

#WELLNESSPOLICY

# Wellness Policy Helps District Build a Long-lasting Culture of Health

Beginning in 2004, Congress required all schools participating in federal child nutrition programs to create school wellness policies, which set goals and outline guidelines that help schools and districts protect and promote the health of their students.

In advance of Congress's latest update to school wellness policy requirements, the Alliance for a Healthier Generation created a [Model Wellness Policy](#) template to set schools on the path towards meeting the government's new guidelines.

When it was time to update the district wellness policy, Texas's Mission Consolidated Independent School District, which serves more than 15,000 students from 23 schools, worked with the Alliance to take advantage of the new tool and further engage its schools in making healthy changes.

## School and Community Leaders Put District on a Path to Health

In the beginning of the 2015-16 school year, the responsibility of updating the wellness policy and the corresponding policy plan, which details how the policy will be implemented, fell to the school health advisory committee (or SHAC).

Lety Ibarra is the physical education and health coordinator for the district, and also the SHAC coordinator. "Our SHAC is made up of mainly community members from health-related fields," she said. "We also have district administrators, parent representatives and students who oversee anything related to health, nutrition and wellness."

"A few years ago, the state of Texas had given all districts a two-page wellness policy to use, and that's what they were still using," said Healthy Schools Program Manager Fancy Flores, who supports the district. "It was very different than the Alliance's Model Wellness Policy."

Fancy introduced Lety and the SHAC members

to the Alliance's template, a more robust policy that aligned with updated federal nutrition and wellness standards for schools. "The Model Wellness Policy template provided us a really good framework to use for our policy plan, which included all the benchmarks for each area of school wellness," said Craig Verley, director of public relations and marketing for the district.

## Support from the Top and Education Overcome Hurdles

While having a template made the revision process smoother, the committee still faced hurdles. A particularly challenging topic was the sale of foods that compete with the school meals program both during meal times and fundraisers, which the SHAC wanted to do away with.

"We had a lot of discussion about understanding the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Smart Snacks in School standards and knowing what tools are available to help staff find healthier



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options, such as the Alliance’s Smart Snacks Product Calculator,” said Lety. “And now, some of our campuses have incorporated 5k runs as fundraisers to stay away from food-based sales.”

One of the biggest factors in moving the new policy forward was support from the district superintendent, Dr. Ricardo Lopez, who helped to rally staff and board members behind the changes that schools would need to make to comply with the new policy, such as more time for recess.

### **Wellness Policies Set Schools up for Long-term Success**

The wellness policy was formally adopted at the June 2016 school board; however the implementation plan was enthusiastically approved at the December 2015 meeting so that schools

could get a head start on the policy changes. Already, the district’s schools have made great strides towards their wellness goals.

In less than two years, every school in Mission School District has earned National Healthy Schools Bronze Awards, and one school—Alton Elementary School—even earned Silver! “Change takes time, but it’s great to see when everyone starts to buy in and see the benefits,” said Lety.

Mission School District isn’t about to slow down. “Now we need to focus on sustainability,” said Craig. “We can continue moving forward because we can see other criteria we want to reach with the Healthy Schools Program. It’s a perfect roadmap.”

