeting to bring a diversity of perspectives on wellness. Many of their wise suggestions are included within our best practice guidelines. In addition, highlights from these presentations, which enriched, inspired and informed our work, are presented here.

1. The Importance of Branding and Marketing

At the very first council meeting, Cheryl Agranovich of WellCorp, the council’s content developer, described the important role that marketing and branding has played in wellness programs her company has developed within companies. Although often overlooked, or looked upon as “a bonus if there are resources,” she commented that marketing must be an essential part of any wellness plan.



Because striving toward wellness takes discipline, it also takes a personal commitment to work toward that goal. Wellness cannot be enforced or externally driven. As a result, raising awareness of — and commitment to — wellness among students (and parents, teachers and school administrators) must occur before any change is to take place.

The council then discussed how successful promotional campaigns have increased interest in nutritional foods. The national “Got Milk?” campaign, sponsored by America’s milk processors and dairy farmers, is a good example of raising public awareness about the health benefits of drinking milk while appealing to a young audience through celebrities wearing a milk mustache. In a related example, milk “chugs” — fun, innovative packaging — were introduced to make the product more appealing, and students responded by purchasing more milk.

2. Stress Management

WellCorp also discussed stress management, a topic that is particularly helpful in opening people’s minds about wellness. Staff and students in schools experience high levels of stress, and they are interested in easing its negative effects. Feeling better from increased healthy choices and reduced stress levels can be the greatest motivator toward further commitment to wellness.

3. Leadership; A Champion for Wellness

Kate Horning, a high school student from northeastern Ohio, believes her school should take action in the area of wellness, although she doesn’t know of any school champions for the issue. She makes healthy choices for herself, but the majority of her friends do not. Kate’s critical reminder to the council was that there must be someone in a leadership role who is committed to addressing the issue in order to create and sustain efforts.

4. Small, Incremental Steps

The saying, “A journey of a thousand miles begins with one single step,” applies to wellness plans in schools. Lisa Morrison, Food Service Supervisor with Manchester Local Schools, illustrated this point by talking about her strategies. One single step she took toward more nutritious foods was to begin serving sandwiches with one piece of white bread facing up and a piece of wheat bread on the bottom of the sandwich. Students either did not notice or did not mind the difference. Small, incremental steps, as opposed to big commitments, can steadily move individuals toward lifelong healthier habits.

5. Student Decision-makers

No committee, no board, nor any school staff members are going to determine the foods that are served in Columbus Public Schools. The students themselves will be the judge when new foods are introduced, reports Dudley Hawkey, food service director of Columbus Public Schools. If students demonstrate they will eat a new food, he will continue to offer it. He also introduces healthy options incrementally so that students can easily adjust to a new way of eating.

6. Integration with Academics

Without an educational component to wellness, how will students continue to know what choices to make? How will schools sustain a wellness agenda if it is not directly tied into academics? Julie Winland, school nurse and wellness policy coordinator for Columbus Public Schools, challenged the council to consider that nutrition education, physical activity and physical education must be integrated



into academics to help students increase their knowledge of how best to prevent disease and promote their own well-being.

7. All Can Participate in Physical Activities

The council “walked the talk” by participating in a series of physical activities from the CATCH curriculum, facilitated by Dan Young, physical education instructor from Huntsville Elementary School of the Indian Lake Local School District. CATCH is a nutrition education and physical activity curriculum offered in many Ohio schools. Council members tried out movements that encouraged social interactions and team building. None of the movements were strenuous or required any athletic ability, so all could participate. The exercise offered a rare opportunity to move during a long day of meetings. It serves this same important purpose in schools.

8. Setting Goals for Personal Nutrition Choices

The council also set personal nutrition goals through the guidance and coaching of Susan Patton, an Ohio Department of Education child nutrition consultant. Council members used the USDA My Pyramid guide book, “Your Goals to a Healthier You,” to establish these goals. Choosing healthier foods in the grocery — or on the school meals line — becomes easier if individuals set goals and plan their strategy ahead.

9. Stages of Change

To understand what a person or a school might go through in order to increase their wellness, WellCorp presented a “Stages of Change” model (Prochaska, 1982). The stages include pre-contemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, maintenance and relapse. In this model, a person might go backward or forward when attempting to make a permanent and lasting change. In considering a wellness practice, the school might consider a different plan based upon where it believes its school culture (or its student population) is, related to wellness.

10. Simple, Fun Ways to Stay Active at Home

For former NFL and Ohio State University football star Tom Cousineau, staying active at home is a family motto. No sitting around watching television in his household. He and the kids pick fun activities that they can do and enjoy together in order to remain active and fit. He said, “Many people use the excuse of ‘it is too cold outside,’ but we just bundle up and walk or hike, or do inside fun activities like seeing who can do the most jumping jacks in a minute or stand on their head the longest!” In the midst of their busy lives, the Cousineaus find time to prepare fresh, nutritious meals and sit down and eat together as a family.

11. Fitness as a Necessary Discipline

If one is paid to be in top physical shape on a day-to-day basis, then it’s a lot simpler to become just that. But when Tom Cousineau left professional football, he wanted to maintain his health and fitness level; thus, he has assumed a fitness routine that requires tremendous discipline. Cousineau relays that he has gone through times when he could not exercise regularly, and his body suffered the consequences. Now, in order to remain challenged and interested, he changes his workout regularly. He is a role model for his children and for students in Ohio, who admire athletes with his level of ability.



12. Staff Wellness

In order to promote a wellness agenda for students, it also becomes important for a district and a school to support the health and wellness of staff, faculty and administration. This theme arose as a resounding imperative in the Wellness Advisory Council's final discussion. An agenda for addressing the health and wellness of the staff will only contribute to the school's level of ownership in the wellness plan.

Ultimately, staff involvement will be a key to the integrity and sustainability of these important efforts.

HOW TO USE THIS DOCUMENT

To assure that this document serves as a useful guide for district and school leadership in establishing and implementing a wellness policy, the council focused on 11 school outcomes that research shows will support the goals of creating lifelong healthy behaviors and attaining higher academic achievement for all students. These statements of outcomes are:

- Schools provide an environment that offers and promotes healthy and appealing food and drink choices;
- Parents, families and students are educated about healthy lifestyle choices;
- Schools collaborate with public and private entities to promote student wellness;
- Schools maximize their participation in federal child nutrition programs;
- Schools maximize their participation in student fitness and physical activity programs;
- Schools integrate nutrition education and physical activity into their everyday curriculum;
- Schools provide professional development, support and resources for staff about wellness;
- School community leadership demonstrates a commitment to wellness through policies, plans and actions;
- Schools provide a positive dining environment that encourages a pleasant eating experience;
- Schools provide and promote social, noncompetitive fitness and activity opportunities;
- Schools use data to develop, structure and support their wellness plans.

Using these outcomes as a guide, the council gathered best practices from associations, nonprofit organizations, government agencies, schools, universities, businesses and others that have implemented wellness plans or strategies. Many options are included that can serve as first steps or easy, quick "wins" before taking on more comprehensive programs. Each guideline includes a measurable objective, three to five best practices, and several resources to support implementing these practices.

The final section of this document focuses on tools and strategies to support schools in complying with the federal requirement for evaluation components in local wellness policies. Although no comprehensive and holistic wellness evaluation tool exists at this time, this document lists a number of resources, including needs assessments, student surveys and school nutrition surveys. As a follow-up to this document, information available electronically on the Ohio Department of Education Web site will contain additional resources to support evaluation efforts.

We hope that these guidelines support and enhance your work toward wellness. With the many pressures and requirements placed upon schools, we hope that through this work, both now and in the future, we can support the adoption and implementation of meaningful policies and practices that will truly help improve the health and well-being of Ohio students.