

School Wellness Policy and Practice: Meeting the Needs of Low-Income Students

February 2006

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The Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) is the leading national organization working for more effective public and private policies to eradicate domestic hunger and undernutrition. Sign up for FRAC's weekly News Digest at <http://www.frac.org>.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This guide was written by Shireen Cama, Bill Emerson National Hunger Fellow, Lynn Parker, Madeleine Levin, and Crystal FitzSimons, with assistance and contributions from Lucinda Megill and Katy Mastman, Bill Emerson National Hunger Fellows, Alexis Bylander and James D. Weill.

FRAC gratefully acknowledges the primary support provided for this guide by S. Daniel Abraham and the UPS Foundation, and the principal sponsors of our work on obesity and wellness -- California Endowment; Robert Wood Johnson Foundation; Kraft Foods, Inc; and Charles Stewart Mott Foundation.

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Executive Summary: School Wellness Policy and Practice

Experts agree that there is an epidemic of overweight and obesity among American children. Since 1980 the percentage of children who are overweight has more than doubled, and among adolescents the rate has more than tripled. Overweight is a risk factor for health conditions such as diabetes and is associated with problems such as poor self-esteem. While the obesity epidemic is being felt in all communities, prevalence of obesity among school-aged children is just as high in some low-income communities and has more profound negative impacts because of inadequate or unavailable health care and lack of resources for improved nutrition.

Congress has given communities a potentially important new tool to address this problem. The Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004 requires every school district participating in the National School Lunch and/or School Breakfast Programs to establish a local wellness policy by the start of the 2006-2007 school year. The law states that schools must set goals for:

- Nutritional standards of foods available in schools;
- Nutrition education;
- Physical activity; and
- Other school-based activities designed to promote student wellness.

Also, the legislation requires that a broad group of local stakeholders be involved in designing the policy to ensure that the diverse needs of the community are met, including members of the school board, school administrators, representatives of the school food authority, parents, students, and members of the public.

This guide is designed to help schools respond to the special nutrition concerns of low-income students in their wellness policies. It is intended for anyone who wants to be an active participant in the process of developing a wellness policy – such as a teacher or school staff person, school administrator, nutritionist, parent, student, health professional or community member. The guide addresses the following key issues:

- **Family and Community Involvement** – Low-income families in particular may face barriers to involvement in their children’s schools, such as non-traditional or long work hours and long commutes on public transportation to and from work. In recognition of this, special efforts should be made to involve low-income parents and key community stakeholders in the development of school wellness policies.
- **Increasing Access to School Meals** – Adequate nutrition is necessary for good health and academic achievement. Low-income children are much more likely than other children to live in households that have inadequate food budgets and therefore, are more likely to be hungry or at risk for hunger. Schools wellness policies should include the expansion of participation in school meals and afterschool snack programs to insure that no child goes hungry, and that all children have their nutritional needs met during the day.
- **Establishing Nutritional Guidelines for All School Foods** – While the quality of school nutrition is important for all children, it is particularly important for low-income children

who may have limited access to nutritious foods outside of school because of financial constraints at home.

- **Addressing Cost Concerns about Changing Competitive Food Policies** - With tight budgets, many school districts, including many with schools in low-income areas, have come to rely on vending contracts and competitive foods to fund school activities and even help run the food service program. Schools can make changes without a significant loss of revenue that restrict or ban certain types of unhealthy foods, and engage in careful marketing of more healthful products.
- **Increasing Physical Activity and Recreational Opportunities**-- Low-income children often have fewer opportunities to be physically active. Concerns about safety in low-income communities, and a lack of adequate recreational facilities, can limit children's opportunities to be physically active. Schools (and school-based afterschool programs) play a very important role in children's health by providing no-cost opportunities for non-sedentary recreation and vigorous athletic activities in a safe environment.

Local school wellness policies are an important new tool to promote healthy eating and physical activity through changes in school programs and environments. It would be a shame if low-income children and communities are not helped as much as possible because they don't know about local wellness policies, or they don't hear about how to get involved in their school's wellness policy development, or their school districts don't pay adequate attention to the particular needs of low-income children. School communities have an exciting opportunity to create a plan for positive change that is specific to their individual needs, goals, and resources. **We hope this guide will be a useful supplement to the many existing tools available for designing a local wellness policy, by providing strategies that address the unique needs of low-income students and families**

Facts on America's Children and Poverty

Poverty and food insecurity among American children continue to be serious national problems. Since 1999, food insecurity has increased by 3 million households, including 1.4 million households with children. Current statistics on American children and poverty paint a clear picture:

- 18 percent of children live in poverty (with family incomes below 100 percent of the U.S. poverty level)
- 39 percent live in households with income below 200 percent of the U.S. poverty level
- 19 percent of children live in food-insecure households*

** A household is food insecure when resources are so limited that households are: running out of food, reducing the quality of food their family eat, feeding their children unbalanced diets, or skipping meals so their children can eat in order to adjust to the economic problems threatening the adequacy of the family's diet.*

Facts from *Kids Count Data Book 2005* and *Household Food Security in the United States, 2004*

1. Introduction: Local Wellness Policies and Increasing Access to Healthy Nutrition and Physical Activity

Child health and education should be leading concerns in every community. Research abounds on the link between health and academic achievement. Studies show that children who experience poor nutrition and hunger – which can be present in underweight, normal weight, or overweight children – tend to have lower standardized test scores and show less academic achievement overall than their more well-nourished peers. Children who do not receive adequate nutrition lack what is essential for optimal cognitive development and function.

Research tells us that:

- Many of the behaviors that can lead to classroom disruptions – such as shortened attention span, irritability, fatigue, and difficulty concentrating – can be linked to hunger and inadequate nutrition.
- Well-nourished children who are not hungry make fewer trips to the school nurse’s office (trips that take them away from the classroom and cost the school money) and have better school attendance and less tardiness. Increased student attendance means more learning opportunities for students (and more state funding for their schools).
- Forty-seven percent of school-aged children and adolescents are overweight or obese. This startling figure translates into potentially serious health consequences: high blood pressure and cholesterol, type 2 diabetes, heart problems, depression, and anxiety. These problems stay with children throughout their lives, as the majority remain overweight or become obese in adulthood. Health care that includes effective prevention, early diagnosis and adequate treatment is less available to many low-income families and their children.
- Children who are properly nourished and physically fit are better able to participate actively in their classes and contribute to the experience of their fellow students and the entire school community.

The local wellness policy requirement emerged out of a push within Congress to respond to increased rates of obesity and to improve the health of America’s youth. As a result of a new provision in the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004, Public Law 108-265, every school district participating in the National School Lunch and/or School Breakfast Programs must establish a local wellness policy by the start of the 2006-2007 school year. (Refer to the Appendices for a copy of the law.) In passing this legislation, Congress recognized the vital role that schools can play in ensuring the health and wellness of their students.

The local school wellness policies are an important new tool to address obesity and promote healthy eating and physical activity through changes in school environments. Development of a local wellness policy offers schools an exciting opportunity to create a plan for positive change that is specific to their individual needs, goals, and resources. The law states that schools must set goals for: nutritional standards of foods available in schools; nutrition education; physical activity; and other school-based activities that are designed to promote student wellness. Also, the legislation

requires that a broad group of local stakeholders be involved in designing the policy to ensure that the diverse needs of the community are met. It is important to keep in mind that responsibility for the local wellness policy is not meant to fall solely on the shoulders of the school food director or the superintendent. The wellness policy requires a coordinated, group effort that should include low-income parents and students, and school personnel who care especially about them and their needs.

School districts with a high percentage of low-income students have the opportunity to develop local wellness policies that meet the specific needs of their students. While the obesity epidemic is being felt in all communities, prevalence of obesity among school-aged children is just as high, and has more profound negative impacts, in some low-income communities and communities of color. This is due to a variety of factors:

- Families may lack resources to purchase a healthy, balanced diet;
- Many ethnic minority and low-income communities lack access to affordable and high-quality healthy foods – especially whole grains, low-fat dairy and meat, and fresh fruits and vegetables – because there aren’t many supermarkets or grocery stores in their neighborhoods, and because healthier food tends to be less affordable in many low-income communities;
- Low-income children often have fewer opportunities to be physically active. Concerns about safety and a lack of adequate athletic facilities in low-income communities can limit opportunities for children to play outside. Also, low-income families have fewer financial resources to participate in organized recreational activities.

(For more information on the obesity epidemic and its relationship to food insecurity and poverty, see *Obesity, Food Insecurity and the Federal Nutrition Programs: Understanding the Linkages* at http://www.frac.org/pdf/obesity05_paper.pdf.) Schools play a very important role in low-income children’s health by providing an affordable source of healthy food and no-cost opportunities for physical activity in a safe environment.

At the same time, schools that serve low-income communities face barriers of their own.

Among other obstacles, these schools are often faced with tighter budgets, higher staff turnover, lower academic achievement, greater pressures to boost test scores, and more limited parental and community involvement. These very real issues could impede the effectiveness of the local wellness policy in both its development and implementation. Yet the potential is there for low-income students (and parents, teachers and administrators) in these schools to benefit enormously from a robust wellness policy. In the United States, 35 percent of school-age children live in households with incomes below 185 percent of the federal poverty line (U. S. Census data, 2005). They and their families often face the double burdens of poverty and an environment hostile to good nutrition and physical activity. There is much that schools can do to help.

This guide is designed to provide particular assistance to stakeholders in schools that serve large numbers of low-income students. It is intended for anyone who wants to be an active participant in the process of developing a wellness policy – such as a teacher or school staff person, school board member, nutritionist, health professional, school administrator, student, parent or community member. The guide begins by giving suggestions and tips on how to engage different

members of the school community in the wellness policy process, and then moves on to address some of the required components of the policy and possible challenges along the way, such as increasing access to nutritious food for all students, changing the nutrition environment of the school, addressing financial concerns, and developing goals for nutrition education and physical activity. There are many resources available for designing a local wellness policy. This guide is designed to supplement those resources by being uniquely tailored to schools that serve low-income communities.

2. Beginning the Process

Developing a local wellness policy for a school district may seem like a daunting task, but it doesn't have to be. Creating a local wellness policy offers an opportunity to take a look at the district's existing policies and make beneficial changes or additions. There is not just one good way to develop and implement a wellness policy. Remember that a policy should be designed to match a district's specific needs, resources, and goals.

In a district or schools with a significant proportion of low-income students, their particular concerns should be one paramount factor, and will be addressed throughout this guide. Here are key steps to creating a local wellness policy:

Develop a School Wellness Team

- **Create a wellness policy committee.** In some districts there may already be an existing committee working on school wellness related issues (such as a school health council or a Team Nutrition group). Build upon the progress it has made and the relationships that have been formed.
- **Make sure a variety of stakeholders are participating on the committee.** A diverse group of people should be convened to develop the wellness policy. The wellness policy committee's activities can be advertised through event calendars, bulletin boards, school websites, PTA phone chains, daily announcements, local newspapers and e-mail. It is essential to include people who will represent and pay close attention to the needs of low-income students.

Plan and Write the Policy

- **Look at model policies and guides, like this one and others.** This will provide a starting point that will be comprehensive and take into account the federal requirements. Look for pointers that are especially relevant to low-income children.
- **Assess the school district's needs.** In order to know what changes to make, the current situation must be understood as clearly as possible. What are the special needs of low-income children? Of children from diverse cultures? Of children with disabilities? Of children in different age groups? Are they being met?
- **Set achievable goals that address the pressing issues for children and the policy requirements set out in the legislation.** While it is wonderful to have a very ambitious policy proposal, make sure that the goals are do-able. Be sure to define a timeframe for when goals will be met. Put high priority on goals that are most likely to help children most in need.

Resources for Planning and Writing Local Wellness Policies

- ***The Local Process: How to Create and Implement a Local Wellness Policy.*** This page on the Local Wellness Policy Section of the US Department of Agriculture's Team Nutrition website will walk you through each of the steps necessary for developing a wellness policy and has resources to help you carry out each step. www.fns.usda.gov/tn/Healthy/wellnesspolicy_steps.html
- ***The School Health Index (SHI).*** The SHI was developed by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) as a self-assessment and planning tool that schools can use to improve their overall health and safety policies and programs. The tool is free and has been used successfully by school districts across the country to develop comprehensive, coordinated and effective school health policies. <http://apps.nccd.cdc.gov/shi/>
- ***Fit, Healthy, and Ready to Learn.*** The National Association of State Boards of Education created this publication as a guide to writing policies on healthy eating, physical activity and other issues related to student health. <http://www.nasbe.org/HealthySchools/fithealthy.html>

Implement and Evaluate the Policy

- **Keep records of how the policy is being implemented.** The local wellness policy is meant to be a living document that the committee will return to and improve upon over the years. Maintaining records will allow a basis for comparison. After the district has adopted and started applying the policy, periodically take time to evaluate how well the policy is being carried out, and whether the policy itself is adequate. Ask for feedback from everyone involved. Is the policy successful in meeting the special needs of low-income children? **If necessary, make changes to the policy to reinforce its objectives.**

3. Assembling the Team

Positive improvements in the school health environment will require significant support from students, parents, school administrators and staff, and the local community in order to succeed.

Involving a diverse group in developing the local wellness policy will enrich the discussion and bring different perspectives to the table, helping to ensure that the final policy is one that works well for schools, students and the community. It also helps to ensure that the whole school community will support the final policy. It is especially important in the development of school wellness policies to engage low-income students and parents, community-based organizations working with low-income people, and health providers serving low-income patients. They will be able to bring into the process the particular problems, stresses and opportunities involved in developing wellness policies that have maximum positive impact for low-income children.

The wellness policy legislation states that the following stakeholders must be involved in the process of creating a district's local wellness policy: members of the school board; school administrators; representatives of the school food authority; parents; students; and members of the public. However, if the wellness policy is going to achieve the most support, a broader set of stakeholders should be involved, including people from other areas of the school. This is especially important for schools serving low-income students, where children and their families face many obstacles to good health. The local wellness policy committee also could include school nurses, classroom teachers, consumer science teachers, physical education teachers, school social workers, and guidance counselors.

When approaching stakeholders about the local wellness policies and asking them to become involved, it is vital to think about the policies' benefits and potential problems from their perspective. What are the issues that are most important to them? What will they consider when evaluating a policy? What personal or professional resources can they bring to the table?

This section will review the key constituencies involved in the development of school wellness policies and provide tips on how to engage them in the process.

3.1 School Board Members

School board members are central to the local wellness policy process because they have ultimate authority over such policies. Members of the school board must address many critical issues including academic achievement, student safety and the financial viability of the school system itself. School board members need to understand how these concerns are linked to student health and nutrition, and the vital role a school wellness policy can play.

- **Get to know the school board members and board procedures.** Most school board members are elected by residents of the school district, meaning they are accountable to the community. Some school boards are required to work with the mayor, city council, or county supervisors on budgetary issues.
- **Identify school board members who care especially about low-income children.** These members will be more aware of, and concerned about, the nutrition and health issues facing low-income families in the community, including access to healthy food and safe recreational opportunities.
- **Research how particular board members have acted on past health and nutrition issues.** Recruit members who will be the best advocates to join or work with the local wellness policy committee. The school board may already have a health and wellness committee or staff assigned to cover the topic. Find out who they are and try to work with them. Gauge their interest in the needs of low-income children.
- **Make the connection between potential wellness policies and existing district and school policies and initiatives.** Individual schools in the district may already have some health and wellness programs. Putting all of these programs under one policy, and making necessary additions, including targeting to meet the needs of low-income families, can lead to better management, increased sustainability and broader availability to all children in the school district.
- **Find out about the health policies and regulations that school boards are adopting in neighboring districts and across the state.** When a school board sees other school districts making positive changes to improve the health and nutrition of low-income students, it may be more motivated to follow suit. See also the Action for Healthy Kids *Wellness Policy Tool* at http://www.actionforhealthykids.org/resources_wp.php for a searchable database of nutrition and physical activity policies in each state in the U.S.
- **Learn about the fiscal concerns of school board members, and how they may help or hurt the chances of gaining adoption of new wellness policies.** See the section in this guide titled *Addressing Cost Concerns about Changing Competitive Food Policies* (page 41), for additional guidance.

- **Encourage community members to get involved.** Ask parents, teachers, students, health professionals and community members to send letters to the school board in support of the proposed wellness policies, and to testify at school board meetings to demonstrate widespread support. Make sure that low-income families are represented. School boards can also hold public hearings to gather ideas and opinions from members of the community.

3.2 School Administrators

School administrators (including the district superintendent, principals and school business officials) play a crucial role in the local wellness policy process because they are responsible for overseeing implementation of district policies. Many school districts that have been able to implement successful health and wellness programs say that the support of the district superintendent or principal was critical to their success. When other members of the school community see that the school administrators are interested in the local wellness policy, they will want to get on board as well. Also, getting the support of the school superintendent can help influence school board decisions.

- **School administrators have many factors to consider when it comes to students.** Nutrition and physical activity are not always at the top of their lists. Together with the school board, the superintendent is responsible for improving student achievement and for ensuring that the district and all of its programs and policies are financially sound. Wellness committee members must help administrators understand the importance of the school nutrition programs, nutrition education and physical activity to improving student health and academic achievement. Particularly administrators struggling to improve schools with large percentages of low-income children need more information about the role that hunger reduction and nutrition improvement can play.
- **Highlight existing needs in the community.** Focus the school administrator’s attention on wellness issues by informing them about the nutrition and health problems that their most vulnerable students are likely to face, and how working to solve those problems in the school setting will move the school forward academically and financially.
- **Student safety and discipline are key concerns for public school administrators.** Experience suggests that comprehensive school health programs can lead to lower suspension and expulsion rates, fewer disciplinary hearings, and fewer assignments to alternative schools. If students’ basic needs are met, and they are equipped with skills to enhance their health and well-being, they will feel more confident and less frustrated, making them less likely to “act out.” A study of the Maryland Meals for Achievement Program, which offers an in-classroom, free breakfast to all students, found that children who ate school breakfast had lower anxiety levels, and less hyperactivity, depression, and psychosocial dysfunction.

“If we are serious about saving a generation of kids, ensuring that not one of them is left behind, we must see that health and achievement go hand in hand. Only when children are healthy and safe will we be able to focus on improving their academic performance.”

Pat Cooper, Superintendent, McComb Separate School District, McComb, MS

3.3 School Food Service Staff

The local wellness policy offers a golden opportunity for school food service directors and staff to be a part of important changes that will affect the entire school environment. Moreover, by being involved in the local wellness policy process, school food service personnel can help make the decisions that will ultimately govern how they operate their cafeterias. Because of their experience with nutrition program regulations and operations, school food service staff have a great deal to contribute to the development of local wellness policies:

- **School food service directors and staff are the experts within the school community.** This is a perfect opportunity for them to exhibit their understanding and knowledge of nutrition program regulations and what makes up a healthy diet.
- **Many food service staff members live in the communities in which they work, and are low-income themselves.** They know and care about the struggles that families face every day to find the resources to adequately feed their children. They are highly motivated to see that no child in the school goes hungry, and that every child consumes a healthful meal. They are in the cafeteria with the students every day, and see and hear firsthand how the children react to the school's nutrition environment and to the food served. By improving the attractiveness and nutritional quality of school meals, the food service staff can help increase participation in healthy school meals, reduce hunger as a barrier to learning, and even reduce the stigma that is sometimes associated with participation in the child nutrition programs.
- **School food service directors are expected not only to serve healthy food to children, but also to generate enough revenue from food sales to cover expenditures and, sometimes, even make money for further program investments.** Thus, some food service directors may hesitate to make changes to established revenue streams (such as vending machines and á la carte lines). It is important to let them know about the many school districts that have made healthy changes in these areas without losing money. See the section in this guide on *Addressing Cost Concerns about Changing Competitive Food Policies* for more information.
- **Wellness policies can create opportunities for food service staff to introduce new foods, incorporate nutrition education into school meal times, and be available to answer questions that students may have about nutrition.** School food service staff could work with teachers and administrators to coordinate what is being served in the cafeteria with what is being taught in the classroom, visit classrooms, and help teach nutrition education.

3.4 Parents

Parent involvement is key to success. Parents are the most effective advocates on their children's behalf because they know their children best – including their eating and health habits and the challenges that they face in and outside of school. Their passion and determination can keep a group going when challenges are faced or problems seem difficult to solve.

Low-income parents are critical players on wellness policy committees. The federal school nutrition programs are crucial supports for their children, especially during periods when they are struggling to make ends meet. Parents know that nutrition programs can help make the difference between hungry, undernourished children and healthy children ready to learn. They will be particularly interested in increasing access to nutrition programs and improving their overall nutritional quality and attractiveness.

Working parents are very busy people. It is crucial to make an extra effort to get parents involved in the local wellness policy process. Many families, and low-income families in particular, may face time pressures because of nontraditional or long work hours, or long commutes to and from work. One good strategy to bring busy parents into the school is inviting them to an evening supper meeting to talk about the wellness policy and get their input. Children can be included in the meal and then cared for by volunteers during the meeting. Providing the evening meal and child care removes two major hurdles to families being able to participate in evening meetings.

Different outreach strategies can inform families about how they can get involved. Newsletters, phone calls, personal letters, local newspapers, and news shows are all good ways to reach out to parents.

Varied meeting times allow parents who work at different times of the day to attend at least some of the meetings. For those who cannot make the meetings, make sure to offer them opportunities to express their opinions by asking for input from all parents by phone, email, letter, suggestion cards in a box near the school office, or participation in “town hall” style meetings.

3.5 Students

Student input is very important because the wellness policy will influence student behaviors and choices. Students should be part of the process from the beginning. Providing students with an appropriate sense of program ownership will improve their acceptance, participation and overall education.

Low-income students are vital voices in this discussion. The nutritional quality, attractiveness and accessibility of the nutrition programs and the overall school wellness policies are key to their present and future health. Yet in many communities the federal school nutrition programs are not available, or if they are, they may be stigmatized as “poor kids’ programs.” Unfortunately, that connotation can be a major barrier to student participation. Student involvement is an important ingredient in effective efforts to promote the nutrition programs as important and welcoming to all students. Students also can help create and implement processes that make programs more accessible, like encouraging “grab and go” breakfasts in high schools.

Because low-income students are more likely to participate in school nutrition programs, they are especially sensitive to the issues of attractiveness, healthfulness and cultural acceptability of meals and snacks. In addition, because they may not have access to health clubs or distant recreational facilities, they are likely to be more interested in creating opportunities for themselves to be physically active in the school setting. They can become sources of new ideas and champions for change and information exchange in these areas.

Involve as many student leaders as possible. Work with student government representatives and try to tap into other students who may not hold traditional leadership roles, but who may want to be involved with the local wellness policy. For instance, ask the consumer science teacher which students seem to take the most interest in the cooking classes; talk to the athletic directors about which students show leadership characteristics on the sports teams; and ask for participation from the school’s young entrepreneurs, who may have ideas on how to revamp school stores. The wellness policy will affect every student, so every student should have the opportunity to be involved.

Think of students as customers. Ask them (through surveys, polls or focus groups) what foods they would like to see in the cafeterias, vending machines and school stores. Hold taste tests and ask for input so that students can vote on the healthy foods that they like best. Students will be more enthusiastic about the food available in school if they see that they will still have choices – they will simply be healthier choices.

Students Are the Key to Good Nutrition

Students have been the driving force behind the nutritious changes at East Middle School in Great Falls, Montana. They started by selling healthier snacks (such as crackers, fruit muffins, and granola bars) at their school store. Based on the successful sales of the healthy products, students have been able to influence what is served on the á la carte line and in vending machines as well. To advertise the changes, students developed daily nutrition announcements that have helped create a significant change in the overall attitudes of the student body toward healthier food choices. Students listen to their peers.

3.6 Community Members

Community involvement can greatly enhance the quality and sustainability of local wellness policies, especially in schools with limited financial and staff resources. When community organizations are invited to be part of the initial planning stages of the local wellness policy, they can contribute years of on-the-ground experience with the most important issues facing the committee, and will feel committed and responsible for playing a major role in implementation and on-going support.

State and local anti-hunger organizations can play an especially useful role and act as an invaluable resource in school wellness policy development. These groups work to raise awareness in the community about hunger among low-income families; help to start, expand and improve nutrition programs; and carry out outreach and promotion about the programs, encouraging broader participation. They know the rules that govern program operations, are listened to by public officials, and know about model programs across the country. They are excited about the enormous opportunity provided by school wellness policy development to expand and enhance the quality of nutrition programs and improve the health and nutrition of low-income families.

In addition, many other community members – including health care providers, law-enforcement officers, clergy, business owners, and taxpayers in general – have a vested interest in the health and wellness of the community’s children. Be sure to check with the superintendent’s office to find out which community organizations already are working with the district, and then consider the following:

- **Public health advocacy organizations** are very likely to be focusing on changing the health and nutrition environment in low-income communities in order to combat obesity. Try to find such organizations to work with in the area; start with the Action for Healthy Kids state team.
- **Health insurance and managed care companies** also can be good partners and are funding wellness programs in schools across the nation. Improved health among students and school staff translates into decreased costs for the insurance companies. Staff wellness is a big part of student wellness: healthier staff will be more effective teachers and will be good role models for healthy habits.

“Good Morning, Power Eaters. Remember, Fruits and Veggies Rule. Less than 5 a Day is Uncool.”

This is the mantra of the Power-Eater program: a partnership between the Buffalo Public Schools and a group of managed-care plans. The companies recognized the need to address the health situation in Buffalo, which is home to the highest rates of stroke and heart disease in New York State. The initiative utilizes multi-media promotion to encourage students to eat more fruits and vegetables and make healthier choices. The initiative is funded by almost \$500,000 in grants from local and national foundations. A Buffalo advertising agency has donated approximately \$30,000 in in-kind services.

- **Health care providers** (pediatricians, nurses, dietitians, dentists) can help make the argument for improved health and nutrition standards by bringing their professional experience to the table. For instance, the head of the local hospital in McComb County, Mississippi, was eager to help change the school health environment because of the high cost of providing medical treatment to the community's uninsured children who received most of their primary care in the emergency room. Health care providers also may be willing to donate services to schools. The county health department can schedule regular visits to the school health clinic. Social service workers can help train school guidance counselors to work with children and families on health and nutrition issues. WIC clinic staff, while generally focused on very young children, have great nutrition expertise to offer.
- **Local Education Funds (LEFs)** are community-based organizations that work closely with public school administrators, teachers, and boards, and partner with parents, community leaders, businesses, and students to bring about educational improvements. To find an LEF, visit the Public Education Network at <http://www.publiceducation.org/lefsearch.asp>.
- **National associations with state and local chapters** (like the PTA, NAACP, National Council of La Raza, 100 Black Men of America, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, American Diabetes Association, American Cancer Society, American Heart Association, and American Lung Association) and professional groups (like the National Medical Association, American Dental Association, and American Dietetic Association) have expertise in many of the chronic health problems that face youth as a result of unhealthy habits. They also may hold health fairs that students and their families can attend.
- **Children's services providers** (like Boys and Girls Clubs, YMCA/YWCA, Police Athletic Leagues, park and recreation departments, Camp Fire Boys and Girls, 4-H, Urban League, Salvation Army, Girls, Inc., and Girl/Boy Scouts of America) can offer activities and spaces for wellness programming and have afterschool recreation and physical fitness programs in which students can participate. Many of them would welcome the opportunity to operate programs at school sites.
- **University centers and departments and local and state governmental agencies** (like the state's Cooperative Extension Service, which seeks to translate research into programs that help local communities), especially those involved in nutrition, physical activity, and education, can provide research and resources to back up claims about the importance of paying attention to children's nutrition and health. They can share strategies for improving school food, increasing physical activity, and improving and expanding nutrition education. Volunteer/community service offices at local colleges and universities can also be helpful in implementing these programs.

- **Local businesses** can contribute in-kind services and funding to help cover the cost of programs. Many businesses have community involvement campaigns to give back to the local area. Some could help the school district design effective marketing strategies for increasing school meal participation. Sporting goods companies and restaurants may be able to donate in-kind services. Businesses can also set precedents for supporting health promotion, such as allowing employees time off to attend health-related school events or wellness meetings.

Working with Community Businesses

Elementary school students in Philadelphia say that they visit corner stores every day, spending up to \$2 per trip on foods high in fat and sugar. The Philadelphia-based Food Trust has started a campaign using social marketing and education to increase demand for healthier snacks in corner stores and works with corner store owners to help make these snacks more readily available. Involving the corner store owners in the wellness policy committee could result in a fruitful cooperation where the store owner and school could agree on what foods should be available for sale to children in stores near schools. For more information visit <http://www.thefoodtrust.org>.

3.7 Teachers

The largest group in a district (after the students) is the teachers. Any policy decision will have an impact on their classrooms, so it is important to include them in policy-making and implementation decisions. If they are behind the changes that the school wellness committee is proposing, the policy is much more likely to be taken seriously.

Teachers, probably more than any other school employees, experience the negative impact of hunger and inadequate nutrition on school-children and understand the enormous potential of school wellness policies to help all children, and especially children from low-income families. Teachers understand why increased access to school breakfasts and afterschool snacks is a key component for all school wellness policies. They have experienced how difficult it is for hungry students to focus on their lessons, and how disruptive hungry students can be. Teachers also see every day the importance of physical activity on a regular basis for every student, especially students who lack access to recreational activities outside of school. They know it makes for healthier, more attentive students, and teachers believe in the transformative power of effective education, including nutrition education.

Teachers can provide valuable insights. Teachers have important experience and expertise, especially in the areas of student motivation, curriculum, and the day-to-day functioning of the school building and classrooms. They can provide valuable insights into trends in student achievement and behaviors. Teachers are a valuable resource on how to work with and encourage students to get involved.

In addition, wellness policies can improve the classroom environment for teachers. As teachers get involved in the process, they can learn how their classrooms will benefit from healthier kids. It is crucial to be proactive in getting teachers involved. Invite teachers to share their ideas, concerns and questions. Science, physical education and health teachers can share their expertise at these meetings. Ask teachers to nominate or elect a representative to be a part of the policy creation team.

Teachers may feel overwhelmed by wellness policies. Like school administrators, teachers are under pressure to produce improved academic performance. Many teachers are struggling with added curriculum requirements, paperwork, and the sheer numbers of students in their classrooms. If teachers are not involved in the planning, or if the information is presented in the wrong way, local wellness initiatives could be seen as just another burden on already stressed teachers.

A Key to Success: Staff Wellness

Focusing on staff wellness can help teachers and other staff members serve as role models for students. Staff wellness initiatives also can increase support among staff for wellness programs school-wide. Ideas for wellness activities should come from the staff themselves, but here are some ideas from successful schools:

- Walking clubs before school, during lunch, or after school
- Weight management meetings on school property
- Smoking cessation or healthy cooking classes after school

3.8 School Nurses

School nurses not only have medical expertise, but also day-to-day knowledge that comes from seeing students who are suffering from a range of health problems – some of which can be addressed through changes in the school nutrition environment. They can offer valuable insights at the beginning of the committee's process on the current wellness status of the school. They can provide anecdotal and statistical data about the health and habits of students in the district. They also can help collect information during the implementation and evaluation stages of the policy.

The school nurse has the potential to be a wellness leader in the school. In addition to the health-related duties of nurses, they can be involved in school nutrition services by providing education about nutritious foods, and encouraging the inclusion of healthy foods on menus, in vending machines, and for classroom snacks. They can be a valuable support to physical educators by providing information to students about physical activity, and helping to design appropriate programs for students with special health concerns. Most importantly, they can speak authoritatively to school officials about the special importance of the availability of healthful school meals and snacks, and opportunities for physical activity, for children from families with limited financial resources.

A 2001 National Association of School Nurses Position Statement on Coordinated School Health Programs describes the various ways that school nurses can be involved and take leadership in school health initiatives. The entire Position Statement can be found at <http://www.nasn.org/positions/2001pscoordinatedprogram.htm>. (The Coordinated School Health Program model was developed by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and has been implemented in districts across the country to address the health concerns of school communities. It consists of 8 components for a healthy school environment. The CDC website information on this appears at <http://www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/CSHP/index.htm>.)

4. Increasing Access to School Meals

Schools that want to do everything they can to support the health and educational potential of their students, and particularly low-income students, must make increased availability, accessibility, and participation in school nutrition programs the very highest priorities in their wellness policies. Adequate nutrition and freedom from hunger are absolutely essential for good health and academic achievement, and yet these goals are not always achievable for families who are struggling to make ends meet. Federally-funded school lunches and breakfasts, afterschool snacks and meals, and meals and snacks provided in summer programs can make critical nutritional contributions to children’s health and education every week of the year. **This section will address the federal school breakfast and lunch programs; afterschool and summer snacks and meals are addressed in a separate section later in this guide (page 52).**

Schools should address the expansion of participation in school meals and snacks in their wellness policies to ensure that no child goes hungry, and to improve the nutritional status and health of students. Federally-funded school nutrition programs must meet nutrition standards, so food from school meals is likely to be healthier than most alternatives, and is certainly an improvement over the alternative of having nothing to eat.

Increasing participation in school meals means a better financial bottom line for schools with many low-income students. School food service managers are able to realize economies of scale when they increase the number of meals served, and schools receive financial support from the federal government for every meal served through the school nutrition programs. Schools that serve at least 40 percent free and reduced-price lunches also can get an extra “severe need” reimbursement for every breakfast served. Federal support also comes in the form of commodities to use for the school meals programs. Some states also offer additional financial support above the federal reimbursements. So, the more children eating school meals, the more money the schools get. This assistance translates into more funds for schools to spend on improving the nutritional quality and attractiveness of the meals, and upgrading the overall operation of the school food service, including repair and replacement of old equipment and more emphasis on on-site preparation of fresh foods.

Sample Wellness Policies: Accessing School Meals

- Schools will insure that all children eligible for free and reduced-price meals will have the opportunity to participate in the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs through frequent outreach to families and the community, and coordination with the local Food Stamp Program, Medicaid Agency, and agencies serving migrant, homeless and runaway youth.
- Schools will make every effort to eliminate any social stigma attached to, and prevent the overt identification of, students who are eligible for free and reduced-price school meals. Toward this end, schools may utilize electronic identification and payment systems; provide meals at no charge to all children, regardless of income; promote the availability of school meals to all students; and/or use nontraditional methods for serving school meals, such as "grab and go" or classroom breakfast.
- Schools with a high percentage of free and reduced-price eligible students (75 percent or higher) will move to a universal free meal system, taking advantage of Provision 2 of the National School Lunch Program. Those with a lower percentage will consider eliminating the reduced-price category for school lunch and breakfast, to increase the accessibility of healthy food to all low-income children.

4.1 Insuring that all Eligible Children Have the Opportunity to Participate in School Meals

Eligibility for School Meals

All public and non-profit private schools and all Residential Child Care Institutions (RCCIs) can participate in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). School boards must apply to their state education agency in order to institute a program. All students in these schools may participate in the lunch program. However, household income determines whether they receive free meals, reduced price meals (the maximum price to the student's family is 40 cents), or "paid" meals, for which students pay most of the cost (the federal government pays a modest amount for administrative costs).

Children from families with incomes at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty line receive school meals for free. Children from families with incomes between 130 percent and 185 percent of the poverty line receive school meals at a reduced price – the student pays a share of the cost (no more than 40 cents per lunch and 30 cents per breakfast), while the federal government pays for the rest. All other participating students, officially designated as receiving "paid" meals, pay most of the cost for their meal, although schools receive a small federal reimbursement for these meals.

Usually, parents apply to their children's school in order for their children to receive free or reduced price meals. The same application covers both lunch and breakfast. However, children from households that receive food stamps, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) are automatically eligible for free school meals. Homeless, runaway and migrant children are also automatically eligible for free school meals.

Some school districts use "direct certification" to qualify children for free meals without requiring the family to submit an application. In these districts, the school works with the State or local Food Stamp, TANF, and FDPIR agencies to identify and certify for school meals (without additional applications) those children in households currently receiving these benefits. Starting in the 2006-07 school year, school districts with enrollments of over 25,000 students will be required to directly certify students from households receiving food stamps for free school meals. In the 2007-08 school year, districts with over 10,000 students will fall under this requirement, and starting with the 2008-09 school year, all school districts nationwide will be required to directly certify students from households receiving food stamps for free school meals.

School wellness policies should include the following requirements to insure that all children eligible for free and reduced-price meals have the opportunity to participate:

- **Conduct frequent outreach and coordination with families, the local Food Stamp Program, Medicaid Agency, and agencies serving migrant, homeless and runaway youth.** In order to reach those most in need, efforts are necessary to insure that all eligible families are aware of the program and can access it. Special outreach is necessary for non-English speaking groups, including translation of all outreach materials and applications into the various languages spoken in the community.

- **Create student school meals “accounts” and corresponding PIN numbers to reduce stigma.** Under a PIN system, instead of paying in the cafeteria, households that pay reduced or full price prepay for some or all meals, and the amount is credited to the child’s PIN account. Children who receive free meals use their PIN number without a prepaid account. Thus, all students, regardless of income, use the PIN number on the breakfast and lunch line. Taking cash out of the cafeteria line goes a long way toward removing the stigma.
- **Implement “Direct Certification.”** In the past, direct certification has been optional, but by 2008, all districts will be required to directly certify children whose families participate in these programs. In addition, there is automatic eligibility for free meals for homeless, runaway and migrant children. For more information on student eligibility and direct certification in the school meals programs, visit http://www.frac.org/html/federal_food_programs/programs/nslpeligibility.html
- **Expand participation through free universal meals for schools with a high percentage of free and reduced-price students.** Provision 2 is an option that enables schools to provide meals at no charge to all of their students while reducing paperwork and administrative costs. Under Provision 2, all students receive free meals, regardless of income, and schools collect applications for free and reduced-price meals once every four years, at most. Schools that operate their school meals programs under Provision 2 do not have to track and record the different categories of meals served for at least three out of every four years. This model has been shown to be financially viable for schools that have a high percentage of free and reduced-price students (around 75% or higher.) Schools with a smaller percentage of free and reduced-price students may want to consider eliminating the reduced-price category to increase access to healthy school meals to students, but at a lower cost to the school’s nutrition budget.

4.2 School Breakfast – The Best Way to Start the Day

For every 100 low-income students who eat school lunch every day, only 44 eat school breakfast.

This means that millions of needy students who participate in the National School Lunch Program do not eat breakfast at school. Many of these children arrive at school not ready to learn and unable to concentrate because they have not eaten. Free and reduced-price school breakfasts help low-income families stretch their limited food budgets and ensure that children are able to start the day right with a healthy meal. The local wellness policy should contain guidelines for establishing and expanding healthy school breakfast programs in all the schools in the district.

Sample Wellness Policies: Expanding School Breakfast

- All schools will participate in the School Breakfast Program, and explore the feasibility of, or operate, a universal breakfast program.
- Schools will arrange bus schedules and utilize methods to serve breakfast that encourage participation, including serving breakfast in the classroom, “grab-and-go” breakfast, or breakfast after first period.
- Schools will regularly notify parents and students of the availability of the School Breakfast Program for all students through multiple means such as take home flyers, school and district newsletters, home mailings, etc.
- School breakfast will meet, at a minimum, nutrition requirements established by local, state and federal statutes and regulations, and include whole grains, low-fat dairy products and a variety of fruits and vegetables.

Research demonstrates the linkages between school breakfast and wellness.

Research confirms what parents and grandparents have known for generations – breakfast is vital to children’s wellness and development.

- Children from low-income households who participate in school breakfast score higher on the Healthy Eating Index (a U.S. Department of Agriculture measure of people’s overall diet quality) than those who did not eat breakfast at school. In particular, these children eat more fruits, drink more milk, and eat a wider variety of foods.
- Children who eat breakfast at school, meaning they eat closer to class and test-taking time, perform better on standardized tests than those who skip breakfast or eat breakfast at home.

- Students who increase their participation in the school breakfast program improve their math grades.
- Students who eat school breakfast have lower rates of absence and tardiness and exhibit decreased behavioral and psychological problems.
- Children who eat school breakfast have fewer discipline problems and fewer visits to the school nurse.

School districts can increase student participation in the School Breakfast Program. There are a number of tried-and-true ways to ensure that children truly have access to a school breakfast every day.

- **Make sure every school offers breakfast.** Unfortunately, too many schools across the country don't offer breakfast at all because of a lack of understanding of the need or other barriers. Perceived obstacles to operating a breakfast program can be overcome quite easily in most circumstances. As soon as schools start a breakfast program, promotion activities should be conducted to make sure that students and their families are aware of the program and its benefits. There are many resources available for starting and promoting school breakfast programs through state child nutrition offices, the U.S. Department of Agriculture website (<http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Breakfast/toolkit/Default.htm>) and the FRAC website (http://www.frac.org/html/federal_food_programs/programs/sbp.html).
- **Make sure students know that school breakfast is for everyone.** Though untrue, it is often thought that school breakfast is “only for poor children.” This perception exists in part because, unlike the typical school lunch, not all children are in the cafeteria at breakfast time. Consequently, just having to go to the cafeteria for breakfast may cause many eligible children not to participate for fear of being labeled “poor.” However, regardless of income, many families find the early morning bus schedules, long commutes to work, and nontraditional work hours make it difficult to prepare or sit down to a nutritious breakfast, and many children do not feel hungry right after waking up early in the morning. Also, research indicates that students perform better academically if they eat closer to class time.
- **Start a “universal” School Breakfast Program to provide breakfast to all children.** The idea of offering breakfast at no charge to all students who want one– sometimes called “universal” breakfast– is gaining popularity because a universal program increases participation, and draws no line between students based on income thereby reducing stigma. Many schools can use Provision 2 of the National School Lunch Act, which reduces administrative burdens and is especially effective for schools with higher levels of students eligible for free and reduced-price meals that want to provide both lunch and breakfast to students at no charge. School districts that don't utilize Provision 2 often find that increased student participation leads to increased federal revenue and economies of

scale which combine to improve the overall bottom line of their food service budgets. Even if a school district does not break even, universal breakfast is a powerful school improvement tool, and the school can offset any added cost by using state and local resources. For a list of states that supplement federal funds for school breakfast, see the FRAC School Breakfast Scorecard at http://www.frac.org/pdf/2005_SBP.pdf. Contact the State Agency for assistance in implementing Universal Breakfast through these provisions. For more information on Provision 2 of the National School Lunch Act, visit the FRAC website at: www.frac.org/html/federal_food_programs/cnreauthor/provision2.htm.

Universal Breakfast Feeds More Students

Participation in the School Breakfast Program in the Dayton Public Schools was low prior to inception of the universal breakfast program. Students who qualified to receive free or reduced-price meals felt embarrassed and would skip school breakfast. With universal school breakfast, however, all students participate equally, without feeling social pressure. This has increased participation by more than 50 percent in the district, with one high school seeing participation increase by 91 percent.

- **Serve breakfast in the classroom.** Breakfast in the classroom is a form of universal school breakfast that reaches even more children, with little extra work involved for the teacher. Classroom breakfast can help overcome some of the barriers to expanding breakfast participation often cited by school administrators, such as lack of staff time, limited space, and commuting and bus schedules (children arriving too late to eat in the cafeteria). Also, breakfast in the classroom often results in better attendance and decreased tardiness. Teachers find that students are more alert and ready to learn after classroom breakfasts. In fact, according to program administrators who have implemented breakfast in the classroom, eating breakfast with the teacher and their classmates helps create a sense of community among the students and builds a bond with the teacher that carries over through the school day.

Newark Public Schools Breakfast in the Classroom

After providing universal breakfast for many years, the Newark Public Schools took action to increase student participation even further in their breakfast program. During the 2004-2005 school year, they instituted breakfast in the classroom in all of their schools except for 7 high schools where breakfast continues to be served in the cafeteria. Before the change was made, 9,290 children participated in the School Breakfast Program in the 2003-2004 school year. With the implementation of breakfast in the classroom, the participation level jumped by 150 percent to 23,358 in the 2004-2005 school year.

- **Offer Grab and Go Breakfast.** This is another strategy that is especially successful with older students. Many schools have started offering breakfast at cafeteria and hallway kiosks, rather than having students arrive early to eat breakfast in the cafeteria before class. Students then eat their breakfast in class or study hall. Cleveland Municipal School District high schools increased their participation in school breakfast by more than 200 percent after implementing grab and go breakfast. Bagged breakfasts can also be distributed on the bus for students who arrive to school on later buses so that they can eat breakfast and still be on time for their first class.
- **Restrict the sale of competitive foods (in snack bars, student stores, vending machines and á la carte lines) during the school day, including breakfast time.** Because only children with cash can purchase competitive foods, children may think of school meals as food for poor children rather than as healthy meals for all students. This perception can affect the willingness of low-income students to eat school breakfast, even if they are hungry. It also means that low-income students may spend the little money they have on competitive foods in order to “be like the other kids.”

5. Establishing Nutritional Guidelines for All Foods Available at School

The legislation governing the development of the local wellness policy requires that schools establish “nutritional guidelines for all foods available on each school campus...during the school day with the objective of promoting student health and reducing childhood obesity.”

This includes foods sold and served as part of the school meal programs and all other foods sold or provided on the school campus. All reimbursable school meals must meet specific, detailed federal nutrition standards, and it is the school’s responsibility to ensure that the meals meet these standards. In developing wellness policies, schools should consider how to assure that those guidelines are met and can be exceeded in order to improve students’ nutrition and health. All other foods sold in the school (including foods sold in snack bars, student stores, vending machines and á la carte) are known as “competitive foods,” because they compete with the reimbursable school meals. The nutritional standards governing these foods are very limited, in contrast to the school meals regulations.

While the quality of school nutrition is important for all children, it can be particularly important for low-income children who may have limited access to nutritious foods outside of school because of financial constraints at home. Schools serving low-income children should be especially careful to provide the best nutrition possible through the meals and snacks they serve, and if they decide to sell foods in competition with school meals, they should ensure that these, too, are healthful and nutritious. **This section highlights some of the strategies a wellness committee should consider when establishing guidelines for the food served in schools.** It also addresses some of the concerns that school administrators may have about making changes in the kinds of foods that are sold to students.

5.1 Improving School Meals: Quality and Environment

Schools should provide their students with a nutritious and pleasurable school meal experience.

Meal time at school gives students a chance to relax while fueling up on energy and nutrients to get them through the day. For low-income students, these nutrition standards are especially important, since their school meals may be filling in nutritional gaps that tight household budgets cannot. Federal regulations require that school meals meet certain nutritional standards. School lunches must provide one-third of the Recommended Dietary Allowances (RDAs) for protein, vitamin A, vitamin C, iron, calcium and calories, and school breakfasts must provide one-fourth of the RDAs.

According to the most recent national data from the US Department of Agriculture, the average school lunch served to elementary and secondary school students significantly exceeds one-third of the RDA for all nutrients (calories, protein, vitamin A, vitamin C, calcium, and iron), except for calories in secondary schools, which is slightly below one-third at 30 percent. Sixty-eight percent of elementary schools have at least one-third of the RDA for calories, while only 20 percent of secondary schools reach this standard. (These differences are due to the greater calorie needs of secondary school students, and the use of offer vs. serve in secondary schools, in which students can omit up to two components of the meal as they pass through the lunch line.) Lunches in all schools meet the one-third RDA standard for protein. In addition, in all or nearly all elementary schools, the standard for vitamin A, calcium, and iron are met, but 15 percent of schools provide less than one-third of the RDA for vitamin C. In 15 to 20 percent of secondary schools, the average lunch provides less than one-third of the RDAs for vitamin C and/or calcium. About one-third of secondary schools do not meet the standard for vitamin A and 40 percent do not reach one third of the RDA for iron. Again, this difference is probably due to higher calorie needs and the use of offer vs. serve for older students.

Schools must also meet the following recommendations from the 2000 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, a set of recommendations published jointly by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS): no more than 30 percent of calories from fat; less than 10 percent from saturated fat; reduced sodium and cholesterol levels; and increased fiber.

In general, school lunches still contain too much fat and saturated fat. The average elementary school lunch contains 33.1 percent of calories from fat, and 11.9 percent from saturated fat. In secondary schools, the average fat in school lunches is 34.5 percent, and average saturated fat is 12.1 percent. Lunches served in only 21 percent of all elementary schools and only 14 percent of secondary schools provided no more than 30 percent of calories from fat. However, seventy-eight percent of elementary schools and 68 percent of secondary schools had fat values at 36 percent of calories or less. Lunches served in only 15 percent of elementary schools and 13 percent of secondary schools met the 10 percent or less standard for calories from saturated fat, but 84 percent of elementary school lunches are lower than 14 percent of calories from saturated fat, and 85 percent of secondary school lunches are lower than 14 percent.

On average, school lunches contain too much sodium – 1259 mg. in elementary schools and 1382 mg. in secondary schools. Only 1 percent have sodium levels below 800 mg., and most of these are elementary schools.

USDA's *Healthier US Schools Challenge*

Get involved in this program for an exciting opportunity to receive support and recognition for the school's efforts to take a leadership role in improving the nutrition environment for the students. Schools can be certified as either Silver or Gold Team Nutrition Schools by meeting enhanced standards established by the USDA Food and Nutrition Service (FNS). The program may provide the extra motivation needed to get school officials focused on improving nutrition and health in the school. See the Appendices for the criteria or visit the website for more information:

http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/HealthierUS/criteria_instructions.pdf.

School wellness committees should find out how well their school districts are doing at meeting these standards, and if they aren't being met, develop improvement goals as part of their wellness policy. Moreover, these standards should be only the starting point for any local wellness policy. For instance, schools also should offer a variety of fruits and vegetables, including fresh options, low-fat and skim milk, whole grains, lean meats and vegetarian alternatives, and foods that are low in added sugars. In addition, the meals should be attractive – prepared and presented in a way that will make children want to eat them. USDA's regulations and guidance for planning nutritious and appealing school meals can be found at <http://schoolmeals.nal.usda.gov/Regulations/index.html>.

While there are barriers that affect a school's ability to provide healthy and appealing meals to students, schools can and should make changes that increase the quality of school meals and go beyond the federal standards. Many food service directors, especially those in schools with limited financial resources, must wrestle with obstacles such as the expense of fresh fruits and vegetables; outdated, inadequately maintained food preparation facilities; limited storage; limited cafeteria seating capacity; and overall education budget issues in the community that put increased pressure on the school meals budget.

There are effective strategies that schools can implement to overcome these barriers and provide healthier, more appealing meals to students. The following strategies should be incorporated into wellness policy goals:

- **Increase the number of meals prepared on-site.** Meals that are prepared on-site in the school cafeteria (or even in bulk in a central location in the school district) tend to be fresher and more attractive and appealing to students. On-site preparation allows greater flexibility in menu planning, which allows the food service staff to offer students more food choices and respond more effectively to student preferences. Some schools, especially those with limited resources, do not have the space, equipment, or staff resources to prepare meals on-site. These schools often use commercially “preplated” meals that arrive prepackaged and frozen – requiring the schools only to reheat the meals. If a school does use preplated meals, it should provide the students with opportunities to taste-test the foods to ensure that the best possible meals are selected. Also, school food service staff should carefully monitor the preparation of preplated meals to ensure optimum cooking: burned, overcooked, undercooked or cold meals that are supposed to be hot are not acceptable, yet they are a frequent student complaint. To offer variety and keep students interested in the meals, schools that have limited kitchen facilities still should try to prepare as many dishes as possible on-site (by portable equipment, like hotplates), heat fresh rolls and bread, and be sure to include fresh fruits, salads and vegetables on the menu.
- **Demand accountability from companies that are contracted to provide pre-plated meals or manage the entire school’s meals program.** Regardless of the level of the school’s financial resources, it should expect value for its money, including attractive and appealing meals. Menu items should be tested before they are ordered by the school food service staff, and the quality of meals should be tracked regularly during the school year. This monitoring could be an important part of the wellness policy. The principal or superintendent should eat regularly in the cafeteria to help ensure the overall quality of meals. The bottom line is that school officials should insist on the best meals possible for their students.
- **Insure that safe drinking water is readily available in cafeterias and elsewhere on the school premises** Too often school drinking fountains are in poor repair and fail to produce clean, cold water. Low-income students especially need access to free drinking water and all children should be encouraged to drink more water during the school day rather than soft drinks or other popular sugary drinks.
- **Make food preparation healthier.** Many schools are using healthy food preparation practices, such as replacing frying with baking and using substitutes for high fat ingredients. Schools have found ways to make some student favorites healthier, such as baking French fries and making low-fat pizza with quality vegetable toppings. There is a great deal of information available on improved recipes for more healthy school meals. There really is no excuse for anything less.

- **Improve the type and form of USDA commodities that the school receives.** The kinds and amounts of government commodities a school receives can be changed, as can the specifications for the processing of commodities. For example, fat and sodium levels of processed products can be reduced.

Department of Defense Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program

This program provides \$50 million worth of fresh produce to schools in 43 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands and Guam through an allocation of commodity entitlement funds. Due to the program's success, the USDA has been able to offer schools a wider variety of fresh produce than would normally be available through USDA purchases. Schools are also able to purchase produce directly through the Department of Defense. In Fiscal Year 2004, USDA was the Department of Defense's second biggest customer, accounting for 16 percent of its produce business.

- **Find new sources to add more fruits and vegetables to the menu.** There are creative ways to combat the high cost of fresh fruits and vegetables, foods that are becoming more and more popular among students. Some schools plant a school garden as part of the education curriculum and then include the garden's produce in the school menus, or join with other schools to purchase fruits and vegetables in greater bulk to obtain lower prices. Others develop direct relationships with local farmers to acquire fresh fruits and vegetables. For low-income children, whose families often cannot afford the cost of sufficient fresh produce, school meals that provide them are especially important. For more information on these programs (known as farm-to-school programs), visit the Community Food Security Coalition online at <http://www.farmtoschool.org>. CFSC also has created a tool with sample wellness policy language that incorporates farm to school programming. It can be found at <http://www.foodsecurity.org/california/F2SWellnessPolicy.pdf>.
- **Be sensitive to the dietary, cultural and religious preferences and needs of students.** For example, ask parents for the recipes of some of their children's favorite dishes from their culture, and try to incorporate them into the school menu to help make the cafeteria and the school more welcoming and inclusive. If religious preferences include vegetarian meals, this is easy to satisfy; schools in New York City, Detroit, Philadelphia and California regularly serve ethnic vegetarian dishes, as well as veggie burgers, veggie chili, soy tacos, and veggie nuggets.
- **Keep the meals interesting by serving a variety of healthy dishes.** Be creative, and try new recipes. Visit the USDA's Team Nutrition Website at http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/Resources/usda_recipes.html and the School Nutrition Association's website at <http://docs.schoolnutrition.org/recipes/> for healthy and tasty recipes to try in school.

- **Reduce plate waste.** Plate waste results in financial loss for schools and nutritional loss for students. If a school has excessive plate waste, try to find out why. Ask the students first. Improving the quality of the food served, providing several choices of healthy and nutritious foods, and incorporating more fresh fruits and vegetables will help to solve plate waste problems, as students are more likely to eat foods that look and taste appealing.
- **Manage costs carefully to maximize the funds that can be spent on quality food items.** Food managers find that they can manage costs and take full advantage of economies of scale by participating in buying cooperatives, increasing student participation and making full use of federal funds through commodities programs and additional reimbursements available to schools with high levels of participation of free and reduced-price students. Cost savings and increased revenues realized by these strategies can then be put into increased purchasing of fresh fruits and vegetables and other appealing and healthful food items.

Farm-to-School

Compton Unified School District in Los Angeles, CA, has implemented a farm to school program in which students are able to choose between a hot entrée and a salad bar for lunch. The vegetables for the salad bar come from Garden Patch, a group of local farmers in the community. The Compton Unified School District has thirty-nine schools and an average of 93.8 percent of students eligible to receive free or reduced-price school meals. Funding for the project came from the Compton Nutrition Services Department, due mainly to the priorities and funding decisions of the department. The school district also collaborates with community organizations that are associated with the California Nutrition Network to provide nutrition education.

Improving the nutrition environment in the cafeteria involves more than changing the kinds of food available. Mealtime has traditionally been a time to relax, foster community and strengthen social skills. School meals should build on this tradition.

- **Leave enough time for students to eat at a relaxed pace.** Many states recommend that students are given at least 20 minutes to eat lunch and 10 minutes to eat breakfast, starting from the time that they get their meals. When children have more time to eat, they are more likely to eat the school lunch and less likely to grab quick, prepackaged junk food that they can eat on the go. Research also suggests that people who eat very quickly tend to overeat, which can lead to overweight or obesity. If the cafeteria is busy, and space is available, the school can offer additional service lines so that students are able to get through the lines more quickly and have more time to eat.
- **Improve cafeteria design.** Many older schools have limited cafeteria space and overcrowded conditions. These schools may have limited financial resources. Student nutrition

suffers as a result – students don't participate, or they buy food from vending machines, because they don't like long lines, crowding, or eating very early or late in the day. In the short term, realignment of the cafeteria design, creatively staggered schedules, and grab and go lunches to eat in other designated areas can help. In the longer term, school boards and communities can take advantage of school renovations and rebuilds to bring the importance of cafeteria design to student health to the attention of those responsible for the architectural designs and renovation plans. The connection between good nutrition and cafeteria design is often overlooked by school renovation decision-makers.

- **Hold recess before lunch.** Research has found that giving children an opportunity to be active directly before lunch can have positive benefits. Students tend to work up an appetite during recess and, consequently, eat more of their food, waste less, and take in more of the nutrients they need. Moreover, research indicates that students who have recess before lunch are more settled and ready to learn in their afternoon classes. Many school teachers, including those at Central Middle School in Whitefish, MO, have noted improvements in afternoon academics when the children were given an opportunity to be physically active before lunch.
- **Ensure enough space for children to eat comfortably.** There should be enough seating available so that no student must stand and eat. Tables and chairs should be the appropriate size for the age group, and not overcrowded. In an ideal cafeteria, tables are round, rather than rectangular. Round tables encourage students to look at each other and talk to each other while they eat. Schools with limited resources could tap businesses in the community for donations of round tables and appropriate size chairs.
- **Make the cafeteria a place where students want to be.** The color of the walls, sound-proofing, amount of lighting, decorations and space in the cafeteria can all contribute to giving it a relaxing and comfortable atmosphere. Local businesses might contribute paint and construction materials as well as free labor. Parents also may have skills in these areas and be willing to donate their labor.
- **Make school mealtimes fun.** Incorporate games, learning, newspapers, comics and activities during school breakfast time. Ask students how the cafeteria could be changed to make it a more attractive and relaxing environment. Ask art teachers to have their students make posters with pictures of fruits and vegetables and with healthy eating tips to hang on the cafeteria walls. Add mentoring and tutoring before, during, and after mealtimes by teachers, older students, community residents, or employees of nearby businesses to attract students to school meals and make them more rewarding. Ask local celebrities to join students at school meals and act as motivational speakers.

5.2 Improving Policies for Competitive Foods in Schools

The phrase “competitive foods” is used to refer to foods sold in the schools that “compete” with the school breakfast and lunch programs, such as foods sold in à la carte lines, in the cafeteria, snack bars, vending machines and school stores. Currently, the only federal restrictions on the sale of competitive foods are for so-called Foods of Minimal Nutritional Value (FMNVs) – a term used by USDA to describe those foods containing less than five percent of the Reference Daily Intakes (RDIs) for all of several key nutrients. FMNVs include carbonated beverages (i.e. soft drinks), water ices, chewing gum, hard candy, marshmallow candies, fondant (such as candy corn), licorice, spun candy, and candy-coated popcorn. The sale of FMNVs is prohibited, but only during school lunch and breakfast periods, and only in the school food service area. According to federal regulations, FMNVs *can* be sold outside of the school food service area – e.g. directly outside of the cafeteria doors – during breakfast and lunch periods. This proximity of FMNVs to the cafeteria makes them quite accessible during meal times and undermines the intent of the regulations.

For the sake of children’s health, schools should go well beyond current federal regulations in restricting the sale of competitive foods. Research shows, not surprisingly, that access to competitive foods in school reduces the quality of students’ diets – lowering their intake of fruits and vegetables and increasing the percentage of calories they consume from total fat and saturated fat. In addition, the sale of competitive foods in the cafeteria during lunchtime reduces participation in school meals. This means that schools are sending children two totally contradictory messages – offering nutritious, healthy and complete meals, at the same time that they are offering, in competition, individual foods that are higher in fat and saturated fat, and less likely to contain fruits and vegetables. The end result is confusion about good nutrition, skepticism about the school’s motives, and reduced consumption of healthy school meals.

The sale of competitive foods is especially harmful for low-income students. If students from families with limited budgets choose to eat less healthy food instead of a free or reduced-price school meal, they will lose out nutritionally in a much bigger way than their more affluent peers who make the same kind of choices but can obtain healthy foods in other ways. They are also more likely to be hungry later in the day. Moreover, the low-income child will be spending his limited resources on a poor food choice rather than on other things he or his family needs more.

The presence of competitive foods creates stigma for low-income children. Peers notice who chooses the school meals rather than the items from vending machines or the à la carte line. Low-income children must choose between spending money they can ill afford, in order to be seen as “one of the group”, or singling themselves out by forgoing competitive foods.

Sale of less healthy competitive foods sends a mixed message about nutrition. Telling students one thing about nutrition education in the classroom and selling them something else in the cafeteria or outside the gym or auditorium does not promote healthy eating – regardless of how nutritious the school meals may be. The availability of competitive foods undermines the nutritional integrity and educational impact of the school nutrition programs.

Address common concerns about restricting competitive foods. When asked to change competitive food policies, school officials often say that students just “won’t eat” healthy food. They also may argue that children should be able to choose the foods they want, and therefore competitive foods should not be restricted. Another common concern is about lost revenue, with school officials arguing that the district would lose important revenue as a result of restricting competitive foods.

There are a number of important reasons why these arguments are wrong:

- It is true that many students arrive at school with established preferences for widely advertised foods like fast food and soda, but it’s not true that children won’t eat anything else. Children will buy and consume healthy food items, especially when the nutritious snacks are priced lower than the less nutritious choices. Also, it helps to hold taste tests and give out free samples of the healthier snacks so that students become more familiar with them.
- Removing unhealthy foods from schools and replacing them with more nutritious alternatives does not take a child’s choice away; it simply provides him/her with a range of healthier items from which to choose.
- Many schools have successfully replaced regular competitive food offerings, e.g. in vending machines, with healthier items, such as 100 percent fruit juice, low-fat milk, water, yogurt, fruits and vegetables. Despite dire predictions, these schools generally have not lost revenue – in fact, several have seen increased revenues since introducing healthier snacks at a reasonable price. For example, the Old Orchard Beach School Department in southern Maine found that income from vending and á la carte sales stayed the same in its high schools and increased in its middle schools when snacks were replaced with healthier options, such as water, low-fat milk, fruit, salads, yogurt and string cheese.

Good Nutrition Pays

In Oceanside, California, the Vista Unified School District was able to change vending contracts, making the district’s Child Nutrition Services (CNS) the sole provider of vending services on the Vista High School campus. All candy and chips were replaced with healthier options. The school district also replaced soft drink machines with vending machines that featured a variety of types of milk, 100% juice, smoothies, bottled water, sports drinks, and just three types of soft drinks. In the first full year after the changes, the CNS vending operation captured new business and grossed \$187,000. The superintendent’s direction and whole-hearted backing of the healthy changes proved crucial in overcoming opposition. (Refer to USDA’s *Making it Happen! School Nutrition Success Stories* for more details on this and related projects. <http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/Resources/makingithappen.html>)

Look to models for improving foods sold at school. Many states and localities already have created regulations governing the sale of competitive foods that go beyond the federal regulations. Louisiana, for instance, prohibits à la carte sales in all schools. To learn about the regulations governing the sale of competitive foods in the state, call the state department of education or visit:

http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/lunch/CompetitiveFoods/state_policies_2002.htm

Several school districts also have established their own regulations that are stricter than both federal and state guidelines. For instance, the school board in Los Angeles County – operating the second largest school district in the nation, in which over 60 percent of all children are enrolled in the free and reduced-price school meals programs – banned the sale of soda from all schools. Many other school districts have come up with similar policies by changing what’s sold in vending machines to include water, low-fat milk or 100% juices. Other schools have incorporated more fruits and vegetables in à la carte lines and vending machines. Many have limited the types of foods that are sold or offered in the schools, like eliminating the offering or sale of deep-fried foods.

Include foods in school-based activities in the competitive foods policy. According to the federal legislation, the local wellness policy must set healthy goals for other school-based activities that have the potential to impact student health. This could include encouraging teachers to think about what foods they serve during class parties – for example, it may not be necessary to eliminate cakes, cookies, and candies from class parties all together, but healthier options like whole grain crackers and fresh fruit also should be available, and served more often.

Resources for Wellness Policies on Competitive Foods

Learn about policies being implemented in different school districts (and states) by going to the Action for Healthy Kids wellness policy search tool.

http://www.actionforhealthykids.org/resources_wp.php

Healthy School Food Policies: A Checklist from the Center for Food and Justice at Occidental College is a resource with healthy ideas from district policies that have been adopted or proposed throughout the country.

http://departments.oxy.edu/uepi/cfj/resources/healthy_school_food_policies_05.pdf

What is the school's fundraising policy? Many schools use fundraisers to help pay for school activities like field trips, classroom projects, sports, music, art and school events. All too often, fundraisers tend to sell food items that aren't healthy, like candy bars or baked goods. Selling these items may help make money, but students are paying the price with their health. Especially in communities in which obesity, hypertension and diabetes are major health problems, selling candy and high fat baked treats just doesn't make sense. Schools now are turning to healthier fundraising alternatives that reinforce positive messages of nutrition and wellness. The local wellness policy should set guidelines for what activities or items can be used in fundraisers. Below are some ideas for healthy fundraising and resources to assist with implementation.

Healthy Foods to Sell

Fruit
Fruit smoothies
Yogurt
Trail mix
Granola bars
100 percent juice bars
Low-fat pretzels

Healthy Things to Do

Walk-a-thons
Singing telegrams
Silent auction
Car wash
Recycling cans
Family dinners
Rent-a-teen helper

Healthy and Fun Fundraising Ideas

- Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) yellow pages website lists fundraising options by category. <http://www.ptotoday.com/yellowpages/fundraising/>
- The Fundraising Bank website has a list of companies that offer healthier products to use in fundraising. <http://www.fundraising-ideas.com/fundraisers/healthy/>
- The 5-A-Day website lists companies that provide fresh fruit and vegetables fundraising options. <http://www.5aday.org/html/educators/options.php>

6. Addressing Cost Concerns about Changing Competitive Food Policies

It is natural for school districts – especially school board members and school administrators -- to be concerned about the financial implications of making changes in nutrition policies that may affect revenues. With tight budgets, many school districts, including many with schools in low-income areas, have come to rely on vending contracts and competitive foods to fund school activities and even help run the food service program. School districts across the country, however, are recognizing that these financial decisions could seriously compromise the health of their students. They also are realizing that it is possible to improve the nutritional value of foods offered to students while minimizing economic loss.

Many school districts have made changes that encourage healthier eating among students, including successfully changing contracts with vending companies, altering food and beverage choices offered on the à la carte line, and changing the mix of food sold in student stores. The revenue stream from food sales at many of these schools has stayed the same in spite of the changes, and some schools even have experienced increased revenues once the switch to healthier foods was made. Furthermore, participation in the child nutrition programs tends to increase (along with federal reimbursements) when the rules governing the sale of competitive foods in schools are tightened.

The health of students should not be compromised by cost concerns. Despite learning about the negative nutrition and health risks that soft drinks can cause, some school administrators still are concerned about losing the revenue generated from vending machines, which they rely on to pay for school needs. But keeping less nutritious foods in the school for this reason sends a very bad health message, and evidence is mounting that changes can be made without a significant loss of revenue, as more schools across the country restrict or ban certain types of foods from vending machines and engage in careful marketing of more healthful products.

Schools hold the upper hand in negotiations with vending companies. The vendors need the schools to sell their products. Any money that the vending companies are “giving” to schools comes directly from the pockets of the parents and students who are buying the products. If schools demand changes, vendors will adapt.

Many of the snack food and beverage companies that sell foods to schools can supply healthier items. For example, 100 percent juices and baked chips can be offered instead of unhealthy soft drinks or candy. Chances are that the vending companies already will have some ideas about healthier products that can be introduced into the schools. The nutrition environment is changing, and some vending companies are beginning to recognize that they must respond to demands for healthier options. The 5-A-Day website lists some healthy vending companies <http://www.5aday.org/html/educators/options.php>.

Minneapolis North High School's Beverage Vending Model

After evaluating the school's beverage vending policy, North High's administration made a decision to respond to the health needs of the school's predominantly African-American student body, which had higher rates of overweight and obesity than their white counterparts. The district's Coca-Cola representative was willing to work with North to provide healthier choices. As a result, the school implemented changes that limited soda to one machine with restricted hours of sales, and increased the number of machines selling water, 100 percent fruit/vegetable juice, and sports drinks. Water and juice were sold at a lower price than the less healthful sports drinks and soda. The policy change also allowed students to drink only water in the classroom; prior to this no beverages were allowed. As a result of these changes, North students bought far fewer cans of soda at school and the total number of beverages sold more than doubled, with water the number one seller. Vending profits increased by almost \$4,000. For more examples of how schools have maintained or increased revenue levels with more healthful options, go to

http://www.actionforhealthykids.org/resources_topic.php?topic=23

There are steps that schools can take to help prevent a loss in revenue when switching to healthier products. For instance, holding taste tests for students can help them become familiar with the healthier foods. Their reactions will give the school food service personnel a better idea of which healthier foods will sell the best. Schools have found that students eventually will buy what is available. It is likely that schools will make money in the long run. In Fresno, CA, for instance, school officials found that sales increased when junk food and sodas were removed from Sequoia Middle School because students were involved in the process of deciding which healthier foods would replace them. Students were able to choose which healthier foods they liked.

The cost of unhealthy policies and practices will show up both in the students' lives and in the school district's bottom line. Unhealthy, inactive, or hungry students are more likely to visit the school nurse, to miss school, or to fall behind in school. Money is lost each time a child misses school, and valuable staff time is spent by school nurses who are attending to sick children. Without an appealing and healthy school meals program, children will be more likely to eat nothing or turn to high-fat, high-sugar "junk" food – both alternatives making it harder for them to concentrate in class, leading to more disruptions in all students' learning, and lower academic achievement. The food choices available also affect the school staff as well, and an unhealthy staff creates additional health care costs for the district. The negative consequences of bad health choices are important and very real. Investing in the health of students today will reap much larger benefits in the short and long term – for students, the school, and the community.

7. Securing Outside Financial Support for Wellness Initiatives

Vending contracts and competitive food sales are not the only ways in which schools can secure outside funding for both wellness programs and extracurricular activities. The issue of seeking outside private funding for schools is sometimes controversial (for reasons beyond the scope of this guide), but by seeking outside help and being creative, school districts have found a variety of ways to fund programs. For instance, schools have used grants from foundations and community organizations to pay for a variety of program needs, including buying new equipment and paying for professional development for teachers and staff.

Below are some factors to keep in mind when thinking about funding for the local wellness policy:

- **Remember that the federal government, and sometimes state government as well, provides a large amount of revenue for school food through the federal nutrition programs.** A good wellness policy will increase the number of students participating in these programs, thus greatly increasing the reimbursements received.
- **When proposing a local wellness policy, be straightforward about any anticipated costs.** Sometimes positive change can mean some increased costs at the beginning stages.
- **Not all new programs need to be fully operational in the first year after the policy has been approved.** The school can build the program one year at a time. Once it has built momentum and funders see evidence of how successful the programs are, they will be more willing to fund future projects.
- **Be creative when searching for funding.** Some possible places to look are hospitals, health insurance companies, health maintenance organizations (HMOs), retail stores and businesses, local sports teams, community organizations, community foundations, and government agencies.
- **Utilize community resources.** Organizations in the community are an invaluable resource. There are many organizations that work directly on child health issues and may have programs that they are willing to carry out in the schools at no charge. There are some foundations that do not give grants directly to schools but will offer services in-kind. Also, they may be able to help raise money for programs being initiated at the schools. Most nonprofits have experienced grant writers that can give tips on how to write a successful grant application. Local nonprofits with a stake in children's nutrition and health can help.

Resources for Finding Grants and Other Funding

- USDA's Local Wellness Policy Resources -- This page offers a list of grant databases as well as specific grants schools can use to carry out wellness policies. http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/Healthy/wellnesspolicy_funding.html
- School Grants -- This site is geared towards teachers to help them write successful school grants. Resources on the website include grant writing tips as well as sample grant proposals. <http://www.schoolgrants.org/welcome.htm>
- The School Funding Center -- This site houses a searchable database of school grants available to both individual schools and school districts. <http://www.schoolfundingcenter.com>

8. Incorporating Nutrition Education into the School Day

Nutrition education is very important for all students and is a required part of the local wellness policy. Educating students about healthy eating can help change their attitudes about certain foods and teach them how to incorporate healthier foods into their diets. With all the different kinds of foods that surround them, children must be equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to make healthy choices today, tomorrow, and for the rest of their lives. A primary goal of the wellness policy should be to ensure that there is a plan in place to incorporate nutrition education into the curriculum at every grade level, and that there is a person in charge of making this happen at each school.

Nutrition education can be incorporated easily into the school day. Nutrition education can be integrated into many subjects. Perhaps the most obvious subject is science: health and nutrition can be talked about when covering the human body. However, nutrition and wellness messages can be reinforced in other areas as well. For instance, math teachers can teach elementary school students to count with carrot sticks; students in English class can keep a journal of the foods they eat during the day and what they think about them. With a little creativity, the possibilities are endless.

Hands-on Learning About Food

The CookShop® program in New York City is a partnership between a nonprofit organization, FoodChange, and the New York City Public Schools. The program connects healthy eating with fun experiences by engaging elementary school children in classroom cooking activities that feature wholesome plant-based foods. At the same time, students learn about the food and how it's grown and write letters to the local farmer who supplies the produce. Teachers partner with local university students and parent volunteers to teach the lessons and help out in the classroom. Often, once children have prepared and become familiar with the food, the school cafeteria offers it as part of the School Lunch Program.

Teachers can coordinate with the cafeteria staff to develop nutrition education activities and programs. For instance, if students are learning about a certain country in a geography or history class, ask the cafeteria to serve a popular healthy dish from that country as part of the school lunch.

Teachers can bring lessons to life using hands-on activities that will stay in students' minds. Good nutrition education is not simply talking about cholesterol and fat in class – it includes activities in which students pick out the foods with high cholesterol and fat, or prepare foods and meals that are nutritious, healthful and appealing to children. Cooking clubs and school gardens also encourage this kind of learning.

Nutrition education materials should be printed in a variety of different languages, depending on the demographics of the students in the school. Then students can take what they've learned home to share with their parents.

Inviting Parents to Dinner

In Leon County, FL, the Wesson Elementary School's family dinner nights provide parents and children with practical information about healthy nutrition, physical fitness and disease prevention while helping kids work on their math and reading skills. The program was supported by a grant from Albertson's grocery store. "It taught me to be more selective in what I feed my children," said a participant of the program and mother of five. "To know the school is sponsoring it means a lot."

Tallahassee Democrat, March 22, 2005

Cafeteria and school walls can be decorated with posters about healthy eating in order to reinforce nutrition messages. Free posters are available from the USDA Team Nutrition website at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/Resources/NTISform.html>.

Nutrition messages should be consistent and can be reinforced throughout the school. Students may receive mixed messages, for instance, if they are taught about healthy eating in class, but are then able to eat fries, pizza and candy for lunch every day with no alternatives that include fresh fruit or vegetables in sight.

Long Beach Unified School District Nutrition Network

Building upon existing efforts, Long Beach Unified School District utilizes funding from the California Nutrition Network to support multiple programs to boost the likelihood that low-income students and their families will increase consumption of fruits and vegetables, participate in physical activity (60 minutes per day for youth, 30 minutes per day for adults), and participate in food assistance programs. To this end, a Project Teacher and Child Nutrition Specialist work closely with the Health and PE Curriculum Leaders to provide teacher training, parent classes, and student lessons at low-income schools (50 percent or more free/reduced-price lunch). In addition, the serving and eating environments of the school cafeteria are enhanced. Project staff works with Food Services and Nursing staff to promote participation in the School Meals Programs and Food Stamp Program. As a result, participants demonstrate increased knowledge and understanding of the importance of nutrition and physical activity; teachers enhance classroom instruction; and adult and student eating/activity behaviors are positively affected. For more information about this program go to http://www.actionforhealthykids.org/resources_profile.php?id=231.

Nutrition education should include information about positive body image and healthy eating.

Body image is the mental picture a person has of his or her body. It includes associated feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. Studies have found that up to two-thirds of adolescent girls and over one-third of adolescent boys are dissatisfied with their body weight or shape. When children, especially girls, have a distorted body image, they are at greater risk for developing eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia nervosa. They also may be less likely to be physically active, and discouraged about their ability to become fit or maintain a healthy weight.

Curriculum Ideas that Work

- USDA’s Team Nutrition – This website has many ideas for incorporating nutrition education throughout the school day. The website also has links to other, non-USDA curricula. <http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/library.html>
- Healthy School Meals Resource System – This resource of The National Agriculture Library houses various nutrition education materials and curricula developed by state agencies.
http://schoolmeals.nal.usda.gov/Training/fulltext_teach.htm
- Planet Health– This resource offers classroom and physical education activities that are designed to fit within existing curricula.
www.hsph.harvard.edu/prc/proj_planet.html
- 5 A Day for Better Health– This website has nutrition lesson plans regarding fruits and vegetables.
http://www.5aday.com/html/educators/educators_home.php
- Farm to School – Farm to school programs offer curricula to help students understand where their food comes from.
http://schoolmeals.nal.usda.gov/Resource/farmentoschool_class.htm
- Body Talk: Teens Talk about their Bodies, Eating Disorders and Activism – This tool can help start a conversation about healthy eating and body image.
http://www.thebodypositive.org/page-view.php?record_id=4

9. Increasing Physical Activity at School

School administrators and teachers who are under increased pressure to demonstrate academic achievement through improved scores on standardized tests often see physical education and physical activity as time-consuming digressions or add-ons in an already full schedule. This issue is of particular concern for schools with high percentages of low-income students, since they face a greater overall risk of falling short of achievement standards and losing funds as a result.

Many children living in low-income communities in particular do not have enough options for being physically active outside of school. Urban neighborhoods often lack safe and accessible parks or playgrounds where children can freely run and play. For example, a study of African-American adolescent girls showed that fear of neighborhood violence contributed to overweight – because the girls were afraid to go outside, which led to limited physical activity, and because they were so traumatized by neighborhood violence that they used the consumption of food as a way to comfort themselves. Schools can play a crucial role in improving low-income children’s health by providing time and space for them to be physically active during the school day, as well as in afterschool programs.

America’s children do not get enough physical activity, yet research suggests that academic performance improves when children are physically active and fit. According to the International Life Sciences Institute, fewer than one in four children gets at least 20 minutes of vigorous physical activity each week. Furthermore, research shows that children become less physically active as they get older. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, almost half of the teenagers in America are not vigorously active on a consistent basis.

- A 2002 study by the California Department of Education found a positive relationship between academic achievement and physical fitness by matching fitness test scores with standardized testing results. The California State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Delaine Eastin, said that the study “provides compelling evidence that physical well-being of students has a direct impact on their ability to achieve academically. We now have the proof we’ve been looking for: students achieve best when they are physically fit.”
- Two studies have shown that math test scores increase when more time during the day is allowed for physical activity (even by reducing class time). The President’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sport found that “youth who spend less time in other subjects to allow for regular physical education have been shown to do equally well or better in academic classes.”

Research suggests that intense physical activity during school helps reduce disruptive behavior and increases a child’s ability to concentrate. Studies have shown that recess can help students concentrate and be less distracted during class because it offers a break during a packed school day.

The law requires that the local wellness policy include goals for physical activity. The resources listed in this section can help develop innovative ways to incorporate increased physical activity and physical education into the school day. The following section provides resources for increasing physical activity in afterschool programs. The National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) recommends that children ages 6 to 11 have at least 1 hour of physical activity every day. This could occur in multiple periods of time lasting ten minutes or more. For instance, a 30-minute recess period can be coupled with shorter periods of jumping jacks or other fun exercises before or during classes.

- **Recess offers a wonderful opportunity for children, especially elementary school students, to be active and creative and provides a healthy release from some of the stresses they may be facing in class and at home.** It gives children a chance to practice important social skills, such as cooperating, taking turns, and getting along with others. Students should be able to play games during recess that require them to run, hop, skip or jump and be physically active. Also, studies have shown that holding recess before lunch increases nutrient intake. Wellness policies should define a minimum number of recess periods and an appropriate length of time for recess.
- **Physical education (PE) classes need to be sensitive to the needs of all students to effectively educate them with the knowledge and skills they will need to lead active and healthy lives.** In order for students to take full advantage of PE classes, the curriculum should be sensitive to the needs of girls as well as boys. Strategies to increase the amount of physical activity for boys and girls may need to be different, because girls tend to prefer different types of physical activity and pursue it for different reasons than do boys. Since girls are more likely to have lower self-esteem related to their physical capabilities, PE programs should provide instruction and experiences that increase their confidence, offer ample opportunities for participation, and establish social environments that support involvement in a range of physical activities.

Barriers to Sports Participation for Low-Income, Urban Girls

There are fewer sports opportunities and limited access to athletic activities for urban girls. Poverty has a big impact on girls' participation in sports activities, especially for girls living in low-income, urban centers. These significant obstacles include: responsibilities at home, including caring for younger siblings; the need to work part-time; lack of family support and encouragement; cost to participate; gender stereotypes; transportation and safety issues; and a lack of competent staff. These barriers can be overcome with careful planning and community support. For more information visit the Women's Sports Foundation at <http://www.womenssportsfoundation.org/cgi-bin/iowa/issues/disc/article.html?record=774>

- **Classrooms can incorporate physical activity.** Being physically active doesn't have to take time away from regular classroom instruction, and can help students focus by breaking up the monotony of class. For instance, students can learn about measurement by measuring the distance that they can jump. Teachers can use action verbs on spelling tests and ask students to act out the words, like hopping or stretching.
- **Afterschool programs** offer safe environments for children while their parents are at work. They can incorporate physical activity in the student's day, without taking as much time from the classroom. See the following section, *Afterschool and Summer Programs - An Important Part of the Wellness Policy* for information on how the school can strengthen afterschool programs by providing an informal, safe environment that is supportive of physical activity.
- **Community-based programs** are good ways to utilize local resources and involve parents. Schools should allow these programs access to their facilities, like the playground or gym, after school and during the summer, so that more children may participate. Some school districts have worked successfully with their local transportation agencies to subsidize transportation for physical activity opportunities. For example, the city of Santa Barbara, California, offers free public transportation to and from city pools.

The Walking School Bus

The Walking School Bus program offers children a safe, healthy and social alternative to riding a bus by providing adult supervision for groups of students who walk to school. For more information on how to start a Walking School Bus program for the school, visit: <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/kidswalk/>. The site includes a PowerPoint presentation that can be used to develop interest in walking-to-school programs in the community.

Resources for Physical Activity in Wellness Policies

- USDA's Team Nutrition website contains resources on how to incorporate physical activity and physical education into schools.
http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/Healthy/wellnesspolicygoals_physicalactivity.html
- The National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) has published guidelines for standards for physical education. These can be accessed on the NASPE website at http://www.aahperd.org/naspe/template.cfm?template=ns_children.html
- *Promoting Better Health for Young People through Physical Activity and Sports: A Report to the President*
http://www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/physicalactivity/promoting_health/index.htm
- *Brain Breaks* is a free resource with ideas on how to incorporate physical activity into the classroom. <http://www.emc.cmich.edu/BrainBreaks/default.htm>

10. Afterschool and Summer Programs – An Important Part of the Wellness Policy

A growing number of schools across the country are operating afterschool and summer programs. Millions of children, including low-income children, have working parents and need afterschool and summer programs to keep them safe, engaged and on track. Other at-risk children need the benefits of such programs as well. These programs not only offer important academic, recreational, enrichment, and youth development programs but can be particularly effective venues for improving nutrition, nutrition education and physical activity.

Sample Wellness Policies: Afterschool and Summer

- Schools will provide nutritious snacks to all school-sponsored afterschool programs through the National School Lunch Program. Schools will provide suppers through the Child and Adult Care Food Program when appropriate due to the length of the afterschool program or the need of the students.
- Schools in which more than 50 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals will operate a summer nutrition program through the Summer Food Service Program or the National School Lunch Program throughout the entire summer vacation. This requirement stands regardless of whether or not the school operates summer school.
- Nutritional standards set for the school day will be applied to every afterschool or summer nutrition program operated by the schools.
- Schools will explore and implement creative ways to provide fresh fruits and vegetables in their afterschool and summer nutrition programs. For example, schools can use fresh local produce and/or the produce grown in school gardening projects.
- School-sponsored afterschool and summer programs will include physical activity and nutrition education in a way that complements and supports initiatives taking place during the school day.
- Any school that does not sponsor an afterschool or summer program will begin one as a way to improve its students' health and well-being.

The positive impact that afterschool and summer programs have on students' well-being and achievement is well documented.

- Afterschool programs have been shown to decrease juvenile crime and violence, reduce drug use and addiction, cut smoking and alcohol abuse, decrease teen pregnancy, and can have a positive impact on weight. Research also documents the effectiveness of afterschool programs in improving educational achievement and reducing absenteeism and tardiness. And some research shows even more positive outcomes for minority students who participate in quality afterschool programs.

- Summer programs also are very important for children – especially those living in low-income communities. Low-income students lose more academic ground during the summer than higher income students, primarily because low-income families are unable to afford summer enrichment activities for their children. Summer programs are a key way to combat the “summer effect” of setbacks in educational achievement during the summer months.

Robust afterschool and summer programs should be part of districts’ wellness policies. These programs can offer children nutritious snacks and meals and opportunities to be physically active, and they can provide nutrition education. Existing programs that do not offer these activities should add them. Districts without afterschool and summer programs should move toward instituting them and include as key components nutritious snacks and meals, nutrition education and physical activity.

Nutritious food is an important part of any quality afterschool or summer program. It gives students the energy and nourishment they need to benefit fully from the educational, enrichment, and physical fitness activities being offered by the afterschool and summer programs. Many low-income children who rely on the school meals programs for the nutrition they receive during school days lack reliable, healthy nutrition resources after school and during the summer. Indeed, food banks report that the largest seasonal surge in demand for their help is not in the winter, but in the summer when children no longer have access to regular school meals.

Accessing Nutritional Resources

There are federal nutrition programs, similar to the regular year school meals programs, that reimburse the cost of meals and snacks served after school and during the summer:

- Schools can use federal funds to provide snacks to school-sponsored afterschool programs through the **National School Lunch Program (NSLP)**. The afterschool program does not have to be operated by the school, nor must it take place on school grounds. The **Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP)** also can be used by schools to feed children afterschool snacks, and it offers the additional option of serving meals. To find out how a school (or other public agency or non-profit organization) can receive funding for afterschool nutrition programs, visit www.frac.org/Out_Of_School_Time/index.html.
- Schools can use federal funds to feed children during the summer at school sites or other locations where children congregate, like parks and swimming pools, church-based programs and YMCA’s, through the **Summer Food Service Program**, or through the **National School Lunch Program**. The latter can be offered as part of summer school or in school systems that continue through the summer – “year-round” schools that stagger their vacation periods. In addition, schools providing summer recreation programs for children or that want to feed the children in their low-income community can reduce paperwork by

utilizing the **Seamless Summer Food Waiver** (instead of the Summer Food Service Program). This program treats summer meals as an extension of the regular school year lunch program, which results in less administrative paperwork. For more information on summer nutrition, visit www.frac.org/Out_Of_School_Time/index.html

Access to these crucial nutrition programs can be addressed in the school wellness policy. The policy can include a commitment to provide students nutritious snacks and meals after school and during the summer through the federal nutrition programs.

Teens Learning from Summer Nutrition Program

Charlene Story, District Director of Food Services for the Yuma County High School District in Yuma, AZ, was worried about how her students – many of whom relied on school meals during the school year – were going to eat during the summer months. Yuma County has one of the highest rates of drug use and teenage pregnancy in the state. She has worked to expand the Summer Food Service Program to sites around the county, including five Yuma County summer school programs, and in the process, used the program to provide a positive outlet for local teens. Through her work with the local Job Training and Partnership Act (JTPA) work training program for teenagers, Story has recruited local teenagers to work at summer food sites, preparing and serving meals to children. In addition to reducing labor costs, the program has taught the teenage workers about nutrition, food safety, baking, preparing meals, and the responsibility of holding a job.

Improving the Nutritional Quality

Like school breakfast and lunch, there are nutritional guidelines for the federal afterschool and summer nutrition programs. And like regular school meals, there is room to improve the quality. As a district develops its policy on the food that is served during the school day, it should include the food served after school and during the summer as well. It makes sense to have a consistent policy for all of the food provided by the school nutrition department.

Many of the ideas to improve the quality of school lunch can be applied in the wellness policy to afterschool and summer nutrition, such as:

- Increasing the use of fresh fruits and vegetables. An afterschool or summer program can provide fresh bananas, oranges, and melons, and can also expose students to unusual fruits and vegetables, such as kiwi, mangoes, papaya, and different varieties of apples that may appeal to students. This can be especially important in low-income communities which do not have access to a wide variety of fresh fruits and vegetables.

- Planting a garden as part of the afterschool or summer curriculum and using the produce in the nutrition program.
- Serving more whole grains. Whole grains are lacking in many children’s diets, but they provide important nutrients and fiber that children need to remain healthy. Bread, crackers, bagels, and other foods made from whole grains can be included in meals and snacks served after school and during the summer.
- Involving the students in menu planning increases their buy-in to the nutrition program and teaches them about healthy food choices.
- Expanding Farm to Cafeteria initiatives to include afterschool and summer programs. In fact, the summertime is when a wide variety of local produce is most likely to be available.

Farm to Summer Food

Every summer, Camp Lejeune Dependents Schools team up with local North Carolina farms to serve fresh fruits and vegetables to about 1,300 children at four summer food sites. The district develops its menus around the produce that is in season, such as cantaloupes, watermelons, cucumbers, tomatoes, green peppers, blueberries, corn on the cob, new potatoes, and squash. Because the fruits and vegetables are prepared and served a few hours after harvest, the children receive fruits and vegetables with the most nutrition, color and flavor possible. The attractiveness of the farm-fresh produce encourages them to try new fruits and vegetables. Camp Lejeune is proud to support the local economy through this farm-to-school fruits and vegetables program. “And the cost is the same or often less than the cost of purchasing the same produce from a distributor,” states Jan Holt, director of Camp Lejeune Food Services.

Adding Nutrition Education

Nutrition education is an important way to encourage healthy eating, build good lifelong habits, and combat our country’s childhood obesity epidemic. Nutrition education is also a core component of the school wellness policy and an important part of the school day. Unfortunately, in many schools, nutrition education is being squeezed out of the curriculum because of greater emphasis on core academic subjects.

Afterschool and summer programs provide a vital opportunity to fill this gap. The wellness policy can require the district’s afterschool and summer programs to include nutrition education that supports efforts taking place during the school day. **It is relatively easy for an afterschool program to add nutrition education to its activities. Afterschool staff can utilize one of the numerous**

nutrition education curricula or can draw upon local nutrition education resources like nutrition or public health students, chefs, and Action for Healthy Kids. And state child nutrition agencies often have nutritionists who can provide suggestions on nutrition education materials or local resources that can become part of an afterschool program's activities.

Participation in the afterschool and summer nutrition programs supports nutrition education. These programs provide the opportunity to introduce children to new healthy foods, especially fruits and vegetables, for hands-on opportunities to teach about appropriate portion sizes, and they supply the necessary dollars to prepare healthy foods, snacks and meals, which are important nutrition education activities.

Putting It All Together: Cooking, Gardening And Physical Activity After School

In Chicago, Illinois, Common Threads operates afterschool and summer programs that include cooking, gardening, and movement in partnership with schools and other non-profit organizations. The children cook and learn about nutrition each day. During the school year, the food the children prepare is reimbursed through the Child and Adult Care Food Program, and Common Threads is looking into getting reimbursed during the summer months through the Summer Food Service Program. In addition to cooking, the children either garden or participate in another physical activity. In the garden, the children plant, water, weed, and harvest the vegetables, which are used in their recipes. The movement activities reinforce the cooking themes. For example, the programs have paired Indian recipes with yoga; South American recipes with Capoeira, a Brazilian martial art; and African recipes with African dance.

Getting Active

According to health experts, school-age youth (age six through 18) should participate daily in 60 minutes or more of moderate to vigorous activity that is developmentally appropriate, enjoyable, and involves a variety of activities. Unfortunately, too few children have the opportunity to be that physically active during the school day. Like nutrition education, physical activity – from recess to formal physical education programs – is being cut from the school day due to the academic pressures that schools face. For example, only 28.4 percent of high school students participated in physical education every day in 2003, down from 42 percent in 1991.

Children's free time has always been an important time for them to be physically active, and the decrease in physical activity during the school day makes this time even more critical. Yet, physical activity outside of the school day is rare for many students. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, nearly two-thirds of children age 9 through 13 do not participate in any

organized physical activity outside of the school day, and over one-fifth do not engage in any type of physical activity during their free time.

Afterschool and summer programs can provide an informal, fun, and safe environment for physical activity. Many children living in low-income communities do not have access to safe and accessible parks or playgrounds where children can freely run and play. The wellness policy provides the opportunity to support physical activity after school and during the summer.

The wellness policy can set standards for physical activity in the school-based afterschool and summer programs. The physical education teacher and coaches at the school can work with the afterschool and summer program staff to develop age appropriate and fun physical activities that both boys and girls can enjoy. In schools that lack a physical education teacher or other expert on physical activity, the afterschool program can draw upon local resources, like the YMCA, Boys and Girls Club, and community sports leagues, to include physical activity.

Afterschool Tennis

The Washington Tennis and Education Foundation partners with the District of Columbia Public Schools to operate its Arthur Ashe Children's Program. This afterschool program serves 500 children in 23 schools. It operates four days a week; two days focus on tennis and the other days concentrate on academics and life skills. The program is located in schools that have tennis courts or that have them in the neighborhood, which allows participants to play tennis on their own in addition to the hours spent in the program. Healthy competition between schools is one way the program is able to keep children engaged.

11. Appendices

Section 204 of Public Law 108-265—June 30, 2004
Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004

SEC. 204 LOCAL WELLNESS POLICY

(a) **IN GENERAL** - Not later than the first day of the school year beginning after June 30, 2006, each local education 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 for schools under the local educational agency that, at a minimum—

- 1) Includes 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;
- 2) Includes 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;
- 3) Provides an assurance that guidelines for reimbursable school meals shall not be 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)0, as those regulations and guidance apply to schools;
- 4) Establishes a plan for measuring implementation of the local wellness policy, including designation of 1 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
- 5) Involves 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.

(b) **TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE AND BEST PRACTICES.** -

(1) **IN GENERAL.** - The Secretary, in coordination with the Secretary of Education and in consultation with the Secretary of Health and Human Services, acting through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, shall make available to local educational agencies, school food authorities, and State educational agencies, on request, information and technical assistance for use in—

- (A) Establishing healthy school nutrition environments;
- (B) Reducing childhood obesity; and
- (C) Preventing diet-related chronic diseases.

(2) **CONTENT.** - Technical assistance provided by the Secretary under this subsection shall—

- (A) Include relevant and applicable examples of schools and local educational agencies that have taken steps to offer healthy options for foods sold or served in schools;
- (B) Include such other technical assistance as is required to carry out the goals of promoting sound nutrition and establishing healthy school nutrition environments that are consistent with this section;
- (C) Be provided in such a manner as to be consistent with the specific needs and requirements of local educational agencies; and
- (D) Be for guidance purposes only and not be construed as binding or as a mandate to schools, local educational agencies, school food authorities, or State educational agencies.

(3) FUNDING. –

(A) IN GENERAL. – On July 1, 2006, out of any funds in the Treasury not otherwise appropriated, the Secretary of the Treasury shall transfer to the Secretary of Agriculture to carry out this subsection \$4,000,000, to remain available until September 30, 2009.

(B) RECEIPT AND ACCEPTANCE. – The Secretary shall be entitled to receive, shall accept, and shall use to carry out this subsection the funds transferred under subparagraph (A), without further appropriation.

HealthierUS School Challenge

Criteria and Instructions for Elementary Schools

Obesity is a growing concern for school children in the United States. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) believes that schools should be taking a leadership role in helping students learn to make healthy eating and active lifestyle choices. Many schools have already made changes to their school nutrition environments, improved the quality of the foods served, and now provide students with more nutritious, healthy choices. The HealthierUS School Challenge certification is to recognize your school's commitment to the health and well being of your students.

An individual elementary school that meets the HealthierUS School Challenge criteria may apply for either *Silver* or *Gold* certification. The certification is for a 2-year period, the current school year plus the following school year. Certified schools are strongly encouraged to continue their commitment and reapply at the end of their certification period.

CERTIFICATION PROCEDURES

Certification begins with a self-assessment of the school environment at the local level. A local certification review panel must be established to review your school against the HealthierUS School Challenge criteria to ensure it meets the requirements for the applicable certification. This panel must include, at a minimum, your school's or site's foodservice manager; the school's Team Nutrition Leader; the school's principal or administrator; the School Food Authority's (school district's) foodservice director¹; a representative from the school's parent organization; and at least one member from the following group: school nurse, coordinated school health representative, physical education teacher, or classroom teacher.

SUBMISSION OF THE APPLICATION PACKET

Once your school's application is certified and signed by members of the review panel, submit the application packet to the State agency that administers the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) in your State. The Application Packet includes:

- Application Cover Sheet
- Application Check-off Sheet
- Application Form (two sides)
- Prior month's menu for reimbursable school lunches in your school. Four full weeks must be submitted. Any substitutions from the planned menu must be documented.
- Lunch Menu Criteria Worksheet (*Silver* or *Gold*)

¹ USDA recognizes that in small independent schools, the foodservice manager, the Team Nutrition Leader, and/or the foodservice director may be the same person. Please note on the signature line(s) if this occurs in your school.

- Nutrition Education Criteria Worksheet
- Physical Activity Criteria Worksheet

APPROVAL PROCESS

The State agency will confirm:

- (1) The school is enrolled as a Team Nutrition school. The school's enrollment can be verified at www.fns.usda.gov/tn/Database/index.htm.
- (2) A School Meals Initiative (SMI) review of your district's School Food Authority (SFA) was completed within the preceding 5 years; the SFA has completed all improvement activities agreed to in the corrective action plan; and has no outstanding Coordinated Review Effort (CRE) audit issues or claims.
- (3) The submitted menus from your school were reimbursable meals and met the menu criteria for either the *Gold* or *Silver* certification.
- (4) The written description of nutrition education activities at the school meets the criteria.
- (5) The written description of opportunities for physical activity meets the criteria.
- (6) The student Average Daily Participation for your school has been reported correctly.
- (7) The foods or beverages sold/served a la carte, in vending machines, school stores, snack bars, etc. in your school meet the criteria for recognition. The school's local review panel is responsible for reviewing and certifying that the criteria have been met. Documentation of the items sold/served must be maintained at the school during the certification period (2 years) for possible review by the State agency and/or FNS.

The school is encouraged to keep a copy of the signed application and documentation as originals will not be returned.

After the State agency has completed its review of the Application Packet, a representative from the State agency will approve/disapprove, sign and date the application. If approved, it will be submitted, along with the required documentation, to the FNS Regional Office. If disapproved, it will be returned to the school's contact person with an explanation. Incomplete applications may be completed and resubmitted.

CRITERIA FOR CERTIFICATION

1. **Your school is enrolled or must enroll as a Team Nutrition (TN) School.**

To enroll as a Team Nutrition School or to verify your school's enrollment in Team Nutrition, go to www.fns.usda.gov/tn/Database/index.htm.

2. **Your school offers reimbursable school lunches that meet the USDA nutrition standards.**

The School Food Authority (school district) that administers the NSLP for your school must have undergone an SMI review within 5 years preceding your school's application for certification. The State agency will verify that all of the improvement activities planned as a result of the SMI review have been achieved. If the SFA did not receive an SMI review within the preceding 5 years and your school wants to apply for a *Silver* or *Gold* certification, the school food authority may request from the State agency that an SMI review be scheduled as soon as possible.

- 3. Your school offers reimbursable school lunches that demonstrate healthy menu planning practices and principles of the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, and meet or exceed the menu criteria listed in the chart on the next page.**

Menu Criteria—Lunch

Silver Criteria	Gold Criteria	Clarification
Three different fruits and five different vegetables offered each week		At least one vegetable must be offered each day. Juice (fruit or vegetable) may only be counted two times a week.
Dark green or orange vegetable or fruit offered three or more times per week		Examples of dark green/orange fruits and vegetables are provided in Food/nutrient guidance, Attachment A. Juice (fruit or vegetable) may only be counted twice per week.
Fresh fruits or raw vegetables offered three or more days of the week	Fresh fruits or raw vegetables offered every day of the week	
Good source of Vitamin C offered each day.		Food/nutrient guidance attachment B-1 and B-2 should be used for determining serving sizes. Juice (fruit or vegetable) may only be counted twice per week. Salad bar and/or fruit or vegetable items may be combined to meet the vitamin C source requirement. List items offered on the salad bar.
Four different entrees or meat/meat alternates are offered throughout each week.		When daily choices are not offered, higher fat entrée items are limited to once per week. A higher fat entrée is defined as having $\geq 40\%$ of calories from fat, excluding nuts, seeds, and nut butters. A definition and examples of different entrees or meat/meat alternates is provided in food/nutrient guidance attachment C.
Cooked legumes (dried beans or peas)—one or more servings offered each week		Examples of legumes (dried beans and peas) are provided in Food/nutrient guidance Attachment D.
Whole-grain foods offered three or more times a week.	Whole-grain foods offered every day of the week.	A whole grain food is one labeled as a whole grain product or with a whole grain as the <i>primary</i> grain ingredient (at least 51% whole grain) in the ingredient statement. Examples of a whole grain ingredient include the terms “whole wheat flour,” “entire wheat flour,” “cracked wheat,” “graham flour,” “brown rice,” “old-fashioned oatmeal,” “quick-cooking oats,” and “whole cornmeal.”. Submit ingredient statement and/or recipes for whole-grain products.
Two or more sources of iron offered daily		Food/nutrient guidance attachment F-1 should be used for determining serving sizes. A child must have the opportunity to select two sources of iron from the day’s menu.
Low fat (1%) and/or skim (nonfat) milk offered daily.		

To demonstrate that the menus meet either the *Silver* or *Gold* criteria, submit the prior month’s menus with portion sizes. The menu must contain four complete weeks, for meals already served.

To assist reviewers in determining if the menus meet the lunch menu criteria, please complete the **Lunch Menu Worksheet** (*Silver* or *Gold*) in the Application Packet, and submit it along with your month's menus.

4. Nutrition education is provided to students in multiple grades of your school and meets or exceeds the criteria listed below:

- Nutrition education is provided for at least half, but no fewer than two, of the grade levels in your school. If your school consists of a single grade, nutrition education is provided to all students in the school. In your written description, document that the students in a single grade school will be provided with nutrition education in at least one other grade as they complete elementary school.
- Nutrition education is delivered as part of a structured and systematic unit of instruction.
- Nutrition education involves multiple channels of communication—at least classrooms, school cafeteria, and home/parents—for each grade to which it's provided.

Submit a brief written description of nutrition education activities in your school that demonstrates the criteria for nutrition education or you may complete the **Nutrition Education Worksheet**, included in your Application Packet.

5. The opportunity for physical activity is provided to students in every grade of your school, except kindergarten, and meets or exceeds the following criterion.

Physical education classes or the equivalent must be provided on a regularly scheduled basis each school week during the entire school year. Examples of equivalents include school walking clubs, bike clubs, intramural sports, walk-to-school programs, approval of community physical activity programs for academic credit, etc. The objective is to ensure that children are routinely encouraged to be physically active in your school.

Submit a brief written description of regularly scheduled physical education or structured physical activity opportunities for students before, during, or after school hours, or you may complete the **Physical Activity Worksheet** included in your Application Packet.

6. A student Average Daily Participation (ADP) of 70% of school enrollment or higher is maintained for reimbursable lunches².

The percent Average Daily Participation (ADP) of school enrollment is calculated by dividing the total student participation for a typical operating month by the number of operating days in that month, then dividing by the school enrollment, and multiplying by 100. A typical month of operation to use is October.

² The average daily participation in elementary schools, based on enrollment, included in a national sample of schools for a target week from the *School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study II* (July 2001) was 67%.

For example:

During the month of October, the school served 20,000 reimbursable lunches. It operated or served lunches 20 days. There were 1,200 students enrolled in October. $20,000 \div 20 = 1,000$. $1,000 \div 1,200 = 0.83 \times 100 = 83\%$ ADP

FOR SILVER CERTIFICATION

7A (a) *During meal periods in the foodservice area, your school does not sell/serve foods or beverages in competition with reimbursable meals.*

OR

(b) *During meal periods in the foodservice area, your school sells/serves only these foods and beverages (listed in the chart below) in competition with reimbursable meals.*

To meet the criteria noted in 7A (b) above, if your school sells *any* foods or beverages during meal service, either a la carte, in vending machines, in school snack stores, etc., the item(s) must meet the criteria in the following chart. It is possible that an item may be served as part of a reimbursable meal but not meet the criteria for a la carte and vended items³.

FOR GOLD CERTIFICATION

7B (a) *Throughout the school day (including meal periods) and throughout the school campus, your school does not sell/serve foods or beverages other than reimbursable meals).* Self-explanatory.

OR

(b) *Throughout the school day (including meal periods) and throughout the school campus, your school sells/serves only the following foods or beverages other than reimbursable meals:* Refer to the Food and Beverage Criteria described in the chart below.

Food or Beverage	Criteria for Sales/Service of A La Carte and/or Vended Items
	These criteria focus on decreasing fat and added sugar, increasing nutrient density, and moderating portion size
Fruits and Non-Fried	Fruits and vegetables may be fresh, frozen, canned, or dried, and they must be found in the Food Buying Guide for Child Nutrition Programs

³ All foods in reimbursable meals are planned so that the menus meet the nutrition standards for calories, calories from fat and saturated fat, and key nutrients over a school week, appropriate to age/grade levels. This requires a balance of lowfat foods, foods rich in nutrients, etc. to meet the weekly nutrition standards. In contrast, foods and beverages sold on an individual or a la carte basis have not been nutritionally averaged into the weekly planned menus. Therefore they must be able to “stand alone” on established nutritional criteria.

Vegetables	http://schoolmeals.nal.usda.gov/FBG/2003FBG/%20Section%202.pdf Examples of products that <i>cannot</i> be sold/served as a fruit or vegetable include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Snack-type foods made from vegetables or fruits, such as potato chips and banana chips; • Pickle relish, jam, and jelly; and • Tomato catsup and chili sauce.
Approved Beverages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced fat (2%), lowfat (1%), skim/nonfat fluid milk meeting State and local standards for pasteurized fluid milk and/or USDA approved alternative dairy beverages⁴; • 100% full strength fruit and vegetable juices; and • Water (non-flavored, non-sweetened, <i>and</i> non-carbonated)
Any Other Individual Food Sales/Service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calories from total fat must be at or below 35%, <i>excluding nuts, seeds, and nut butters</i>. This is determined by dividing the calories from total fat by the total calories and multiplying by 100. If calories from fat are not available, multiply the grams of fat by 9 to equal calories from fat. • Calories from saturated fat must be at or below 10%. This is determined by dividing the calories from saturated fat by the total calories and multiplying by 100. If calories from saturated fat are not available, multiply grams of saturated fat by 9 to equal calories from saturated fat. • Total sugar must be at or below 35% by weight. This is determined by dividing the grams of sugar by the gram weight of the product and multiplying by 100. This includes both naturally occurring and added sugars. This limit does not include fruits and vegetables as defined above. • Portion size for a la carte sales in the school cafeteria are not to exceed the serving size of the food served in the NSLP/SBP; for vending sales, the item package or container is not to exceed 200 calories.

Meal period is defined as the time from the beginning of the school’s scheduled meal service until the end of the scheduled meal service, or until the last student is served, whichever comes last.

Food Service Area refers to any area on school premises where program meals are either served and/or eaten.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Please provide the name and contact information of someone at your school in case there is a question during the review process.

⁴ There are no USDA approved alternative dairy beverages at this time. Public Law 108-265 (Child Nutrition Program Reauthorization) authorizes the Secretary of Agriculture to establish nutritionally equivalent non-dairy beverages by July 1, 2005. Please check with your State agency for further clarification.

RECOGNITION

After the application has received final approval, your school will be recognized by USDA in the following ways:

- Receiving a plaque that recognizes the school's achievement.
- Posting of the school's name and certification status on USDA's Team Nutrition website.

During the certification period, your school must keep on file copies of the following documentation:

- Your completed and signed Application Packet and attachments.
- Food production records that support the menus submitted.
- Nutrition facts labels, or recipes if school-made, for products sold/served under provisions of #7(b) *Silver* criteria and #2(b) *Gold* criteria.