



Where Do They Stand and What Can You Do?

Local school wellness policies (i.e., wellness policies) provide an opportunity to create and support a healthy school environment, promote student health, and reduce childhood obesity. Because they are required for all school districts participating in the federal Child Nutrition Programs including the National School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program, millions of children can be reached through implementation of these policies which focus on creating supportive school nutrition and physical activity environments. Research has documented that although almost all districts have adopted a wellness policy, they lack specificity related to competitive foods as well as requirements for implementation and compliance.¹

BACKGROUND

The *Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004*,² and more recently the *Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010*,³ required that school districts participating in the federal Child Nutrition Programs adopt, implement, and most recently, report on local school wellness policies.

What Do the Experts Recommend?

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has issued a guidance memo for State agencies and child nutrition directors to guide districts on wellness policy implementation, compliance, and reporting;⁴ and, a USDA, U.S.

Department of Education, and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) interagency workgroup have developed a 5-year technical assistance plan to guide local efforts.⁵ In addition, many organizations including the Institute of Medicine and the American Academy of Pediatrics, recommend that schools implement policies and practices supportive of healthy eating and physical activity (PA).⁶⁻¹⁵



What is this Brief About?

The following sections highlight areas where policy opportunities exist, as well as areas where policies are well-established relative to the following wellness policy components: (1) nutrition education and promotion; (2) standards for competitive foods and beverages; (3) nutrition standards for school meals; (4) PA outside of physical education (PE); (5) PE; (6) stakeholder involvement; and (7) wellness policy monitoring, evaluation, and reporting. This brief summarizes the range of policy actions taken by public school districts from the 2011-2012 school year, from the Bridging the Gap (BTG) study. All policies were collected and coded by BTG researchers using a standardized method based on evidence-based guidelines and recommendations from expert organizations and agencies.^{12,16} Complete details about how these data were collected and compiled are available in the companion methods documentation.¹⁷



bridging the gap

Research Informing Policies & Practices
for Healthy Youth

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WHAT ACTIONS HAVE SCHOOL DISTRICTS TAKEN?

Nutrition Education and Promotion

Schools can provide nutrition education as part of the k-12 health education curriculum and engage in nutrition promotion activities. Nutrition education should teach specific skills and knowledge, such as understanding caloric balance, energy expenditure, Nutrition Facts labels, and media awareness.^{6,18} During the 2011–2012 school year, the BTG study found that

- Nearly 93% of districts included required nutrition education goals in their wellness policies.
- Slightly more than one-half (52%) of districts required skill-based nutrition education.
- Only 35% of districts required a nutrition education curriculum be provided for each grade level.
- 71% of districts had no policy regarding the promotion of healthy food choices in schools.

Schools can also engage in nutrition promotion efforts that encourage healthy choices by favorably pricing healthy options, restricting advertising of unhealthy options, or developing strategies to increase participation in school meals.⁵ During the 2011–2012 school year,

- Nearly 14% of districts prohibited advertising of unhealthy choices.
- 13% of districts' policies included provisions to increase participation in school meals.
- Only 5% of districts required promotion of healthy choices.

Nutrition Standards for Competitive Foods and Beverages

Competitive food and beverage policy provisions varied by location of sale within the school, specific nutrient restrictions, and grade level. During the 2011–2012 school year,

- The most common restrictions for competitive foods and beverages were for vending machines, followed by school stores and à la carte lines in the cafeteria. Few districts had policy restrictions regarding class parties (Figure 1).

School Meals

Wellness policies are required to include an assurance that school meals at least meet the federal standards.³ Districts may also include other requirements related to school meals.

During the 2011–2012 school year,

- Approximately 85% of districts included an assurance in the wellness policy that school meals meet federal standards.
- Nearly 51% of districts required participation in the School Breakfast Program.

Physical Activity

Federal guidelines recommend that school-age youth participate in 60 minutes or more of physical activity each day and avoid prolonged periods of inactivity.^{19,20} School districts can adopt and implement policies that maximize opportunities for students to be physically active and help them meet the national recommendation. During the 2011–2012 school year,

- 89% of district policies included goals for PA.
- 44% of districts required PA opportunities to be provided for every grade level.
- 14% of districts required that PA be integrated throughout the school day (such as through PA breaks in the classroom).
- Only 7%, 3%, and 2% of districts specified an amount of time for PA at the elementary, middle, or high school levels, respectively.

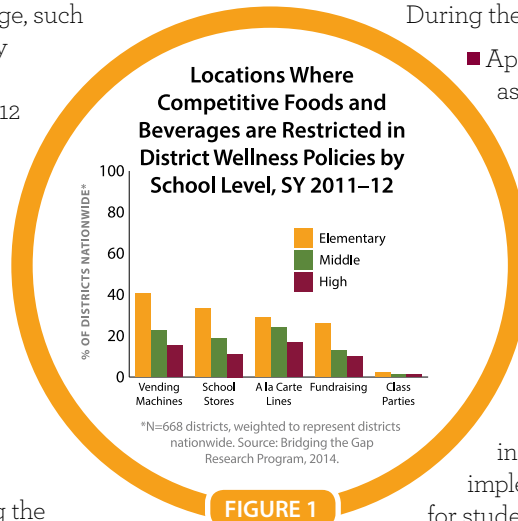


FIGURE 1

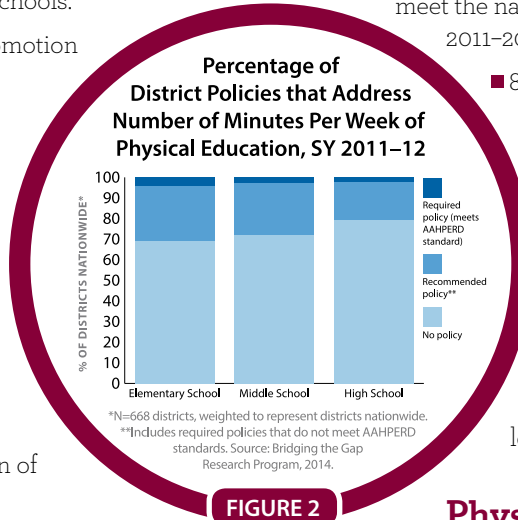


FIGURE 2

Physical Education

The American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance (AAHPERD) recommends that elementary students receive 150 minutes and secondary students receive 225 minutes of PE each week.²¹

During the 2011–2012 school year,

- Over 70% of district policies did not address time requirements for physical education across grade levels, and very few district policies (less than 5%) met the AAHPERD-recommended time (Figure 2).

- When addressed, district PE time provisions ranged 30–150 minutes per week at the elementary level, 30–250 minutes per

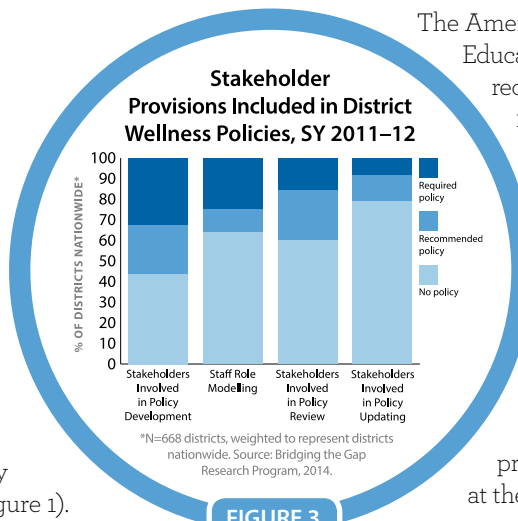


FIGURE 3

WHAT ACTIONS HAVE SCHOOL DISTRICTS TAKEN? (continued)

week at the middle school level, and 30–225 minutes per week at the high school level.

Stakeholder Involvement

The *Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010*³ included provisions to increase stakeholder involvement implementing, monitoring and reporting about wellness policies. Policies can also encourage district staff members, a key stakeholder group, to model healthy behaviors as a part of daily life. During the 2011–2012 school year, few district policies required stakeholder involvement (Figure 3).

Monitoring, Evaluating, and Reporting

The *Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010*³

included new language to require that districts periodically measure and report on policy implementation, compliance, and progress. During the 2011–2012 school year,

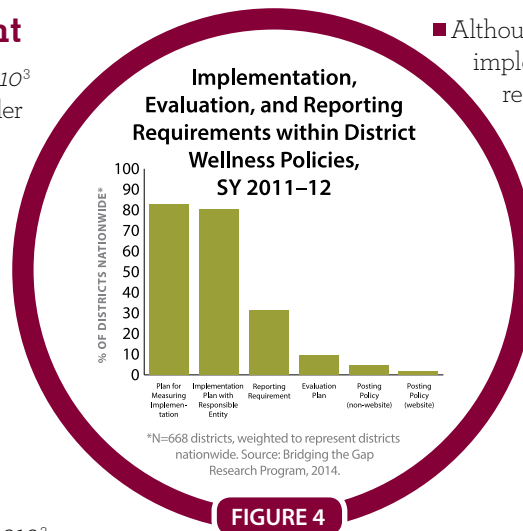


FIGURE 4

- Although the majority of districts required implementation plans and assigned responsibility for implementation, few required reporting, evaluating, or making the policies publicly accessible such as on the district Web site (Figure 4).
- When specified, implementation review typically was required every 1–3 years and annual reporting was the most common reporting timeframe.
- 48% of districts required an ongoing health advisory or wellness committee.

Supporting Local School Wellness Policies

There are a number of evidence-based strategies and expert recommendations that can help improve wellness policies.^{6–15} The actions below can help you implement these strategies and recommendations. See the Resource section at the end for links to documents and Web sites that provide additional information to help these efforts.

STATES

- Set a state-wide priority for establishing healthy school environments, implementing district wellness policies, and communicating the connection between health and academic achievement.
- Provide districts with professional development and technical assistance for revising district policies to align with national recommendations and standards.
- Assist districts with monitoring and reporting on the implementation of district wellness policies.

SCHOOL DISTRICTS AND SCHOOLS

- Educate districts about the elements of a healthy school nutrition environment including nutrition standards that meet or exceed the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) "Smart Snacks in School" nutrition standards for all foods sold in school.
- Support standards-based nutrition and physical education for districts and schools.
- Involve parents and other stakeholders in reviewing and revising district policies.
- Engage in nutrition promotion efforts that encourage healthy choices (e.g., favorably pricing healthy options).
- Provide skill-based nutrition education as part of the k-12 health education curriculum.
- Require that elementary students receive 150 minutes and secondary students receive 225 minutes of PE each week as part of a sequential, standards-based PE program.
- Create a school health council that includes district and community stakeholders to implement, monitor, and evaluate the district wellness policy.
- Review and revise the district wellness policy to align with national recommendations and assist schools with implementing the policy.
- Make the district wellness policy and nutrition standards available to parents and other stakeholders (e.g., district Web site).
- Provide opportunities for moderate-to-vigorous physical activity for all students during the school day (e.g., PA breaks in the classroom).
- Encourage school staff to model healthy eating and physical activity behaviors.
- Provide ongoing training and professional development opportunities for all school staff.

What Can You Do?

RESOURCES

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Nutrition, Physical Activity and Obesity. <http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/npao/>.
- USDA Food and Nutrition Service. Local School Wellness Policy. <http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/local-school-wellness-policy>.
- USDA. Team Nutrition. <http://www.teamnutrition.usda.gov/>.
- USDA Healthy Meals Resource System. School Nutrition Environment and Wellness Resources. <http://healthymeals.nal.usda.gov/school-wellness-resources>.
- Action for Healthy Kids. Wellness Policy Tool. <http://www.actionforhealthykids.org/resources/wellness-policy-tool>.



- Bridging the Gap Research. School district wellness policy-related reports and materials. http://www.bridgingthegapresearch.org/research/district-wellness_policies.
- Let's Move. Schools Take Action: 5 Simple Steps to Success. http://www.letsmove.gov/sites/letsmove.gov/files/pdfs/TAKE_ACTION_SCHOOLS.pdf.
- National Association for Sport and Physical Education. Position Statement: Physical Education Is Critical to Educating the Whole Child. <http://www.aahperd.org/naspe/standards/upload/Physical-Education-Is-Critical-to-Educating-the-Whole-Child-Final-5-19-2011.pdf>.
- Yale Rudd Center. Wellness School Assessment Tool. <http://wellsat.org/>.

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