A healthy school environment is important to the well-being, development and achievement of students. Schools have the potential to influence children’s food choices and daily activity levels, and present a wonderful opportunity to introduce and encourage healthy habits. The following school districts are implementing innovative programs, policies and practices that are creating healthier school environments for students and staff.

Local Wellness Policies – Creating Healthy Policy Changes


The essence of the bill enacting the wellness policy guidance recognizes that schools play a critical role in promoting student health, preventing childhood obesity, and combating problems associated with poor nutrition and lack of physical activity.

By its very nature, the law calls on school district leadership to put in place a systemic plan — that includes the development, implementation and evaluation of a wellness policy — and that it be comprehensive in its quest to involve and value all relevant stakeholders.

Atlanta, Ga., Public Schools and Richland School District 1 in Columbia, S.C., are two examples of school districts that have implemented not just the letter of the law, but embody the very spirit of the law. The buy-in and support of school district leadership on health and wellness issues within a school district is vital to program and policy success. Strong leadership has been a key factor in implementing and sustaining programs in these districts.

These two school districts also recognize the importance of engaging the community in their programs, and the health of students is a community-held value. What they share with other districts is that community partners not only promote what the school system is doing, but actually extend what they are able to do. In addition, involving students within the district in meaningful ways when designing changes can increase buy-in, and get the input to make programs successful for the ultimate consumer — students.

what’s inside:

◆ Atlanta Public Schools: Student Success Is the Goal of Every Program
◆ Taking Collaborations to the Next Level – Inside the School District & Out
◆ Richland School District 1: Our Children’s Health is Not for Sale
◆ Creating Healthy Policy Changes In Your District
Leadership

In Atlanta Public Schools, superintendent leadership is strong and has invigorated the district. Student success is a priority and the health issues of students, including the need for physical activity and healthy food choices, have been on the district’s radar screen for years. In fact, the district passed their school wellness policy in February 2006, months ahead of the federal requirement. In the Atlanta Public School district, careful attention is given to designing health and wellness policies that will have a measurable impact on student success. Programs that do not support or increase student success simply do not exist in Atlanta Public Schools.

The first step in creating a wellness policy in Atlanta Public Schools was to create a district wellness council. This council was comprised of local school and central office staff, community partners and local businesses. The wellness council created a policy, which included plans for implementing the wellness policy across all district school sites. In each elementary, middle and high school district-wide, wellness objectives have been integrated, when possible, into the core curriculum in all grade levels. To monitor the effects of the wellness plans across all school sites, the district has established a three-year evaluation plan, funded in part by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Community Collaboration

Through a partnership with Georgia-Pacific Corporation, the M. Agnes Jones Elementary School has made important strides. A primarily low-income school in which 90 percent of students receive free and reduced lunch, and 60 percent live in single-parent homes, the school has been able to create and maintain a 1/4 mile walking trail that is used by students, staff, the community and administration regularly. The trail was created with the help of a volunteer group, Hands-On Atlanta, on property already owned by the school district.

In addition to using the trail for exercise, many teachers have found creative ways to incorporate the trail into their lesson plans. For example, they may track their progress in miles using math skills, chart a walk around the world studying different countries and cultures, or study different plants along the way for science class. In addition to the walking trail, physical activity and nutrition have been integrated into other aspects of the school environment. This includes using only healthy snacks as incentives by teachers, sponsoring family fun and fitness nights, providing incentives for walkers on the trail, teaching health and fitness words and phrases in Spanish classes, developing a reading section in the media center that promotes healthy living, and providing afterschool activities that incorporate physical activity. The local community supports the school and their healthy efforts as well. A community festival health fair is held annually, healthy snacks are available at parent meetings, and parents are asked to send healthy snacks with students during testing time. The community has embraced the idea that this is “their” school, and everyone is willing to work together to make the school as healthy, productive and successful as possible.

Student Involvement

In Atlanta Public Schools, a vegetarian student took the initiative to ask for some healthier options in her high school cafeteria. Unsatisfied with the current vegetarian options in the lunch line such as cheese pizza, drooping lettuce in salads, and the occasional fruit or vegetable option, she approached school leadership about the possibility of introducing a full-vegetarian line in her high school cafeteria.

The same student created a vegetarian club to educate and collaborate with interested students. This club also helped her build interest in and support for the vegetarian line in the cafeteria among her peers. This all-vegetarian line is thought to be the first of its

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Leadership

The health and wellness efforts in Richland School District 1 began in 2000 with discussions and collaboration between leaders focused on nutrition and leaders focused on physical education and activity. In addition, during a review of contracts with vending companies, the school district, then under the leadership of Ronald Epps, realized how much money they were making from selling unhealthy snacks and beverages to students. Combining this realization with the data from statewide surveys and a hard look at national numbers, the district realized it was inadvertently harming the students and staff that it serves. This was the turning point toward a more healthy vision for the district. The products sold in the vending machines were changed immediately and the district began to live by the motto “Our children’s health is not for sale.”

Student Involvement

Richland School District 1 is proud that it has been able to harness student participation to improve wellness policies. For example, cafeteria menu development is done with the input of students, and students also help evaluate new products before they are placed in menu rotation. This type of involvement of the students, from taste testers to inclusion on the district wellness teams, help the students feel as though they have a say in new policies and increases their support of the changes taking place in their schools.

Integrating Health into the Entire School Day

It was very important for the school district to create schools that were “nutrition-friendly.” The district’s Department of Student Nutrition Services became a key partner in this effort. The cafeteria became a place where students can try new foods they might never be exposed to at home. These healthy foods then can become a staple in the diet of the students — if not at home, then at least in the school cafeteria. Communication was increased between the staff who planned the menus and the students who brought their lunches. Parents and students joined school-led advisory councils and worked on menu development and the evaluation of new products. Fourteen schools in the district serve breakfast in the mornings in the classrooms — making it possible for students to receive a healthy meal at the start of the day when they might not have the opportunity at home. In addition, school building rules regarding food and beverages in the classroom were relaxed, to let students carry water bottles with them throughout the day. All schools in Richland School District 1 also make an effort to focus on physical education and physical activity — and encourage strong participation from both students and staff.

Within the district, and especially at Forest Heights Elementary School, there are many great examples of physical education and activity opportunities for students and staff. These activities and programs are used at many elementary schools throughout the district with the goal to keep students moving.

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Physical education classes often have homework, too — the energetic physical education staff send kids home with the charge to do anything — just be active — for an hour. In addition, core curriculum skills are integrated into the physical education program, including writing, reading, math and science. Measuring the length of a long jump, writing about a sporting event that was attended, figuring out how much force it takes to throw a ball — all of these assignments integrate physical activity with core curriculum skills.