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Inviting Your Community to the Table

The skinny on writing your school wellness policy

McDonald's "apples and walnuts," Burger King's "salads your way," and Wendy's "healthy sides" attest to the fact that the corporate fast-food giants know that healthy choices are essential to the future health of their industry. They are responding to market demand.

But what do burgers or salads have to do with school public relations? With the Child Nutrition and WIC (Women, Infants and Children) Reauthorization Act of 2004, all school districts are required to develop a school wellness policy by June 2006.

It looks like the federal government knows it, too: Healthy youth are essential to the long-term health of our nation!

But again, what do burgers, salads or a local wellness policy have to do with school public relations? Isn't it possible to write your district's wellness policy in isolation, or to blow the dust off your existing policy, add a few words, and call it a day? No, because that would not be in compliance with the legislation. Nor would it provide the quality in the policy that you desire and that your students deserve.

Community Involvement

The legislation requires that the policy be written with community involvement, and community involvement opens the door to a new avenue of school public relations. Your community's involvement in the development of a wellness policy is a golden opportunity for community engagement. The community engagement process will allow you to:

- gather information;
- take the community's pulse on the rigor that they expect in your policy; and
- answer some of the tough questions after evaluation of data.

By inviting to the table the various members of your community who possess the expertise, your school district has a genuine opportunity to connect the community to its schools.

(A word of caution: Like any information-gathering process, if you are not willing and able to truly value and listen to the feedback you gather, do not bother to engage. Assuming that's not the case, let's move on!)

The Legislation Requirements

In brief, with school board, staff and community input, the policy must address:

- goals for nutrition education, physical activity and other school-based activities designed to promote student wellness;
- nutrition guidelines for all foods available on each school campus during the school day to promote student health and reduce childhood obesity;
- an assurance that guidelines for reimbursable school meals are not less restrictive than regulations and guidance issued by the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, as applicable to schools; and
- a plan for measuring the implementation of the school wellness policy, including the designation of one or more persons within the district or at each school responsible for ensuring that the local policy requirements are met.

Needed: Good Leadership

Admittedly, your policy-writing committee will need a good leader on this project, and it may take

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longer to complete the process when you involve a larger group of people. It's worth it! Each area needs serious consideration and will have an impact on your schools. Using your community to help you answer the tough questions makes good sense. You'll know the community's pulse before there is a policy to implement. The potential for this policy to build good will is very real.

The Community Team

Who should your administration invite to the table? Look outside the box to include all individuals who have expertise or an interest in the topic. Your list might include:

- health professionals (doctors, nurses, dentists, etc.);
- dietitians and nutritionists;
- other professionals who have specific training in health, wellness, and fitness;
- staff members with desired skills and background (physical education

teachers, health and family living educators, and your food service manager or professional); and

- other members of the community and parents who have expressed interest in the issue of child wellness.

During policy development, it is good to hear from all sides so that, in the end, your policy represents a true community perspective on a policy that will have significant impact on your school district.

Issues to Consider

There are hard questions to be asked during the development of this policy and you will need data to answer questions about community attitudes on critical issues.

- Should the policy stick to the letter of the law, meaning that your policy will address only food served during the school day, or should your policy apply to food served at school 24/7 (including football concession stands)?

- Are your current food service programs awesome, lean and mean money-makers, or full of fat and sodium? What are the hard data about your food service program and what are the perceptions of students, parents, staff and the community?
- What types of current fundraising activities involve food? How much fundraising? What are the alternative fundraisers? What will be the impact of your policy on fundraising?
- Is food used as a reward in your classrooms? Should it be? What is the classroom snack policy? Can students drink water during the day?
- What foods and activities are allowed during school and classroom celebrations?
- Will you limit or eliminate soda? How? What is the financial impact?
- How will your policy address vending machines?



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- What health and physical activity curriculum is in place? Is it current and consistent with current information on health and wellness? How will you update it?
- What do all the teachers know about health and wellness? What are the staff development implications? Is your curriculum up to date?
- Who will oversee the implementation of your plan?
- Does your policy meet the requirements of the law?

Make Decisions Based on Data

As school boards and administrators continue to use data in more and more venues, this is another area where data and information must be used. It is important that the data come from your community. Your data should be current and reflect the current attitudes and needs in your schools. Your team should

research for best practice and good model policies from other schools. Ultimately, the school board must approve a school wellness policy that is appropriate for your local community and your schools.

Gathering the Data

Assessing your current climate is the way to begin the process. To provide the most comprehensive and efficient information, districts are encouraged to survey several groups of individuals — students, parents, staff and community. It is critical to gear the questions to the audience to gain the most usable data. For sample survey questions, visit the Wisconsin School Public Relations Association (WSPRA) Web site at www.wspra.org.

A Word of Caution

If you engage people in the process of developing your wellness policy, they will expect more than a piece of paper or an electronic file containing

your policy. They will expect that their work will cause real change that will benefit the children of your community. Once the policy is written, breathe life into it! Make it fun. Involve the students and staff in promoting new ideas.

Ah, what are we seeing evolve? Yes, it is another public relations opportunity to tell the story of positive changes happening in your schools as a result of your policy. But that is the topic for another article. The school wellness policy is your first step. Good luck on your journey! ■

Schumacher is the secretary for the Wisconsin School Public Relations Association (WSPRA), which provided this column. Dembski is vice president of WSPRA. WSPRA, specializing in school-community relations, provides visionary leadership and services to Wisconsin's schools by equipping its members with effective communication skills.

For more information on the requirements of the school wellness policy, see the WASB Web site at www.wasb.org.