

Promoting Local Purchasing & Farm to School Activities: Model Wellness Policy Language for Schools

Reauthorization of the Federal Child Nutrition programs in 2004 included a provision that required each educational agency participating in a federal school meal program to have a local school wellness policy in place by the 2006-2007 school year (*Public Law No: 111-296, Section 204*). In 2010, this provision was updated by the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act expanding the scope of these school wellness policies. Beginning in the 2011-2012 school year, schools will be required to involve stakeholders in the development, implementation and review of these policies, as well as inform and update the public about the content and implementation of local wellness policies.

At a minimum, the law requires that local wellness policies must include:¹

1. Goals for nutrition education, physical activity and other school-based activities that promote student wellness.
2. Nutrition guidelines that, for all foods available on each school campus under the jurisdiction of the local educational agency during the school day,
 - a. Are consistent with federal law,
 - b. Promote student health and reduce childhood obesity.
3. A requirement that the local educational agency permit parents, students, representatives of the school food authority, teachers of physical education, school health professionals, the school board, school administrators and the general public to participate in the development, implementation and periodic review and update of the school wellness policy.
4. A requirement that the local education agency inform and update the public (including parents, students and others in the community) about the content and implementation of the local school wellness policy.
5. A requirement that the local educational agency periodically measure and make available to the public an assessment of the implementation of the local school wellness policy.

Moving forward, the USDA Food and Nutrition Service will be updating the local wellness policy materials on the FNS website: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/healthy/wellnesspolicy.html>. FNS is also working with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Department of Education to provide technical assistance on local wellness policies for local educational agencies, school food authorities and state agencies.

Farm to School: A Tool for Achieving School Health & Nutrition Goals

Farm to school programs around the country have played a significant role in improving the quality of school meals and expanding nutrition education, and thus have an important role to play in school wellness policies. As defined by the National Farm to School Network, farm to school programs can include four major elements:

- Purchase of products from local farmers² for inclusion in school meal programs and other food sales or special events;

¹ Some of the requirements have been paraphrased or summarized for clarity's sake. Additionally, some requirements may be refined as the USDA implements the most recent legislation. Please refer to Public Law No: 111-296, Section 204 for the full text of the law, and the USDA's wellness page for the latest: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/healthy/wellnesspolicy.html>

² Definitions of local vary regionally. Schools are encouraged to develop their own definitions as appropriate.

- Incorporating agriculture and nutrition education into the classroom as part of existing standards-based curricula;
- School gardens, where children can learn to eat what they grow and link their tangible experiences to lessons in science, math, and other disciplines; and
- Hands-on education programs, such as visits to farms and farmers' markets.

These programs offer more to schools than great tasting, farm-fresh products; they provide hands-on educational experiences to connect children with the source of their food. Because farm to school programs are multi-faceted—linking nutrition education with the classroom, the lunchroom, the school garden and local farmers—they not only benefit students, but also provide a win-win-win for schools, farmers and the community.

School Food Service can benefit through increased student participation rates. Including farm-fresh products and hands-on experiential education programs has been shown, in some instances, to increase the number of students that participate in school meal programs. Farm to school programs also help strengthen schools and school food service programs through training on product sourcing, food preparation and menu planning.

Students benefit from healthier options in the cafeteria and a closer connection with food and agriculture. Research on nutrition education methods increasingly suggests that the more a child is involved with food—either through gardening, farming, cooking or other “real life” food experiences—the more likely it is that he or she will adopt healthy eating behaviors as a lifelong practice. Purchasing local food affords schools a tremendous opportunity to generate and reinforce these kinds of learning experiences.

Farmers benefit from increased sales opportunities. Farmers are always looking for high value, markets nearby that might give them higher profit margins. Schools can provide a steady, predictable market for much of the year.

Communities benefit from more locally-based agricultural marketing. Sourcing foods from local farms helps keep community dollars in the local economy. Healthy farms provide jobs, pay taxes and keep working agricultural land open. Undeveloped farmland can also benefit the region by maintaining open space and diversified wildlife habitat.

Organizing in Your School District

Farm to school programs offer creative ways to expand nutrition education and increase servings of fresh and minimally processed foods. A comprehensive wellness policy that addresses a school’s many needs can thus be designed to support local purchasing and other farm to school activities.

A majority of school districts have a policy in place, but implementation and evaluation vary widely. Where to begin in your efforts to integrate farm to school depends on where your district is in its process. Here are some suggested steps:

STEP 1: Find out what progress the district has made in developing, implementing or evaluating a school food or wellness policy and whether farm to school programs have been included. One place to start is the district superintendent’s office.

STEP 2: Play an active role in the conversations around school wellness policies. Your district’s policy has likely been written by this point; become part of the group that evaluates its implementation. If no such entity exists, help bring together the important players from the school and the community—including school administrators, food service staff, teachers, parents, students,

community representatives and members of the agricultural community. Use the policy ideas mentioned here to help start the conversation.

STEP 3: Draft farm to school language that fits the needs and interests of your school district. Draw on the model language included below for examples and explore the resources listed at the end to build your case for why the addition of a farm to school component is important. Present an updated version to your school board for adoption.

STEP 4: A true test of an effective policy is how well it is implemented. Develop an evaluation plan that measures the included components of farm to school programs so you can ensure that the policy is being implemented the way it was intended.

Pursuing farm to school strategies is only one step toward creating a healthier school environment. The sample language below is intended to be only a piece of the puzzle. Please refer to the resources section for information on additional tools to help your school develop a comprehensive wellness policy.

Model Language for School Wellness Policy

School wellness policies were designed to be adapted in ways that make the most sense for your district. Wellness policies have five requirements; for each of these areas you can use any of these statements individually or as whole sections, depending on your district's goals.

Wellness Policy Requirement 1: *Goals for nutrition education, physical activity and other school-based activities that promote student wellness*

Nutrition Education: Farm to school programs can provide interactive, experiential education activities that can strengthen and reinforce nutrition education efforts.

- Staff shall integrate experiential education activities—such as gardening, cooking demonstrations, farm and farmers' market tours—into existing curricula at all grade levels.
- Nutrition education messages from the classroom will be modeled in the cafeteria and across campus by offering locally-grown food whenever possible within the school meals programs as well as in à la carte sales, including vending machines.
- Each school shall establish a school garden of a sufficient size to provide students with experiences in planting, harvesting, preparing, serving and tasting foods, to be integrated with nutrition education and core curriculum, and articulated with state standards.
- School food service, in partnership with other school departments and community organizations, will work to creatively market and promote locally-produced food to students, through activities such as:
 - Featuring food grown in the school garden in the cafeteria, through sampling and inclusion in school meals based upon availability and acceptability.
 - Developing cafeteria themes relating to local farmers and products grown in the region.
 - Hosting farmers in the cafeteria and classroom.
 - Developing creative campus fundraisers based on healthy food items, integrating farm grown produce where appropriate.

Physical Activity:

- The district recognizes that school gardens and farm visits can offer physical activity opportunities, as well as agricultural education, by engaging students in activities such as planting, harvesting and

weeding. Teachers and students are encouraged to take advantage of these physical activity opportunities during the school day as well as through field trips and after-school activities.

Other School-Based Learning Activities:

- Food service and teaching staff shall work cooperatively to integrate experiences in cafeterias, instructional gardens, kitchen classrooms and farm field trips with the formal learning experience of all students.
- School food service will work with school departments, community partners and the student health council to facilitate student understanding of fresh, local, sustainably grown food.

Wellness Policy Requirement 2: *Nutrition guidelines that promote student health and reduce childhood obesity*

Farm to School programs can be integrated to enhance broader nutrition guidelines that increase children's consumption of fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and other healthy foods. Language encouraging local sourcing can be integrated in numerous ways.

- The Child Nutrition Services Director shall develop and implement a plan to integrate organic foods, or foods produced with minimal pesticide use, into the meals served to students.
- Meals served within the federally reimbursable meal program must be designed to feature fresh and minimally processed fruits and vegetables, from local sources, to the greatest extent possible.
- Schools are encouraged to offer fresh, seasonal, locally grown food at every location on the school site where food is sold and at all school-sponsored events and activities.

Wellness Policy Requirement 3: *Involve parents, students, representatives of the school authority, the school board, school administrators and the public in development, implementation and periodic review of the local wellness policy*

In addition to district and community representatives, members of the farming community—farmers, representatives from farm organizations, master gardeners, agricultural industry representatives—should be included in developing school wellness policies. They can help you integrate seasonal and regional products into your menu, understand what may be best to grow in a school garden and learn how to work with farmers in a mutually beneficial way.

- A team of district and community representatives will be established to support the food service director and teachers in implementing local purchasing and other farm to school activities on an ongoing basis.
- The wellness policy committee must include parents, students, representatives of the school authority, the school board, school administrators and the public in development, implementation and periodic review of the local wellness policy. Representatives from the local agricultural community and food and nutrition professionals could be key members of the committee. These committee members could be farmers, local public health professionals, chefs, nutritionists, health educators or representatives from farm organizations, farmers' markets, agricultural industry or community organizations that work to promote local foods.

Wellness Policy Requirement 4: *A requirement that the local education agency inform and update the public (including parents, students, and others in the community) about the content and implementation of the local school wellness policy*

Wellness Policy Requirement 5: *A requirement that the local educational agency periodically measure and make available to the public an assessment on the implementation of the local school wellness policy*

Including locally sourced farm products within the school lunch program and offering interactive nutrition education in the classroom and cafeteria helps to meet both nutritional and financial goals of school meal programs. Offering students local produce has been shown to increase participation in the school lunch program, which also generates increased revenue for the school food service. Evaluation of the effectiveness of school wellness policies should be designed to capture and reflect these factors.

- An annual review will be conducted to measure the impact and implementation of the wellness policy. The report will include:
 - A review of school-food sales that determines
 - the percentage of food purchased from local sources
 - the budgetary impact of increasing local purchases
 - existing opportunities to increase purchasing of local and seasonal items
 - the impact of local purchasing on participation in the school meal programs
 - An evaluation of the frequency and effectiveness of nutrition education activities involving the school garden, farm visits and other agriculture-based activities

Farm to School & School Wellness Resources

Information on Starting a Farm to School Program

- **National Farm to School Network:** www.farmtoschool.org
- **Community Food Security Coalition:** www.foodsecurity.org/farm_to_school.html
 - *Linking Farms with Schools: A Guide to Understanding Farm-to-School Programs for Schools, Farmers, and Organizers* available at www.foodsecurity.org/pubs.html
 - *Healthy Farms, Healthy Kids: Evaluating the Barriers and Opportunities for Farm-to-School*, available at www.foodsecurity.org/pubs.html
 - *Feeding Young Minds: Hands-on Farm to School Education Programs*, available at www.foodsecurity.org/pubs.html
- **Center on Ecoliteracy** has developed the Rethinking School Lunch guide, which includes farm to school resources as well as a guide to model wellness policies that incorporate farm to school programs:
 - www.ecoliteracy.org/rethinking/rsl.html
- **Michigan State University** has an online, interactive guide to developing farm to school programs in your district:
 - <http://www.mifarmtoschool.msu.edu/index.php?q=guide>
- **Farm to School in the Northeast: Making the Connection For Healthy Kids and Healthy Farms** is a toolkit and guide for farm to school programs, developed by Cornell University. Includes a section and resources on wellness policies:
 - <http://farmtoschool.cce.cornell.edu/toolkits.html>

Resources on Wellness Policies & School Nutrition

- **National Alliance for Nutrition and Activity Model School Wellness Policy:**
 - www.schoolwellnesspolicies.org
- **USDA's Local Wellness Policy** site:
 - www.fns.usda.gov/tn/Healthy/wellnesspolicy.html
- **Action for Healthy Kids** has a school wellness policy tool:
 - <http://www.actionforhealthykids.org/school-programs/our-programs/wellness-policy-tool/wellness-tool-4.html>
- **WellSAT: A Wellness School Assessment Tool** provides a standard method for the quantitative assessment of the comprehensiveness and strength of school wellness policies:
 - <http://www.wellsat.org/default.aspx>
- **School Policies and Practices to Improve Health and Prevent Obesity** is a 2010 report from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation based on survey data collected from elementary schools. Includes a section on the status and impact of districts' wellness policies:
 - http://www.rwjf.org/childhoodobesity/product.jsp?id=64429&cid=XEM_205602
- **School Nutrition Association** has many resources on crafting, implementing and evaluating local wellness policies, with examples from around the country:
 - <http://www.schoolnutrition.org/Content.aspx?id=2164&terms=wellness+policy>
- **Colorado Department of Education** assembled the "Local School Wellness Policy" guide for districts across the state. It includes success stories, assessment tools and resources for specific meals, food items and more:
 - <http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdenutritran/nutriWellnessGuide.htm>
- **Maryland Department of Education** has a similar guide, "Making Wellness Work," with resources for setting and measuring goals within wellness policies. Includes some farm to school:
 - http://www.marylandpublicschools.org/MSDE/programs/school_wellness

- **Wyoming Action For Healthy Kids** has this toolkit for developing wellness policies:
 - <http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdenutritran/download/pdf/WPYomingWellnessPolicyToolkit.pdf>

Model School Wellness Policies

- **Model Wellness Policy Guide** from the Center on Ecoliteracy provides a model wellness policy that incorporates farm to school at many points:
 - http://www.ecoliteracy.org/sites/default/files/uploads/ceI_model_wellness_policy_guide.pdf
- **Portland Public Schools'** wellness policy includes strong farm to school components. More on the policy and its implementation can be found on the school district's wellness site: <http://www.pps.k12.or.us/departments/nutrition/3989.htm>
 - Download the district's full policy, Administrative Directive 3.60-062-AD here (see full policy: http://www.pps.k12.or.us/files/board/3_60_062_AD.pdf)
- **Washington, DC.** The district's original local wellness policy incorporates experiential learning, including farm visits and school gardens. In 2010, the City Council passed the Healthy Schools Act. It includes a provision about local wellness policies, requiring that goals are set for "increasing the use of locally-grown, locally-processed, and unprocessed foods from growers engaged in sustainable agriculture practices."
 - Learn more at: <http://dchealthyschools.org/whats-in-the-act/wellness-policies>

For additional information, please contact:

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