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.

The Influence of Community Culture on Healthy Eating, Physical Activity and Social Change

This edition of Healthy Learning News features two very different school districts on opposite coasts working toward the same goal: a healthy school environment where children can learn a core curriculum and acquire lifelong healthy habits and skills. These districts understand that time spent on reinforcing healthy habits — whether it involves facilitating physical activity or increasing access to nutritious foods — translates into knowledge and behaviors that can have a positive impact on health, classroom behavior and academic performance.

With increased pressure to improve test scores and the need to focus on core curriculum, many districts are finding creative ways to infuse physical activity, nutrition education and healthy food choices into the school day without eliminating precious academic time. For example, in the Portland, Ore., Public Schools, students learn about the vegetables and fruits grown locally within the state and region — and also get to eat them. In the District of Columbia Public Schools, students learn new skills and activities that they can use to make physical activity a part of their daily, lifelong routines.

A supportive culture and community allows these districts to reach out effectively to students. In Portland, there is a culture focused on locally-grown foods. Parents are not only seeking nutritious foods for their children, they also want foods that reflect the values of the community. Recognizing the important role families play in children’s lives, the D.C. school system reaches out to students’ families so the broader community can help support the healthy messages taught at school.

From Oregon to our nation’s capital — and points in between — school districts are rising to the challenge and finding creative ways to fulfill academic expectations and incorporate healthy changes to benefit schools, students, staff and community. Is yours?
Healthy food and beverage options in school cafeterias are nothing new in Portland, Ore., Public Schools. The focus on improving nutrition standards in the district began well before local wellness policies became a requirement. Through the hard work and support of former Superintendent Vicki Phillips and School Nutrition Director Kristy Obbink, the district made healthy changes to snack and beverage selections in vending machine and student stores and replaced a la carte foods in the cafeteria with balanced school meals. When the School Lunch Act was reauthorized in 2004, requiring local wellness policies to be developed prior to the start of the 2006 school year, Portland Public Schools were well ahead of the curve and ready to meet and exceed the federal guidelines.

The strong focus on nutrition within Portland Public Schools dates back to the 1980s, when the district built a central kitchen to standardize recipes and to allow for economy of scale in purchasing. Since that time, the management team has included dietitians who have made high nutrition standards a priority and school meals that meet dietary guidelines part of the district fabric.

Salad bars featuring unlimited fruits and vegetables and skim or 1 percent milk are offered with every meal. In addition, with more than 50 percent of students eligible for free and reduced-price meals at 37 schools, the district offers breakfast in the classroom at no charge to all students — regardless of eligibility category. Providing breakfast to all students helps to eliminate the stigma that may be attached to receiving a free meal and allows all children to start their academic day ready to learn.

Locally-Grown Lunch
Portland Public Schools has made an effort to increase purchases from local farmers and to feature local products in their school meal planning. During the 2005-06 school year, community advocates encouraged Portland Public Schools to rethink the school lunch. Participants were united by a desire to connect the cafeteria to the classroom through school gardens and to think about food and nutrition as social and environmental issues.

Driven by the enthusiasm and skills of a local “champion,” a parent who was a trained chef and avid gardener, an elementary school in southeast Portland began a “Garden of Wonders” program to provide students with hands-on learning experiences. The garden classroom integrates knowledge about the food system into the curriculum and the cafeteria features a “vegetable of the week” grown and picked by children and prepared by the cafeteria chef.

Local food procurement is a district priority. By working closely with their primary produce vendor, Portland Public Schools purchases from Oregon and Washington farmers whenever possible. The district’s “Harvest of the Month” program serves a fruit or vegetable from a featured local farmer in all cafeterias. The district’s colorful calendar menus feature student artwork illustrating each “Harvest of the Month” item and provides “Did You Know” facts and ideas for parents on how to enjoy eating or cooking the harvest food at home.

In addition, reaching out to parents and the community for support and participation has been a key in promoting a healthy culture within Portland Public Schools and the greater community. In Portland, the nonprofit organization EcoTrust works to promote the long-term health of their local food system by making changes in the school lunchroom that will lead to lifelong healthy eating habits in children. The primary goal is to improve public understanding of local agriculture and increase the market share of locally-grown food. EcoTrust partners with Portland Public Schools to help create connections that will lead to healthy, locally-grown foods incorporated into school meals. Collaborations and partnerships are keys to creating and maintaining a culture that respects and values a food system full of fresh and local foods.

Policies to Support District Change
Portland Public Schools was fortunate to have the strong leadership of former Superintendent Vicki Phillips before and during the local wellness policy implementation. Phillips made the case to staff that health and wellness were part of the solution to the achievement gap.

The strong leadership from Phillips made for relatively easy buy-in from the school board and building principals, which increased the commitment to creating a healthy district.

Like the majority of public school districts in the country, Portland Public Schools adopted a one-page school wellness policy based on the input of the school board, district staff and the community. This policy was created by a 20-person committee that disseminated a web-based survey and held public hearings for community input.

In many school districts, this one-page document is where the policy ended. In those districts, although the policy is on the books and has the approval of the school board and other district leadership, it remains unclear how the policy will be implemented or who is responsible for the implementation.

In contrast, Portland Public Schools has a comprehensive administrative directive that clearly supports and outlines the responsibilities and expectations associated with the local school wellness policy. This directive includes not only the details and goals for each component of the policy; it also outlines the roles and responsibilities for implementing and monitoring the policy. This directive goes above and beyond the guidelines set by the federal government for local wellness policies. It looks at important issues such as the dining environment in

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Keeping Kids Active All Year Long

District of Columbia Public Schools; Washington, DC

Chancellor: Michelle Rhee • Total Number of Schools: 156
Total Enrollment: 52,200 • Free and Reduced Lunch%: 64%

The District of Columbia Public Schools are committed to improving the health and well-being of their students all through the year, regardless of whether school is in session. The Department of Health and Physical Education within the district believes that healthy students are more focused and better able to stay on task during classroom lessons. Because many students in D.C. public schools are socially and economically disadvantaged and at risk for a variety of chronic health conditions, the school district works hard to deliver high-quality health and physical education programs in the classrooms and in the surrounding community.

Wellness as a Lifestyle

Physical education classes in the District of Columbia Public Schools promote physical activities and sports that students can enjoy and incorporate into their lives during their school-age years and beyond. For example, there is a concerted effort to expose children to sports and other activities that they may not otherwise be exposed to because of their urban environment. And there is an effort to move beyond the “old physical education” model — where students play team sports and ultimately spend much of their time standing or sitting while waiting for their turn to participate.

Through a partnership with an organization called First Tee Golf, students in the district can learn to golf in a relaxed and supportive environment. They can also participate in summer intramurals in golf and tennis offered at 30 summer school sites through partnerships with First Tee and the Washington Tennis Association. These opportunities are part of a city-wide pilot program led by the district’s Department of Health and Physical Education. Another community partner is the Fort Dupont Ice Rink. In addition to extending opportunities to students, many of these community organizations also offer professional development opportunities to physical education and health teachers and others who work on physical activities with students, such as after-school program staff.

The school board of the District of Columbia Public Schools passed a wellness policy and staff across the district are working hard to implement the new policy. For example, school lunch menus are changing for the better, vending machines in high schools will have healthier offerings, and the school district is emphasizing the connection between student health and academic achievement to health and physical education teachers. These measures are helping to ensure that student wellness becomes an integral part of the D.C. public school system.

Involving the Family

Many of the initiatives focused on wellness in the District of Columbia Public Schools attempt to include the entire family — especially parents. Through an initiative with the Washington, D.C., mayor’s office and other D.C. agencies, the school system has a goal to work with local transportation organizations to promote a city-wide wellness campaign. Through posters on buses and at bus stops, this public education campaign will bring awareness to parents about the benefits of a healthy lifestyle for children — and will provide free, local and public wellness opportunities within the city and in their neighborhoods.

During many spring and summer breaks, school- and city-sponsored activities are planned and shared via a calendar so students know when and where their favorite activities will take place around the city while school is out of session. Many schools throughout the district host an event called Family Fitness Day, which consists of a health fair with screenings, education-based demonstrations, including cooking healthy foods, and fun activities that encourage physical fitness. In addition, through a pilot program with Children’s Hospital that began in the fall of 2007, the school system will focus on select K-6 schools to increase parental and community involvement through healthy activities similar to the Family Fitness Day events.

Partnering With the Big Leagues

The District of Columbia is fortunate to have many professional sports teams that call the city home, including the Washington Redskins football team, the Washington Mystics women’s basketball team, the Washington Nationals baseball team, the Washington Wizards men’s basketball team and the D.C. United soccer team. Like many communities with professional sports teams, the school district has found opportunities to partner with the teams and specific athletes to bring messages of wellness, sportsmanship and responsibility to students. Professional athletes can have a tremendous impact on young boys and girls, who look up to these individuals as heroes. Currently, the school system is partnering with the Washington Mystics to convey motivational messages about health and education to students throughout the city.

An Urban Community Focused on Targeted Change

The District of Columbia Public School system has found ways to connect the important components of a healthy school and healthy community environment. These efforts are being accomplished and sustained in a large and diverse urban district by focusing on specific, targeted changes within the schools, enlisting the help of dedicated and well-trained staff, partnering with the community, reaching out to families and identifying activities that will promote nutrition and physical activity and keep students engaged outside of the school year. Through these activities, the D.C. school district is building a community where students and their families have access to helpful resources and have more opportunities to make healthy choices. ✦
the cafeterias and has a strong focus on physical activity and education for students. This strong administrative support and directive is a major element underpinning Portland Public Schools’ ability to continue their long history of nurturing a healthy school district even in the midst of administrative change.

**Partners for Change**

In addition to EcoTrust, the Portland Public School district partners with other community agencies to increase the impact they have on the lives of children. One such agency is Stand for Children (Stand), an organization that advocates for improvements to and funding for programs that give every child a fair chance in life. Stand is based in Portland and has direct involvement with the Portland Public Schools and the development of their wellness policy as well as the administrative directives that accompany the policy.

After the school district developed a wellness policy, Stand began working with nine local school building pilot sites to go through the School Health Index, an assessment tool created by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to help schools assess where to start with healthy improvements. Since then, Stand has worked with these sites to conduct staff training and evaluate areas that need improvement in order to maintain the momentum of developing a healthy school environment for all.

By leveraging the valuable contributions of local partners and a community culture that recognizes the importance of quality, nutritious foods, the Portland Public school district is developing an environment of health and wellness. This has a positive impact on students in the classroom, as well as the community in which they live, learn and play. ◆