

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



National Food Service Management Institute
The University of Mississippi
1-800-321-3054

2013

This project has been funded at least in part with federal funds from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service through an agreement with the National Food Service Management Institute (NFSMI) at The University of Mississippi. The contents of this publication do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. government.

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Suggested Reference Citation:

Osowski, J. M., Nettles, M. F. (2013). *Exploring the Role of the School Nutrition Program in the Sustainability of School Wellness Policy Initiatives in the Middle School Setting*. University, MS: National Food Service Management Institute.

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**National Food Service Management Institute
The University of Mississippi**

Building the Future Through Child Nutrition

The National Food Service Management Institute was authorized by Congress in 1989 and established in 1990 at The University of Mississippi in Oxford and is operated in collaboration with The University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg. The Institute operates under a grant agreement with the United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service.

PURPOSE

The purpose of the National Food Service Management Institute is to improve the operation of child nutrition programs through research, education and training, and information dissemination.

MISSION

The mission of the National Food Service Management Institute is to provide information and services that promote the continuous improvement of child nutrition programs.

VISION

The vision of the National Food Service Management Institute is to be the leader in providing education, research, and resources to promote excellence in child nutrition programs.

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**EXPLORING THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL NUTRITION PROGRAM IN THE
SUSTAINABILITY OF SCHOOL WELLNESS POLICY INITIATIVES
IN THE MIDDLE SCHOOL SETTING**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2004, the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004 (Section 204 of Public Law 108-265) mandated that all school districts participating in the federally funded child nutrition programs must establish a local wellness policy (LWP) by the beginning of the 2006-2007 academic year (Public Law 108-265). The minimum requirement for district-level policies was that they must include goals for nutrition education, physical activity, and other school-based wellness activities designed to promote student wellness. The policies must also include nutrition guidelines for all foods available on school campuses during the school day; and a plan for measuring implementation of the LWP and community involvement in the development of the LWP. Community involvement includes parents, students and representatives of the school food authority, the school board, school administrators and the public (Peterson, 2007).

Due to many challenges facing schools when implementing the LWP, it is important to investigate how schools can be successful in LWP sustainability. Research has shown that a supportive infrastructure sustains wellness practices, and that a supportive infrastructure includes employing qualified teachers, providing ongoing professional development, and using a standards-based curriculum. Research has also shown that LWP programs need to involve parents, families, and communities to be sustainable (“Healthy Youth! Coordinated School Health Program,” 2013).

The purpose of this project was to investigate the sustainability of an LWP by identifying the following:

- School districts that have successfully implemented an LWP;
- Characteristics of an LWP that students respond to well;
- Barriers to implementation of an LWP;
- Barriers to sustainability of an LWP; and
- Strategies, resources and successful practices for sustaining a wellness initiative.

A holistic, multiple-case study methodology with a literal replication design was utilized. This format was selected to collect data that would yield similar and contrasting practices in the implementation and sustainability of an LWP (Yin, 2003). To select the school districts to serve as case study sites, child nutrition state agency directors were asked to recommend school nutrition (SN) directors who administer exemplary SN programs that are actively involved in the implementation of successful school wellness policies. From the pool of SN directors, four SN directors were selected and invited to serve as case study sites.

Data were gathered in two modes. In the first mode, data were collected by SN directors one month prior to site visits. In the second mode, data were collected by researchers during site visits. Prior to each site visit, SN directors received a packet containing a disposable camera with instructions for the SN directors to capture elements that illustrated how the SN program promoted and contributed to the implementation of the LWP. Program and management personnel profile questionnaires, media release forms, and a postage-paid return envelope were also included in the packet.

All site visits were performed by two National Food Service Management, Applied Research Division staff members. Four case study site visits were conducted in three

geographical regions as defined by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). The initial site visit was conducted in the Midwest USDA region and served as a pilot session designed to test data collection protocols. The three remaining sites were conducted in the USDA Mountain Plains and Mid-Atlantic regions. The site visits were completed in one day with four different activities involved: (1) structured interview with SN director, (2) structured interview(s) with other school and/or district personnel involved in the wellness team, (3) focus group with middle school students, and (4) field observations.

A number of common factors emerged from the four sites that participated in this study. Three of the four sites had a closed campus during lunch. Three sites utilized multiple lines for service with at least three or four different menu choices. Additionally, all sites offered competitive foods that were within LWP policy restrictions at their school.

The transcripts from the structured interview with the SN director were evaluated, and several similarities emerged. All of the SN directors indicated that it was important to have numerous stakeholders involved in the planning for and the implementation of the LWP initiatives. At all four sites, the senior administration (superintendents, school principals, and school board members) gave support. Also, during the initial phase of implementation, three sites used extra funding from grants or general funding. In regards to perceived barriers to the successful implementation of the LWP initiatives, transcripts revealed that even though each site had their own set of barriers to overcome, there were a few similarities, such as reluctance of teachers to follow policy guidelines and parental resistance. There were several commonalities reported for the strategies, resources and successful practices for sustaining a LWP initiative. All four SN directors noted that it was important to have the commitment and support from the districts' senior administration. The SN directors reported that strong leadership on the wellness

committee and communication of the LWP to staff and stakeholders were also important. Three SN directors attributed student input in menu planning to successful practices.

An analysis of the transcripts of the wellness team member interviews indicated similarities in several responses. Wellness team members at all four sites indicated that it was important to have an active health council, and there needed to be support provided by the senior administration for successful LWP implementation. Wellness team members at two sites indicated that grant funding was necessary to successfully implement the LWP initiatives. Wellness team members at three sites indicated that the resistance of the teachers was perceived to be the largest barrier to successful implementation of the LWP initiatives.

The responses during the focus group interviews with the middle school students showed some commonality. Students at three sites defined wellness to mean being healthy. In regards to what the wellness policy meant, the general consensus was the policy would help keep them healthy by making improvements in the food choices. At all four sites, the students responded that an ideal healthy food was either fruit or vegetables. At two sites, whole grains and protein foods were also considered healthy. Other healthy foods included in the list were bread, dairy, water, and healthy meats. When asked if they felt the school meals were healthy, students at three of the sites noted that they were healthy, and they listed particular foods that made them healthy. The students were asked their opinion on the changes that their school made in vending products. The overall opinion of the students at all four sites was that they accept the changes because they knew it was for their own good. However, there was resistance to the elimination of soda from the machines.

The observations of the middle school sites revealed several commonalities. All of the sites had vending machines and offered competitive foods. The foods and beverages that were

offered were within the nutrient guidelines of the nutrition standards. All sites had removed their fryers from the kitchen and were preparing foods using methods that do not add extra fat. Each school had displays or posters portraying health promotion. Each site had menus with health promotion messages sent home with the students.

The results from each data gathering phase of this study indicated that all of the participating schools had made strides towards implementing the LWP in their school districts, and as a result, generally positive outcomes were found. The following conclusions can be drawn from examining these four school districts:

- Successful strategies for sustaining wellness initiatives included firm commitment and support from the districts' senior administration.
- Strong leadership on an active wellness committee and communication of the LWP to staff and stakeholders is also essential.
- Barriers to the implementation and sustainability of the LWP emerged. The resistance from teachers and parents to follow guidelines can undermine efforts to promote wellness to students. The perception of lack of funding or time can be a detriment to success. Lack of accountability for implementation and proper evaluation of LWP program can also inhibit success.
- The students in these districts responded well to the availability of healthy foods such as fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. Student input in menu planning promoted student acceptance of the LWP guidelines, which helps lead to sustainability.