

Exploring the Role of the School Nutrition Program in the Sustainability of Local Wellness Policy Initiatives in the Middle School Setting

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this study were to determine strategies utilized by school nutrition (SN) directors and other administrators to implement local wellness policies (LWP), identify strategies, resources and successful practices for sustaining LWP initiatives, and identify characteristics of the LWP that students respond to well.

METHOD

- A descriptive case study method with a holistic multiple-case replication design was used at four school districts across the nation.
- Data were gathered through structured interviews with SN directors and other district/school personnel responsible for LWP implementation, and guided focus groups with middle school students.
- Data from each site were analyzed for pertinent data and themes. Cross-case tabulation was performed to search for distinct patterns, similarities or important differences in LWP implementation and sustainability strategies.

RESULTS

Results showed that several factors played a role in the successful implementation and sustenance of the LWP.

SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION

- having a team of numerous personnel from across disciplines and the community
- extra funding and outside collaborations

STRATEGIES FOR SUSTAINMENT

- extra funding received through grant support and collaborations with outside resources
- policies and guidelines to ensure sustainability
- support and commitment from district administration
- evaluation for measuring success
- communication of the LWP
- strong wellness committee leadership
- student and parent involvement
- education of staff about the LWP

CHARACTERISTICS OF LWP THAT STUDENTS RESPONDED WELL TO

- the offering of foods perceived as healthy
- the chance to taste test new foods
- poster displays of healthy foods
- nutrition literature on display at eye level
- healthy eating lessons in classes

APPLICATIONS

Findings suggest that several strategies are necessary to successfully implement and sustain LWP initiatives. Information gained from this study can be used to guide the development of a self-report survey targeting SN directors to determine what LWP implementation and sustainability strategies are being utilized in SN programs across the nation.

SELECTED QUOTES FROM MIDDLE SCHOOL FOCUS GROUPS

- I think wellness is about staying healthy and being well
- There are more fruits and vegetables and variety in the lunchroom
- The cafeteria has posters up about healthy foods
- Make sure your meals have different food groups in them (not just all from dairy)
- Where food was served there were posters with healthy advertisements
- The food is healthier in middle school compared to elementary school

ADVICE FROM SUCCESSFUL DIRECTORS

- Know your community; don't get too far ahead of them
- Sometimes you need to go slow to go fast
- Have a clear plan
- Have a willingness to change
- Have a supportive staff
- Involving the kids makes them more accepting of the policy
- Be flexible
- Be consistent
- Get partnerships going, you'll get things you can't do yourself
- Listen and truly be open to change



Jane Osowski, PhD, RD and Mary Frances Nettles, PhD, RD
National Food Service Management Institute
Applied Research Division
The University of Southern Mississippi