

# School Wellness Policy



## Forming a School-Site Wellness Policy Committee



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**Why a school-site wellness committee?** Federal mandates require districts that participate in the National School Lunch Program to develop and implement a district wellness policy that specifically addresses healthy eating, physical activity and other school-based wellness initiatives that promote a healthy school environment. <sup>1</sup> Translating district wellness policy initiatives to the school-site level can be challenging. <sup>2-5</sup>

The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, School Nutrition Association, and Society for Nutrition Education and Behavior recommend wellness committees as a means to successfully translate federally mandated district wellness policies to the school-site level by developing culturally and context-appropriate initiatives. They also identify wellness committees as an avenue through which community stakeholder's may share their experiences, as well as their challenges, within the school community, and, when relevant, with local, state, tribal, and federal agencies and policy makers. <sup>6</sup>

## Introduction

The primary goals of the school-site wellness policy committee are to **implement, evaluate, disseminate, and maintain** culturally-appropriate school-site wellness policies that support the district-level wellness policy. This is achieved through a community-based approach (see diagram).

First, community engagement is achieved through the establishment of partnerships and other collaborations. Next, community priorities are identified through a community assessment. After areas of need and strengths are identified, action planning and implementation of goals are established based on strengths and areas of need.

It is important to understand that this process takes time. One food and nutrition services director once said, "While you can achieve some goals *fast* alone, you can get *much further* with the help of others." Celebrate achievements at each step of this worth-while process!



Elements of a cyclical, community-based approach, Israel et al., 1995

## Becoming Familiar with the School District Wellness Policy

Many school site wellness committees form for different reasons and have different goals that often include supporting the wellness policies in some fashion. A great place to start is to look into the district wellness policies.

### ☑ **Nominate/cultivate a School-Site Wellness Committee Leader**

It often takes a lot of time, patience, and expertise to prepare for the formation of a school-site wellness committee. It is recommended that one person take the lead in spearheading the wellness committee.



**Shaping Healthy Choices Tip!** Consider appointing a member of the agency responsible for implementing the Shaping Healthy Choices Program as lead of these preparatory efforts during the beginning phases. However, to increase school support and committee sustainability, consider nominating a vice-chair that is either a parent or teacher who will take over the lead position after a set time. Keep in mind that in order to ensure these changes being made in the community are sustainable, the person that is appointed lead should be prepared to serve this role for an extended amount of time, or eventually hand off the responsibilities to a more established member of the community.

### ☑ **Review the School Districts Wellness Policy**

It is important to do your “homework” on existing district wellness policies in order to prepare for the formation of a fully functional and efficient school-site wellness committee. School district wellness policies should be available for download on the school district’s website. If you have trouble locating it, there should be contact information for assistance. A good place to look is on the nutrition services tab or page.



**Shaping Healthy Choices Tip!** District wellness policies are often quite lengthy. Consider consolidating main points in a smaller document for easy review.

### ☑ **Attend/Become a Member of a District Wellness Policy Committee**

The government mandates that all school districts and agencies form a wellness policy committee at the district level. The activity level of each wellness committee varies from agency to agency or district to district. It is recommended that you review the district or agency’s website to find out meeting times. Depending on the culture of the district wellness policy, they may welcome you as a regular member of the committee, which is ideal. Make sure to share your successes at the district level. Other schools may want to follow your lead and develop their own site-level committees.



**Shaping Healthy Choices Tip!** If it seems appropriate, consider requesting that you have a few moments on the agenda to present the goals of the Shaping Healthy Choices Program and how they align with those of the district wellness policy. Include plans for implementing the program at the school-site level.

## Forming a School-Site Wellness Committee

Once you have become familiarized with the district wellness policy, you are ready to start the process of translating the district policy at the school-site level. See the tips below to help you do so successfully.

### ☑ **Gather input from administrators**

Before formally starting a school committee, be sure to get approval and input from the school principal. Set-up a meeting and ask what his/her goals are for school health and wellness. Are there chronic problem areas that distract from student learning? Bring a list of questions including when and where the committee could meet and who should be included.

Consider scheduling a brief meeting with the school-site principal or food and nutrition services director in order to assess whether or not a school-site wellness policy exists. Next, it is helpful to get his/her input regarding the best way to proceed with recruitment.



**Shaping Healthy Choices Tip!** Consider bringing a list of school-site wellness committee goals to help facilitate discussion.

### ☑ **Recruit committee members**

The composition of a school wellness committee may vary depending on the needs of the school community. Committee members may include parents, teachers, students, food and nutrition services directors, local farmers, or other community stakeholders (such as Cooperative Extension representatives). It is recommended that the school principal or food and nutrition services director inform the composition of the school wellness committee. Listed below are some considerations for recruiting committee members:

**Represent the diversity of your community.** As members are invited to the school wellness committee, consider the diversity of the school and surrounding community.

**Include key players in the school and community.** Reach out to those in the school community that have the greatest ability to network and recruit members. There often exists a school champion who is willing to take on this component of the program. Key committee members may include Cooperative Extension representatives, local farmers, physical education (PE) teacher, the local public health department, and others.



**Shaping Healthy Choices Tip!** For a well-rounded wellness committee, consider inviting the following key stakeholders: principal, food and nutrition services director, district nutrition educator, nutrition education facilitator, garden coordinator, PTA/Site council member, parents, student council members, PE teachers and other community members such as Cooperative Extension representatives.

**Include people who can commit the time.** Many school staff members and community members are asked to sit on multiple committees. It is important to be clear about how much time the wellness committee meetings and activities will take. Time is often seen as the biggest barrier to

getting things accomplished. It might be helpful to reach out to those that other committees may not have thought to include.



**Shaping Healthy Choices Tip!** Consider assigning one person who has enough time, dedication, and passion for the subject matter to help lead the committee. This most often is a member of the agency that is in charge of implementing the Shaping Healthy Choices Program.

**Build upon existing committees.** Many schools have strong PTA/PTOs or Student Council groups. Creating a sub-committee within these existing committees, or even transforming the goals of the committees to be more health-oriented may be considered. The California PTA has a job description for a Health Chair. Consider presenting this position at a PTA/PTO meeting to see if they are interested in creating a new chairperson to represent health and wellness.  
<http://downloads.capta.org/toolkit/print/JobDescriptions.pdf>

## Facilitate Committee Meetings

For best results, it is recommended that the committee identify and meet several objectives over the course of one academic year. Depending on need and preference, a school-site wellness committee may choose to meet as frequently as once per month, or it may be more realistic to only meet three times a year. This can be determined by the individual committee. Below is a list of objectives to consider.

- Objective 1: Introduce the Shaping Healthy Choices Program**  
 It is helpful to begin with receiving buy-in for the Shaping Healthy Choices Program. In order to do so, you may present the goals and activities of the Shaping Healthy Choices Program and how they align with the district levels wellness policy goals.
- Objective 2: Familiarize committee members with district wellness policy**  
 Here is where a consolidated version of the district wellness policy may come in handy.
- Objective 3: Assess district wellness policy**  
 This assessment can take the form of a discussion. One tip is to provide a consolidated version of the wellness policy to each member and have them read it independently or as a “homework assignment,” followed by a group discussion.
- Objective 4: Attend a meeting /become a member of the district wellness policy committee**

Ideally, at least one member of the school-site wellness committee can become a member of the district-level wellness committee. This way, they can report back to the school-site committee any changes or interesting developments and take the opportunity to share their site-level successes and advocate for changes to the District Policy identified by the group.

Oftentimes, school-site committee members may already be district wellness committee members.

☑ **Objective 5: Assess school-site environment**

Assessing the school-site with an established assessment tool is a helpful way to identify strengths and areas of improvement. There are many tools available. Consider using the Shaping Healthy Choices Self-Health Check (SHC<sup>2</sup>) available for download from the Center for Nutrition in Schools website (<http://cns.ucdavis.edu>).

☑ **Objective 6: Assign goals and establish a timeline to complete goals**

Consider your discussion about the district wellness policy, the Shaping Healthy Choices Program activities, and the results of the school-site assessment. Starting with small, achievable goals helps increase the likelihood of success. Make sure you recognize and celebrate completion of goal #1: Establishing a school site wellness committee!

☑ **Objective 7: Establish a mechanism for checking in on progress**

Decide whether there will be another meeting as the whole group or if it will be done in small groups. Decide how the group will follow-up on progress. This can be done through email or phone calls.

☑ **Objective 8: End of the year assessment and communication of results**

In order to track progress with respect to wellness committee goals, use the same assessment tool that was used previously. See if you can identify any improvements that were made at the school site as a result of the committee's efforts. This will help validate the achievements of the wellness committee members, as well as provide a way to help monitor the wellness policy annually.



**Shaping Healthy Choices Tip!** Create a one-page flyer or press release that details the committee's accomplishments. Make sure to share at the PTA/PTO meeting and District Wellness Policy Committee.

## Program Connections

Several goals of the site-specific wellness committee can be fulfilled through the implementation of the Shaping Healthy Choices Program. Bringing all aspects together takes strong relationships between school administrators, teachers, food service, parents, students, and outside agency partners. Be sure to recognize the unique contributions and needs of each of these partners. No single person or agency can do it all.

☑ **Coordinate with other Shaping Healthy Choices Program activities**

While The Shaping Healthy Choices Program activities themselves help to fulfill the wellness policy requirements, feel free to get creative and use the wellness committee in order to establish even more connections between activities. Remember, the more connections you make between program

activities, the stronger the infrastructure of the program as a whole. Some ideas for coordinating with other Shaping Healthy Choices Program activities include:

- **Host a booth at the community health fair:** This is a great way to recruit more members for the school-site wellness committee.
- **Recruit student representatives from your *Discovering Healthy Choices* classes:** It is always good to have multiple student representatives so they don't feel as intimidated by all the adults in the room.
- **Discuss Smarter Lunchrooms concepts with your Wellness Committee members:** There may be a subgroup that is interested in promoting healthy foods in the lunchroom.
- **Bring the *Team Up for Families* newsletters to the Wellness Committee meetings:** Discuss with parents what their children are learning in class and how they can support the program at home.
- **Demonstrate a recipe from the *Cooking Up Healthy Choices* curriculum:** Everyone loves food! Providing a healthy sample at the start of the meeting will reinforce the message of wellness, connect with what is being taught in class, and it's fun!
- **Take the committee out to the garden or host a garden work day:** When the weather is nice, take the committee out to tour the school garden to see what the students are growing. Have the students lead the tour and discuss what is growing. If possible, start one of your meetings with some physical activity in the garden. Pull weeds for 10 minutes, water, plant a tree – it doesn't take long and it creates a sense of community and accomplishment.

## Other Resources

1. **Appendix 4. Steps to Working with Parent Teacher Organizations.** A Shaping Healthy Choices Program implementer developed this resource based on her experience working in the field. It provides tips on how to successfully develop a relationship with Parent Teacher Organizations.

## References

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## Appendix 4. Steps to Working with Parent Teacher Organizations

Steps to Working with Parent Teacher Organizations:

1. Contact school to find out when meetings take place.
2. Introduce yourself and explain why you want to begin attending the meetings.  
Example: I want to hear about the events taking place at your school and see how I can be involved and help.
3. They may ask if you want to be on the Agenda. Simply ask to be introduced.  
Most school type meetings already have a packed Agenda; they do not necessarily want to listen to you but eventually they will.
4. Attend all meetings consistently. Be on time. Be an excellent listener. It is better to sit back and take it all in, if asked for an opinion keep it brief. It is also ok to not have an immediate response and ask if you can get back to the group with an answer.
5. Build your relationship with parents, teachers and all faculty at the school site including custodians.
6. As the relationship builds and becomes more comfortable begin to offer alternate ideas and suggestions for foods being served at events and fundraising activities at the school. Encourage the group to begin thinking “healthier” in terms of non-food fundraisers and rewards for students. Try not to become frustrated when the suggestions you make are not implemented immediately.
7. Remember, encourage *small* changes, even if the group is extremely receptive. Sometimes one or two members of the group may want to implement major changes. Your role is to remind them that “baby steps” are better than no steps at all.
8. Every school, even within the same school district, will be different and needs to be treated as an individual site. A one size fits all approach with Parent Teacher Organizations will not work.
9. Maintain confidentiality – Always! Any issues that take place at these meetings should not be discussed with others.
10. Regression, even with your best Parent Teacher Groups, will take place. When an unhealthy food is offered to students at an event that you may not have been aware of or approved **DO NOT** address this issue at the event. Everyone makes mistakes and by now you have worked hard to create and build a strong working relationship. Take a deep breath, walk away, consider your response, and voice your concern at the next meeting constructively and without criticism. Suggest to the group healthier alternatives for the next event . . . educate them.

