

# WORKING WITH SCHOOL BOARDS TO ACHIEVE A GOLD STANDARD SCHOOL WELLNESS POLICY

- A Guide for School Wellness Committees -

## FAST FACTS

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- ☑ Children eat **40-50%** of their daily calories and spend **6-7** of their waking hours **at school**
- ☑ Supportive **nutrition and physical activity policies** and programs at the school can go a long way towards improving the health of Alaska's kids
- ☑ Required items in District School Wellness Policies:
  - Districts goals for improving nutrition and physical activity environments and outcomes
  - Implementation of "Smart Snacks at School" – nutritional guidelines for all foods sold at school during the school day
  - Regular reporting to the parents and the community about progress toward reaching goals and meeting policy requirements

Next to families, **schools** have more influence on the lives of young people than *any other social institution*. While it is understood that schools alone cannot be expected to address all student health issues, schools are in a unique position to reach nearly all the young people and their families in the state. Schools can improve the health and education of young people and prepare them to be healthy and productive adults. Wellness policies support physical activity and nutrition and are a key component of obesity prevention in schools. That's why recent federal legislation (The Healthy and Hunger Free Kids Act) requires all school districts to have strong school wellness policies.

A comprehensive school wellness policy benefits everyone by creating environments that reinforce healthy behaviors, attitudes and norms. The State of Alaska Obesity Prevention & Control Program, in collaboration with the Alaska Department of Education & Early Development Nutrition Program, developed a model Gold Standard School Wellness Policy.

Most school districts in Alaska adopted wellness policies in 2006. This document provides guidance for School Wellness Committees on how to organize for success when assisting a school district in updating their wellness policy.

# How do you change policies in schools?

## 1. UNDERSTAND THE SYSTEMS

### Who are the policy makers?

School policy change happens at the **school board** level. There are 54 school districts in Alaska and each one has a governing body: the local school board. School boards are typically made up of 5 to 7 people who volunteer their time to govern the school district. This group of people will ultimately decide whether or not the school district has a strong school wellness policy.

School district **administrators**, especially the school Superintendent, support the school board in implementing established policies. School boards rely on school district administrators to provide them with accurate and timely information that will assist the board in making decisions. Therefore, it is important that school district administrators are supportive of policy change that is reviewed and voted upon by the school board.

## 2. ORGANIZE YOUR SUPPORT & BEGIN TO STRATEGIZE

### Pull together your wellness team

Does your district have a School Wellness Committee that is as strong and active as it can be? If you want to boost membership and ensure your efforts are a success, start by evaluating your current committee. Is everyone present at the table? If you wish to expand, think through groups and individuals who may also want to see a Gold Standard School Wellness Policy implemented in your district. Your nutrition services staff is great place to find partners.

Make contact with the allies you have identified. Remember each new member can

bring along other supporters. Your group will gain momentum in time, so you won't need to publicize for support just yet.

It is crucial to find allies at all levels within the school system, if possible. Teachers, students, coaches, administrators, the Superintendent – anyone who is supportive of what you are doing – should be involved to the fullest extent possible. If someone feels they are unable to *actively* participate, let them know that is okay. Ask if you can still count on them as an inactive ally. More allies provide a better chance of success.

### Decide on 1<sup>st</sup> steps

Once you assemble a core group, from as many sectors of the community as possible, you need to consider how you are going to **approach** the situation. There are many possibilities:

- Talk with the Superintendent
- Make a friendly public comment at a school board meeting
- Find an administrator to champion the policy
- Conduct a simple poll of parents and others in the school community to demonstrate support for a Gold Standard Wellness Policy

No one approach will work in every situation, this is why planning and involving others in the process are important. You may need only a bare-bones idea of whom to approach, or you may need a full-blown strategic plan. Either way, you have to do some planning to decide on your course of action.

### Establish methods of "C & C"

Within your core group, establish methods of **Coordination and Communication**. If a particular person or program takes the lead in a policy change effort, then that person/program will usually act as the central point. If there is no clear lead, the group will need to establish internal communication strategies. You do not necessarily have to create a formal organization to accomplish

# CORE MESSAGES

these tasks, but it is important to set up a structure to make sure people are on the same page.

The more you know about the current policy, school system, issues related to your proposed changes, and individuals involved, the better your chance of success.

## 3. DO YOUR HOMEWORK

### Learn about current policy

Make sure you understand exactly what is and what is not covered in the current wellness policy for your school district. At this point in your process, assessing your current policy using the [WellSAT: Wellness School Assessment Tool](#) is strongly recommended. This comprehensive review tool, designed by the Yale Rudd Center for Obesity and Food Policy, will give your group the knowledge and confidence to speak about your current policy's strengths and weaknesses.

### Know the issue inside out

Make sure you understand the importance of school wellness (nutrition and physical activity policies) well enough that you can answer any questions put to you, and anticipate and counter opponents' arguments. **Know your opponents' arguments as well as your own, and be prepared for frequently asked questions.**

If questions do arise that your group needs assistance with, contact [the Alaska Obesity Prevention and Control Program](#) for help.

Many adults assume that Alaska students attend PE classes as often as they did when they were younger. Unfortunately, that is not the case. Only 17% of Alaska high school students attended PE daily in 2011, compared to 32% nationally.

There are no federal or state mandates that require PE at the elementary or middle school levels.

The State of Alaska health/PE high school graduation requirement of one credit is not adequate to support recommended levels for quality PE.

### Use the model policy

Obtain the State of Alaska Gold Standard School Wellness Policy from <http://redegroup.co/opcp-wellness-policy> or the Alaska Obesity Prevention and Control Program.

### Know school organization

Take time to find out the structure of your school district's chain of command. Is it rigid or flexible? Who reports to whom? Whom will you offend if you do not follow protocol?

### Get to know the board

As important as the protocol are, so are the personalities of the people involved. **Who** are the members of the school board? **Which** members are potential allies in a policy change effort, which are potential opponents, and which are the neutrals you will have to convince? **What** positions has the board taken on the issue in the past? **What** is important to them? **Who** are their friends and constituencies? Who is up for reelection or reappointment?

### Understand the board

Attend school board policy subcommittee meetings to understand how the board functions. **Who** are the powerful voices on the board? **Whose** opinions are respected, and whose are ignored? **Who** influences whom? **Who** responds to what kinds of arguments? Does the board function well as a body, or is it challenged by disagreement and distrust?

### Think through opposition

It is very possible that there will be little or no opposition. However, it is important to talk with your core group and others to **root out any opposition** prior to putting a policy forward to the school board. When talking to community members and school community members about the policy, ask them if they can think of anyone who might oppose it.

## 4. PREPARE A SOLID RATIONALE FOR THE PROPOSED CHANGE

### Come prepared

Explain exactly **why** a comprehensive school wellness policy is necessary. Use the information above and any local information you can add, including stories or local issues that involve real people in your community.

### Outline the financials

Speak to the **costs** of implementing a Gold Standard School Wellness Policy. School boards must be very careful when making decisions that might cost the district money. While the benefits far outweigh the costs associated with implementing a school wellness policy, you should talk with administrators about what the costs might be and prepare to address them with the school board. If schools aren't doing so already, some elements

of the Gold Standard School Wellness Policy -- such as providing physical education to all students at the recommended number of minutes -- may require district resources. Work with your group and school administrators to estimate the costs and/or provide a cost range for policy makers to review.

### Identify champions

Obtain testimonials from nearby school districts that have passed a Gold Standard School Wellness Policy. School administrators and boards like to hear from peers and colleagues who can provide credible insight into implementing a school wellness policy.

## 5. WORK TO GET THE GOLD STANDARD POLICY PASSED

Now that you have laid the groundwork for policy change, it is time to take action.

### In general, **start your discussions with school leaders at the ground level.**

This is both a matter of courtesy and strategy. You need to gain the support of the person(s) who will have to carry out wellness policy such as food service staff, school activities fundraisers, PE/Health teachers, and curriculum coordinators.

As you go farther up the chain of command (making your way from principals, to administrators, to the Superintendent and eventually to the school board), it will be critical to gather and demonstrate support at each level.

## How do you present your message?

Once you have solid support and a strong majority of the school board members committed to vote 'Yes':

### Get on the school board agenda

If the Superintendent and school board members are involved, they can make sure that you get enough time for a proper presentation.

**Present the proposed policy change at a school board meeting.** For real results, you

have to do more than simply show up. Here is where your prior organizing will pay off.

- Pack the meeting with supporters from as many sectors of the community as possible. Gather **students, parents, teachers, interested community members, and groups that are concerned with the issue the policy addresses**— the more

representation you can produce, the more obvious it is that there is broad-based enthusiasm for your proposal.

- Alert the public about the meeting. Call your media contacts, send out press releases, make announcements on the VHF, and/or hang fliers around the community to **ensure that people know what's happening** and have exposure to the issues.



☑ **Physical education**

is not the same thing as physical activity; both are critically important for our children's health.

☑ Physical activity helps control weight, builds lean muscle, reduces fat, promotes strong bone, muscle and joint development, and decreases the risk of obesity.

☑ **Quality PE is important** because it...

- Teaches children the necessary skills to be physically active
- Gives kids the opportunity to develop motor skills and knowledge to participate in a variety of physical activities
- Enhances all aspects of development, including health, academic performance, physical fitness, knowledge of moment, goal setting, self-esteem, relationship development and social skills

- **Choose spokespeople carefully.** If several members of your group are allowed to speak, use the opportunity to showcase people who are articulate, represent a range of stakeholders (parents, students, particular groups affected), are respected by the community.

Effective speakers present themselves considerately but firmly, and have compelling stories to tell or arguments to make. Personal stories in particular can make a powerful impression, especially if those who tell them are familiar to the audience, or are people with whom they can identify.

- **Make sure your message is clear and consistent, no matter who is delivering it.** What your group has to say should be straightforward, informative, and non-confrontational. It should be backed by facts, statistics, study results, and/or experiences from other school systems. Most importantly, it should emphasize how the Gold Standard School Wellness Policy will benefit students, education, and the community.

**How do you ensure high compliance?**

Once the Gold Standard School Wellness Policy has passed, making sure that everyone complies is important. Having a

solid and public policy adoption process will go a long way toward having policies that are understood and well enforced.

Sometimes groups shy away from longer public policy processes thinking that just quietly working with the school board to pass a policy will be faster and easier. And it might be the case if all you want to do is pass a policy. But a policy that's just "on paper" means nothing; this approach could leave you in a less than optimal place when it's time for enforcement. **The more people that have a chance to learn about, talk about, air their concerns about and engage in a policy before it's passed, the better!**

The State of Alaska Obesity Prevention Program will develop tools with helpful advice on implementing a wellness policy such as sample announcements. It is our intent to provide assistance to districts so they can meaningfully implement their wellness policies♦

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