

“Find strength in numbers”: Parents’ advice for promoting engagement and advancing school wellness initiatives

Background



Parents play a vital role in their children and adolescents’ health and well-being and are also critical stakeholders in school wellness initiatives. Since the 2006-2007 school year, Congress and the U.S. Department of Agriculture have required that all school districts participating in federal Child Nutrition Programs develop and

implement a local school wellness policy (LWP) that sets forth nutrition and physical activity goals for students.¹ However, no studies explore parents’ perspectives or experiences with LWP implementation and only a limited number of studies examine their perceptions about specific provisions of the LWP, such as school meals.²⁻³ Given the most recent LWP final rule (see box), it is important to understand the experiences and perspectives of this key stakeholder group to advance implementation of LWPs and wellness-related initiatives in school districts.

What Is This Brief About?

This brief highlights recommendations – identified by parents of middle school students – to facilitate parental engagement and implementation of wellness initiatives. These recommendations are targeted toward fellow parents as well as to schools and school districts. These strategies emerged from parents’ experiences and perspectives on wellness, which are described in the Full Report, [“Parent Perspectives on Local School Wellness Policies.”](#)

FINAL RULE FOR LOCAL SCHOOL WELLNESS POLICIES

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010⁴ prompted adoption of a final rule⁵ that renewed and expanded the LWP requirements. The requirements took effect for the 2017-2018 school year and included new provisions such as:

- Policies for food and beverage marketing that allow advertising of only those foods and beverages that meet *Smart Snacks in School*;
- Permission for stakeholders (e.g., parents) to participate in policy development, implementation, review, and updates;
- A requirement that the district annually inform and update the community about the policy’s content, implementation, and any updates; and
- A requirement that the district triennially measure and make available to the public an assessment on implementation, including school compliance, alignment with model wellness policies, and a description of progress made in attaining the wellness policy goals.



Recommendations for Fellow Parents

Parents had a wide range of implementation experiences and offered advice to fellow parents who are working to implement LWPs and/or wellness-related initiatives.

FIND “STRENGTH IN NUMBERS”:

Parents described a range of ways that they recruited fellow parents to join their initiatives.

FORM RELATIONSHIPS WITH SCHOOL PROFESSIONALS.

DON'T GIVE UP!

IMPLEMENTATION TAKES TIME.

Parents advised the need to focus on implementation as a long-term goal.

FORM WELLNESS COMMITTEES.

Wellness committees created formal platforms for parents to advance their initiatives. For one parent in a state with mandated wellness committees, also called School Health Advisory Committees (SHACs), this allowed wellness to be a priority in the district.

ENGAGE PTA/PTO* GROUPS IN WELLNESS INITIATIVES.

Parents described ways that PTAs were supporting LWP implementation and assisting with communications of initiatives.

JOIN A FACEBOOK PARENT GROUP.

Many parents belonged to Facebook groups, an important space for resources and advocacy around wellness and other school-related issues.

DO RESEARCH FOR BEST PRACTICES.

Many parents took the time to do their own research for resources before and during implementation of wellness initiatives.

DON'T CRITICIZE OR COMPLAIN, INSTEAD BE PROACTIVE.

Parents were careful to communicate in solution-oriented, proactive ways with their school or school district professionals.

* Parent Teacher Association/Parent Teacher Organization

If you are saying something alone, you are less likely to be taken seriously. So if they **find other parents that can be allies**...That can help you get a foot in the door.

They're [principals] the decision-maker of the building, so... you have to **show them how you're going to do it**, what your plan is, and how it's not going to cause any more work for them.

You can't expect it all at once. So you're not feeling like if we didn't get what we wanted the first time around, we have an action plan to go back.

I think it's great that it's [School Health Advisory Committees] state mandated, because it really forces the school to **keep health and wellness at the forefront.**

We talk about fundraisers and whatever, but really **the PTA is to get policy implemented**...Parents have power so if it's something worth doing...if you want policy to change, policy doesn't change unless parents make it change.

I find this one [Facebook page] to be extremely helpful... Because **everybody knows something about something.** Talking about school lunches, how schools deal with bullying, how schools deal with exercise.

Look at other school districts in your county or in your state... **See what's out there already** and see if it's working.

You always have to try to partner with the people who **truly have the power** to get things done. So if you start off criticizing the administration and the teachers, they're just going to completely wall you off.

Recommendations for Schools and School Districts

Parents had advice to schools and school districts interested in engaging parents for LWP and/or wellness-related initiative implementation.

COMMUNICATE MORE BROADLY ABOUT WELLNESS-RELATED INITIATIVES.

Most parents stated that they would like to receive more communications about wellness efforts.

DESIGNATE A WELLNESS PERSON.

Many parents recalled being unsure of who to connect with at the school regarding wellness; as a result, parents wished for one point-person or wellness leader. The final rule required that each school district establish “wellness policy leadership” who is responsible for ensuring that the district is in compliance with the policy.⁵

BRIDGE HOME AND SCHOOL ENVIRONMENTS.

Parents noted that schools could better bridge the connection between home and school environments in promoting students’ health. Parents recommended wellness education for parents as one activity to promote bridging the gap.

REDUCE TRANSPORTATION AND CHILDCARE BARRIERS.

One community school district offered childcare and dinner during PTA and wellness committee meetings to facilitate engagement; other parents described challenges of transportation. Thus, parents recommended that school districts – when able – provide childcare and transportation to encourage parent attendance.

MAKE WELLNESS ACCESSIBLE.

Parents suggested that school districts could present wellness in an accessible way that avoids jargon.



I don’t think that most parents would know that our district even has a wellness policy. I think if school districts would ask parents, like that...we’re asking you to be involved, **I think parents would show up.**

I’d love to see [someone] designated as **the person who gets the word out.** You know, the person who could talk more to the kid about the choices that they’re making, and reach out to the families maybe.



I think schools are starting to do a much better job of trying to bridge the gap between home and school, realizing that over the years...that it **helps students and it helps families** to have the two be connected, and understand that it’s almost like an ecosystem for a student, to have that support between the educators and the family.

She’s [fellow mom] **never attended anything at school,** she doesn’t have transportation, and she doesn’t have funds to access transportation to do so. And for some families, childcare might be a barrier.

Stay away from acronyms because people don’t remember what they stand for and nobody knows what you’re talking about...People come to these meetings and they’ll just talk over everybody’s heads...So I don’t want to say ‘dumb it down,’ because that’s not what I mean either, but be aware that not everybody knows what you’re talking about...

Methods Summary

This policy brief summarizes findings from a qualitative study of 30 parents from 15 states who participated in telephone interviews conducted between October 2017- February 2018. More detailed information about study methods can be found [here](#).

Resources

- National Wellness Policy Study www.go.uic.edu/NWPSproducts
- Action for Healthy Kids <http://www.actionforhealthykids.org/>
- Parents for Healthy Kids <https://parentsforhealthykids.org/>
- National Parent Teacher Association (PTA): School Wellness Policies <https://www.pta.org/home/programs/Healthy-Lifestyles/School-Wellness-Policies>
- Parent Attitudes about Food Marketing to Children (UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity) <http://www.uconnruddcenter.org/files/Pdfs/Rudd%20Center%20Parent%20Attitudes%20Report%202017.pdf>
- USDA Local School Wellness Policy Toolkit (<https://www.fns.usda.gov/local-school-wellness-policy-outreach-toolkit>)

FUNDING ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This brief, prepared from parent interviews, was written by staff from the National Wellness Policy Study at the University of Illinois at Chicago and the University of Connecticut's Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity as part of the United States Department of Agriculture School Wellness Policy Cooperative Agreement (USDA-FNS-OPS-SWP-15-IL-01). The contents of this publication do not necessarily reflect the view or policies of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the University of Illinois at Chicago, or the University of Connecticut nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement. Graphic design and layout by Claudia M. Grosz (www.claudiegrosz.com). Photos obtained from <https://www.flickr.com/photos/usdagov/>.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Asada Y, Read M, Schwartz M, Chiqui JF. "Find strength in numbers": Parents' advice for advancing local school wellness initiatives. Chicago, IL: National Wellness Policy Study, Institute for Health Research and Policy, University of Illinois at Chicago, 2019, www.go.uic.edu/NWPSproducts.

**INSTITUTE FOR
HEALTH RESEARCH
AND POLICY**



REFERENCES

- ¹ Local school wellness policy implementation under the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, final rule. 81 Federal Register 50151. 2016. <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2016-07-29/pdf/2016-17230.pdf>.
- ² Golembiewski EH, Askelson NM, Elchert DM, Leicht EA, Scheidel CA, Delger PJ. (2013). From policy to practice: Parent perceptions of the 2010 federal school lunch mandate. *The Journal of Child Nutrition & Management*, 39(1),1-13.
- ³ Ohri-vachaspati P. Parental perception of the nutritional quality of school meals and its association with students' school lunch participation. (2013). *Appetite*. 2014;74:44-47.
- ⁴ Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010. PL 111-296; 124 Stat 3183. 2010 (111th Congress). <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-111publ296/html/PLAW-111publ296.htm>
- ⁵ Local school wellness policy implementation under the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, final rule. 81 Federal Register 50151. 2016. <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2016-07-29/pdf/2016-17230.pdf>.

