

Wellness Policy Provides a Roadmap for District's Healthy Transformation

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, Kansas's Hutchinson Public School District, which serves nearly 5,000 students from 11 schools, worked with the Alliance to take advantage of the new tool and further engage its schools in making healthy changes.

Administrators Seek Healthier School Policies

During the 2013-14 school year, Director of Nutrition Services Jennifer Tatro heard rumblings from principals about parents dropping off fast food in the lunchroom and students bringing candy from home. At the time, there was no policy to prevent this from happening, but school administrators noticed that it was distracting students and asked: what could they do?

It was her fourth year at the district and Jennifer, too, wanted these practices to stop. She started conversations with Superintendent Dr. Shelly Kiblinger the following August. "Our superintendent recognizes the impact that nutrition has on learning," Jennifer said. "She gave us free range to find something that would work across all buildings."

Along with a team of administrators, Jennifer began the process of updating the wellness policy. Through participation in the Healthy Schools Program, she learned about the Alliance's Model Wellness

Policy. "It gave us somewhere to start—that's the biggest advantage," said Jennifer. "Why create something from nothing?"

Creative Ways to Celebrate: From Cupcakes to Pencils

Two years before the policy was revised, Hutchinson began piloting a new way to celebrate birthdays that didn't involve a sugar rush or disruption from class time. When it was time to update the policy, they already had an idea of what would work well across the district.

"On the third Tuesday of every month, we now celebrate birthdays in the lunchroom. We set up a special table for birthday students and invite their parents to join them for lunch," said Jennifer. "They're given a special treat, such as a 100% juice cup, and sometimes the PTA donates pencils or other items."

The new birthday policy proved to be a win-win: Parents like that they don't have to worry

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about providing snacks for an entire class and administrators like having more time for instruction during the school day.

Turning Policy into Practice across the District

In June 2015, the school board approved the revised wellness policy, cementing the new way to celebrate birthdays for all schools in the district, in addition to eliminating food-based fundraisers during the school day and take-out meals in the cafeteria.

To ensure that everyone was aware of the changes, the policy was made widely available through a press release. It was also shared on the district website, during a presentation at the

back-to-school meeting for staff, and through discussions at every school wellness meeting at the start of the next school year.

The district wellness committee asked each school to focus on a few areas that they could improve upon. “We didn’t just want to say: here’s the policy; you have to follow it,” Jennifer said. The district-wide committee meets twice a year to review each school’s progress and provides support or follow-up to schools that need it.

“It’s important to start small and to take the time to have lots of people look at the policy before implementing. It takes time to get everyone on board who will be instrumental in making it successful on a day-to-day basis,” she said. Then she added, “But it’s worth it.”

