

Advocacy Update: *Shaping School Wellness Policies*

Park and recreation agencies can influence the development of these policies at a local level.

By Monica Hobbs Vinluan, J.D.



Millions of children have working parents and need after-school and summer programs to keep them safe, engaged and on track. Park and recreation departments around the country play a crucial role in the community by filling the need for after-school and summer programming, particularly for at-risk youth. These programs not only offer important recreational, enrichment and youth development programs, but can be effective venues to improve physical activity levels and proper nutrition awareness that often influence habits into adulthood.

Research indicates that individuals who have better access to parks, visit parks more frequently, and engage in physically-active park behaviors make fewer visits to their doctor (for reasons other than a regular check-up). Also, people who visit parks more frequently are more likely to have a positive perception of their general health. Park and recreation departments contribute to their communities' wellness on a daily basis and should lead the way in implementing policy.

To promote physical activity opportunities, nutrition education and nutrition standards for food and beverages offered at school, Congress has mandated the development of Local Wellness Policies for all school districts. Establishing and implementing district-wide Local Wellness Policies (LWP) is an important step toward supporting appropriate physical activity participation and positive eating behaviors, thereby decreasing the risk of childhood obesity. After-school and summer programs need to be a part of the LWP through community-based alternatives to accomplish these federally estab-

ACTION ALERT

Park and recreation departments are the perfect partners for schools to not only improve neighborhood connections, but also connections to after-school activities, parks, trails, recreation programs and organized youth sports. Park and recreation agencies should get in touch with leaders of the Coordinated School Health Team now to implement the policy. For more information on action steps, see the USDA site listed under Resources.

lished goals.

On June 30, 2004, Congress passed section 204 of Public Law 108-265 of the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004. This legislation requires each local educational agency that participates in the National School Lunch Act or the Child Nutrition Act of 1966 to develop a LWP by July 1, and implement it by the first day of the school year beginning after June 30. The four core areas of LWPs are nutrition education, nutrition standards, physical education and physical activity.

The first step in the development of the LWP is to form a Coordinated School Health Team to create the policy and provide ongoing review. Parents, students, school administrators and representatives from the school food authority, the school board, and the public should be involved. Recommended members include school counselors, teachers (including specialists in the areas of health and physical education) and representatives from school health services, such as a school nurse or a community health professional.

These teams could benefit from including local officials from park and

recreation agencies to offer information and resources related to physical activity promotion, after-school and summer health and wellness programming. Accessing, reviewing and sharing these tools could help park and recreation agencies take a leadership role in the implementation of a LWP.

Involvement on LWP teams will also provide park and recreation agencies the opportunity to join a group of local professionals that share the goal of promoting physical activity and decreasing adolescents' risk for obesity. In addition, these teams could open the doors for improved communication and information-sharing between local schools and the park and recreation agency serving the same community.

The LWP developed by each district needs to include at least the following:

- Goals for nutrition education, physical activity and other school-based activities designed to promote student wellness in a manner that the local educational agency determines is appropriate;
- Nutrition guidelines for all foods available on each school campus during the school day, with the objectives of promoting student health and reducing childhood obesity;
- An assurance that reimbursable school meals meet USDA regulations; and
- A plan for measuring the implementation of the LWP, including designation of at least one person within the local educational agency to ensure that the schools meet the LWP.

The primary goal of the physical activity component of a LWP is to provide opportunities for students to develop skills to participate in physical activity, maintain fitness and understand the role of physical activity in good health. Opportunities for physical activity should be provided to all students—formally and informally—through before- and after-school activities, as well as during lunch or breaks.

Schools should establish and implement policies to prohibit the use of physical activity as a punishment or to

withhold recess from students to make up missed instructional time or as punishment. In addition to increasing the minutes of required physical education, options for elections should be offered and use of waivers to exempt students from physical education should be minimized. Participation in Walk-to-School Day (www.walktoschool-usa.org), Hoops for Heart (www.americanheart.org/hoops), Jump Rope for Heart (www.americanheart.org/jump), ACES, All Children Exercising Simultaneously (www.projectaces.org) and development of walking or mileage clubs are other ways for schools to support physical activity.

Another way LWPs can promote physical activity is by including components of various Safe Routes to School initiatives (www.saferoutesinfo.org). This national movement creates safe, convenient and fun opportunities for children to bicycle and walk to school. Local park and recreation agencies often own or manage much of the land surrounding local schools and connecting local neighborhoods. Park and recreation agencies can bring extraordinary resources to Safe Routes projects, including environmental and technical knowledge, trail planning assistance and new volunteers.

Model LWP policies have been developed by several states and provide a template for other development teams. They offer examples of appropriate goals for the four core areas of the LWP and some have adopted policies that support requirements that are potentially valuable to LWP development teams elsewhere.

Using these policies as a model, communities can effectively implement school wellness policies that offer students recreation and development of skills that will stick with them throughout life.

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Resources:

U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Services information on Local Wellness Policies:

www.fns.usda.gov/tn/Healthy/wellnesspolicy.html

National Alliance NANA:

www.schoolwellnesspolicies.org

Action for Healthy Kids:

www.actionforhealthykids.org/wellnessstool/index.html

American Dietetic Association's Wellness Policy Resource list:

www.eatright.org/adafiles/WellnessPolicyResources.pdf

Food Research and Action Center's "School Wellness Policy and Practice"

www.frac.org/pdf/wellness_guide2006.pdf

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