



# ADDRESSING SCHOOL WELLNESS POLICIES AND IDENTIFYING PRIORITIES FOR ACTION IN GREATER KANSAS CITY

Executive Summary - November 2012

# Executive Summary

## PROJECT OVERVIEW

Childhood obesity rates have climbed dramatically in the past 30 years, with one out of three children outside of healthy weight ranges in the greater Kansas City area. These changes are having a major impact on the health of children and youths. If we don't reverse this epidemic, the current generation of young people could be the first in history to live sicker and die younger than their parent's generation. It is imperative for us to take serious, collaborative steps to address this crisis.

Schools are uniquely positioned to provide a culture and environment that supports the efforts of children and parents to make choices to support their health and wellbeing. School wellness policies are an effective tool that impacts not only what children learn and do at school but create a lifetime of healthy choices. Schools alone cannot resolve this problem but it is highly unlikely that the crisis can be ended without strong school involvement.

In 2012, the Weighing In and the Healthy Schools Committee (supported by Children's Mercy Hospitals and Clinics), collaborated with researchers at the University of Kansas Medical Center (KUMC) to better understand the current status of local school wellness policies. The study aimed to:

- Assess local school wellness policies in the bi-state greater Kansas City area;
- Conduct discussion groups with school personnel to identify supports needed, barriers and priorities to implementing and enhancing school wellness policies; and
- Identify priorities for collaborative action to support schools.

### Local School Wellness Policy Mandate

Local wellness policies are an important tool for parents and school districts in promoting student wellness, preventing and reducing childhood obesity, and assuring that school meal nutrition guidelines meet the federal standards.

Section 204 of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, Public Law 111-296, expands the scope of wellness policies; brings in additional stake-holders in its development, implementation and review; and requires public updates on the content and implementation of the wellness policies.

The USDA will be issuing new proposed regulations on local wellness policies and the Kansas City area is well-positioned to respond to these requirements.

## METHODS

Researchers collected and analyzed school wellness policies from 46 school districts from seven counties in the Greater Kansas City region (38 districts in MO and 8 districts in KS). KUMC used the national Wellness School Assessment Tool (WellSAT) to assess the comprehensiveness and strength of written policies. In addition, they conducted seven discussion groups with school administrators and personnel and administered an online survey of school wellness policy practices with responses from 156 individuals.

## FINDINGS

Several recurring themes were found across the school wellness policy analysis, discussion groups and survey results.

### Engage families to meet school wellness goals

- Only 3 of 46 school districts had policies on how they engaged families or provided information on school wellness goals.
- Discussion groups reported that schools received pushback from parents related to school wellness policies.
- 62% of survey respondents indicated that parents bring foods into the cafeteria from local fast food restaurants during lunch and three-fourths believe this practice made the school environment worse, especially in recent times when concentrated effort is being made to meet new nutrient standards to improve school meal choices.
- School personnel stated they wanted easy ways to consistently communicate policies and their purpose with parents.



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### Regulation of Foods Sold

- More than 50% of survey respondents indicated their schools use chocolate, candy and high-fat baked goods in current fundraising practices.
- When asked about how beneficial these practices are, about two-thirds of respondents reported it does not support a healthy school environment but makes it worse.
- Seven out of 46 district wellness policies did not mention how food sold was to be regulated or if mentioned, the policy statements were weak.
- Discussion groups described significant challenges to implementing and enforcing policies. They indicated a reliance on the revenue generated from vending machines to support programs.

### Foods Used As Rewards

- More than 2/3 of survey respondents indicated food is used as rewards/incentives at their schools.
- More than sixty percent of respondents indicated this practice does not support a healthy school environment.
- More than 60% of school district policies did not address foods being used as rewards, or if mentioned, the written policies were rated as weak. Only one school district met/exceeded expectation for this nutrition standard.
- No school districts had written policies that regulated foods served at class parties or other school celebrations that met or exceeded expectations.
- School personnel believe this wellness standard is a priority for change.

Only **two** school districts had written policies that met or exceeded expectations for regulating nutrition standards in food sold in vending machines, school stores or a la carte in cafeteria.



About **80%**  
of respondents believe  
restricting physical activity  
as a punishment **does not**  
**support a healthy**  
**school environment**  
but makes it worse.

### **Physical Activity and Physical Education Standards**

- Policies addressing the time spent in PE were identified as a practice by 79% of the survey responders and almost all of them said this practice made better or may benefit the school environment.
- Almost half of the respondents indicated that they address moderate to vigorous activity at least half of the total time during PE class and almost all said this practice made better or may benefit the school environment.
- Schools fared well in written policy that addressed written PE curriculum and programs with over two-thirds of the school districts having written policies.
- No school district had written policies that met or exceeded expectations for regular physical activity breaks for elementary school students during classroom time, not including PE and recess.
- Adequate time for physical activity and physical education during the school day was identified as a priority for action.

### **Restriction of Physical Activity (PA) as Punishment**

- Eighteen percent of school personnel indicated use of physical activity as a form of punishment is a current practice (e.g., push ups for bad behavior).
- About 40% of respondents indicated withholding recess or PE as punishment is a current practice.
- Eighty percent of respondents indicated these practices do not support a healthy school environment.
- Participants indicated restriction of physical activity as an important policy to be addressed. Participants want to prohibit physical activity from being taken away or used as punishment for student misbehavior.

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- About two thirds of school districts failed to address restriction of physical activity as punishment in their wellness policies. When addressed, less than one-fourth of school districts met/exceeded expectations for regulating this physical education/physical activity standard; remaining district policies were rated as “weak” for this standard.

### Community Use of School Facilities for Physical Activity Outside of School Day

- Thirty-one out of 46 school districts did not address this standard in their wellness policies. Of those districts that had wellness policies, 13 districts met/exceeded the standard.
- Twenty-seven percent of survey respondents indicated their schools allow use of indoor facilities for recreation outside school hours. More than half (53%) of respondents indicated it was not allowed.
- Discussion group participants did not mention community access as a priority for change. They stressed the need to enhance community partnerships with schools.



wellness policies can  
**lower**  
risks for **obesity**

## **SUMMARY**

School wellness policies are an effective tool for addressing the childhood obesity crisis through improvements in school-based nutrition and physical activity supports and practices. When written and implemented effectively, these policies have demonstrated not only improved healthy behaviors that lower risk for obesity but also improved classroom behavior and academic performance.

This study provides a means to identify areas where greater Kansas City school districts are doing well and areas where community collaborative efforts will be most helpful.

These findings suggest that significant improvements can be made in the strength and comprehensiveness of written school wellness policies. They also provide insights on where we need to bridge the gap between the current state of written policies and the desired beneficial practices to support a healthy school environment.

## **FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

The Healthy Schools Committee will use this information to generate attention and support from the community for improving school wellness policies. The information gained will also help to guide planning and collaborative action to support schools to implement the new federal school wellness requirements that will be enacted soon.



