

**TESTIMONY OF  
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ACTION FOR HEALTHY KIDS  
ON  
“LOCAL SCHOOL WELLNESS POLICIES”  
BEFORE THE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTHY FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
MAY 10, 2007**

Action for Healthy Kids was founded in 2002 at the first Healthy Schools Summit. We are the only nonprofit organization formed specifically to address the epidemic of overweight, undernourished and sedentary youth by focusing on changes at school. We work in all 50 states and the District of Columbia to improve children's nutrition and increase physical activity, to improve their readiness to learn. We seek to create the systemic and sustainable changes detailed in the schools chapter in the *Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity* (2001).

Action for Healthy Kids has over 9000 volunteers and 60 national partner organizations. These volunteers and partners help us to undertake our mission to engage diverse organizations, leaders and volunteers in actions that foster sound nutrition and good physical activity in children, youth, and schools. To do this, we have set three goals:

- Systemic, sustainable changes of sound nutrition and good physical activity occur in all schools;
- Schools, families, and communities engage to improve eating and physical activity patterns in youth;
- Action for Healthy Kids is the trusted, recognized authority and resource on creating health-promoting schools that support sound nutrition and good physical activity.

(More information about Action for Healthy Kids can be found at our website: [www.ActionForHealthyKids.org](http://www.ActionForHealthyKids.org).)

Our volunteers work through Teams in each of the states. Our Teams include representatives from state and local education and health agencies, bringing together the public and private sectors. They are parents, teachers, nurses, school administrators, school board members, school food staff and other members of the community. Twelve Action for Healthy Kids Teams have created regional teams within their state to work at a grassroots level in their communities. Each Action for Healthy Kids Team develops an action plan that sets the agenda for their work.

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Action for Healthy Kids predates the adoption of the federal mandate for Local Wellness Policies. Since the passage of the requirement we have made it a top priority for the work of Action for Healthy Kids Teams. In the 2005-2006 school year, 80 percent of Action for Healthy Kids Teams worked to support school districts in the development of Local School Wellness Policies. During this current school year, all of our Teams are working to support districts and school buildings with the challenges of implementation.

Recognizing that schools are a critical component of the efforts to address the epidemic of childhood overweight and obesity, we have seen Local Wellness Policies as a critical part of the efforts to create the healthy school environment that all children deserve. Local Wellness Policies are part of an effort that includes federal, state, and local activities and can be a critical catalyst for creating or expanding links with other community agencies and organizations to create healthy communities for all.

Among Action for Healthy Kids national partners, are the United States Department of Agriculture's Division of Food and Nutrition Services and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Division of Adolescent and School Health. Working with these two partners, other partners, and members of our volunteer Teams, Action for Healthy Kids developed our *Local Wellness Policy Fundamentals* (see attached) and our *Wellness Policy Tool* (<http://www.actionforhealthykids.org/wellnesstool/index.php>). The *Local Wellness Policies Fundamentals* identifies key topics under each of the required areas that a sound policy should address. The *Wellness Policy Tool* walks users through the stages of policy development and access to expert advice at each step of the process. These tools provide continued guidance for districts wellness committees in putting together strong and comprehensive policies.

Action for Healthy Kids Teams have provided assistance to school districts in a variety of ways: Seventy eight percent provided guidelines or recommendations, 62 percent conducted trainings, 74 percent produced tool kits or model policy language, 31 percent hosted conferences or events, and 24 percent offered mini-grants to support development.

In addition to our own resources, Action for Healthy Kids has promoted and distributed the resources of our partners. This includes the CDC's *School Health Index*, which many Teams offering mini-grants to schools use as the tool for baseline needs assessment by the districts to support policy development. Other partner tools used included USDA's *Changing the Scene*, and *Fit, Healthy, and Ready to Learn* from the National Association of State Boards of Education, and the resources of the School Nutrition Association and the American School Health Association.

### **Local Wellness Policies: A Critical Part of the Solution**

Schools play a critical role in preventing the increase in childhood overweight and in helping children to develop lifelong habits of good nutrition and physical activity. The mandate for Local Wellness Policies recognizes this important role. While schools cannot and should not be the only societal institution held responsible for addressing overweight and obesity, schools can be at the center of the discussion. Local Wellness Policies, by requiring the input of parents, school administrators, school staff, and students can begin the process of creating system wide solutions that will last over time.

Wellness Policies, like all school policies, may need to be implemented incrementally. As we show below, much progress is being made, but as we also show, there is still much to be done. We encourage this committee and your colleagues in both houses to recognize this incremental progress and the need for schools and districts with support to achieve the potential of these policies.

### **What We Know About Wellness Policies**

Because the development and adoption by the local school board of the Local Wellness Policy is only the first stage in the process, Action for Healthy Kids has worked on providing support for the implementation and monitoring stages. As an initial step, we have completed two “Snapshot” policy collection and content analyses. The purpose of these snapshots was to begin to gain a better understanding of the contents of the almost board-approved 15,000 policies and to identify areas where support and technical assistance is needed to ensure the policies achieve their potential.

Starting last summer and continuing into the beginning of the school year, Action for Healthy Kids collected a non-random sample of policies. We collected 256 approved policies and, where possible, the supporting regulations or implementation guidelines. We sought a sample of policies from every state and the District of Columbia and from districts of all sizes. Because minority children are disproportionately at risk and are overrepresented in the nation’s urban school districts, we also made a special effort to collect policies from the largest school districts. Policies were collected through submissions from Action for Healthy Kids Teams and partners and direct requests from districts via email or the district website.

When the collection period closed we had the following distribution of policies.

- At least one policy from each state (except Hawaii, which had not completed the policy adoption)
- A distribution of policies from all states, taking into account that not every state has districts in each of the size categories
- 67 from small districts (up to 2,500 students)
- 90 from medium districts (2,501-20,000 students)
- 99 from large districts (over 20,000)

Following the collection, Action for Healthy Kids conducted an analysis of the policies against each of the areas required by law and the topics addressed in our *Local Wellness Policy Fundamentals*. (See attached report on the analysis)

The good news from this analysis:

- Eighty percent of the policies addressed the required areas of nutrition education, nutrition standards and physical activity;
- Seventy-seven percent of the policies addressed the important issue of access to school meals and after-school snacks;

- Eighty-nine percent of the policies addressed other school-based activities to promote student health and wellness as allowed by the law. Among these policies, 82 percent specifically addressed efforts to continue to involve families and communities and 60 percent called for the establishment of an ongoing school health council or committee (an important vehicle for community involvement).

Of some concern are the areas of implementation and monitoring/evaluation. Policies were often less specific in these areas:

- Seventy-three percent provided some detail on implementation;
- Sixty-seven percent identified who is responsible;
- Fifty-one percent provided a time line for implementation;
- Forty-nine percent addressed how policy implementation will be tracked;
- Fifty-nine percent addressed evaluation, but did not provide detail.

It is important to note the lack of specificity does not mean that the policy will not be implemented. However, it may suggest that implementation has not received the full support needed to make these types of changes. We know from other areas of education research that a number of factors contribute to the successful implementation of new policies at the district and building level:

- The policy is well written and comprehensive;
- The right people are at the table for development AND implementation;
- The policy is understood by all constituencies;
- Support and commitment from school leaders who are willing to “walk the walk”;
- Support from school staff and community members;
- Where changes in practice are called for, staff and families are offered alternatives (i.e. for parties or fundraisers);
- Plan for monitoring the implementation and a plan for improvement;
- Person with sufficient authority who is responsible for overseeing implementation.

We also know that there can be barriers to successful implementation:

- Costs that not offset or addressed;
- Lack of commitment and understanding on the part of key stakeholders;
- There are logistical challenges, such as space, time etc.;
- Lack of clarity, so school personnel and others do not know what is expected.

### **What Action for Healthy Kids is Doing to Support Implementation**

Action for Healthy Kids at the national level and through our Teams is committed to working with our partners to address the challenges of implementation so that these policies can be part of a comprehensive school and community effort.

Action for Healthy Kids Teams continue to provide mini-grants and technical assistance to districts and schools. Among the Teams doing this work are:

- **Arizona** where the Action for Healthy Kids Team developed model policies and participated in a state-wide pilot effort to change the mix of foods and beverages offered in vending.
- **California** where the Action for Healthy Kids Team is working as part of a partnership with California School Boards Association, Project Lean, and others to provide targeted assistance in high poverty districts. The Team and their partners have provided workshops in five high need districts.
- **Colorado** as been working and will continue to work with parents to train them to advocate for continued improvement in the school environment.
- **District of Columbia** where the Action for Healthy Kids Team helped to develop a model policy used by the DC public schools (and charter schools) and will be working to expand a healthy vending program through peer education and outreach.
- **Georgia** where the Action for Healthy Kids Team created a web-based technical assistance question and answer site and provided training via distance learning.
- **Kentucky** was one of several Action for Healthy Kids Teams that worked closely with the state school board association in the development of model policies. The Team is also part of the Partnership for a Fit Kentucky. Team members developed and implemented action plans to provide workshops for administrators, trainings for youth league coaches, and the dissemination of tools, resources, and materials to a range of audiences.
- **Maryland** where the Action for Healthy Kids Team is working to identify technical assistance needs and provide support beyond the support that state agencies can provide.
- **Minnesota** which has targeted parents through distance learning opportunities for strengthening their understanding of and participation in Local Wellness Policy development and implementation.
- **New Hampshire** which has raised funds through grants and fundraisers and helped to support the construction of walking tracks, the development of walking programs and expand access to healthy food choices. The Team has also trained teachers to administer and use the data from the *Fitnessgram*.
- **New Mexico** where the Action for Healthy Kids Team is working to help schools develop and implement healthy fundraisers using healthy, locally produced foods.
- **New York** where a Team in New York City is piloting a new research-based parent engagement program in schools to train parents as advocates and leaders for good nutrition and physical activity.
- In **Ohio**, the Action for Healthy Kids Team worked with the Ohio Department of Education to provide Wellness Policy trainers to support the development of the policies. These trainers reached every school district in the state. The Team has worked as part of a state wide effort to expand access to healthy school breakfasts. These efforts enrolled almost 30,000 additional students in school breakfast.

- **Tennessee** is working with their state office of coordinated school health to implement coordinated school health programs in every school district. In the upcoming school year the Action for Healthy Kids Team will be promoting and providing training in the *Take 10!* physical activity curriculum.
- **Texas** has worked with partners including, Texas School Boards Association, the American Cancer Society and the Departments of Health and Agriculture to provide technical assistance and model policy language to school districts. In the upcoming school year the Texas Team will be replicating a Massachusetts project “Students Taking Charge” which trains students to be school-based leaders.

National Action for Healthy Kids continues to provide information and resources through our publications and monthly phone symposia to help our Teams continue their work.

### **What Agencies and Organizations are Doing to Support Implementation**

State government and agencies including education, health and agriculture are providing assistance and accountability. A soon-to-be-released study from the National Association of State Boards of Education found that at least 45 states are actively providing assistance to local school districts. Many have also passed legislation or state board policies that provide further direction on standards in both physical activity and nutrition. Among the states and their actions:

- **Arkansas, Kentucky, Rhode Island, and South Carolina** are incorporating reporting and accountability for implementation into their existing school improvement plans and reporting.
- **Kansas, Pennsylvania, New Mexico, and New Jersey** all required some level of review of the policies as part of the policy development process.
- **Kentucky, Nevada, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and Virginia** have established requirements for districts to report to the state on implementation, however the state does not provide an evaluation or review.
- **Florida, Indiana, Kentucky, New Mexico, and Tennessee** require school districts to establish ongoing local level accountability through reporting and review at the district level.
- All states are working with a range of partners and programs to ensure that districts get help in implementation and beyond:
  - Requirements for additional contents in the policies;
  - Resolutions that encourage districts;
  - Policy guidelines;
  - State level advisory councils.

Federal agencies including USDA and CDC/DASH are critical to helping states provide the support they need:

- USDA's Local Wellness Demonstration Project grants in **California, Iowa, and Pennsylvania** are a cooperative agreement with Food and Nutrition Service and will do the following:
  - Assess local wellness policy activities in selected school districts;
  - Document the process used by these school districts to develop, implement and measure the implementation of a locally adopted school wellness policy;
  - Document any school environmental change;
  - Assess the level and types of technical assistance necessary to implement and evaluation a local wellness policy.
- USDA, in partnership with the CDC and the Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools has compiled and continues to update extensive web-based resources for districts.
- CDC's Coordinated School Health Program, with its resources such as the *School Health Index* provides an important framework for districts and schools to ensure the changes made under this requirement are part of a coordinated effort to address the school environment and its contribution to childhood obesity.
- CDC/DASH has convened state education agency staff and others at a School Wellness Institute in January 2006 at which resources were disseminated and shared. CDC continues to provide assistance through its Coordinated School Health Programs.
- The Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools (U.S. Department of Education) also recognizes the importance of these policies and is including sessions on the policies and on healthy eating in their annual grantees conference this summer.

Other national organizations are also taking on the challenge of working to support these policies. One of the most innovative efforts is a partnership between the National League of Cities and the American Association of School Administrators. At a Leadership Academy in February, these two organizations brought together city administrators and school leaders to look at what the cities could do to support schools, but also to look at how the Local Wellness Policies could be expanded to address the larger community in which children live. Fifteen districts attended the academy, which mixed presentations from experts with time for the participants to network, to learn from each other and to focus on planning time. Currently, districts that attended are submitting applications for additional funding to help them to implement their plans. The partnership will be funding five or six of these applications.

The National Association of State Boards of Education is providing support to state school boards and state education agencies for their leadership role in this area. In the first year of this project, they have produced the comprehensive overview on state strategies reference above. They have also hosted a policy symposium for interested state school board members and their partners.

## **Conclusion**

Thank you again for the opportunity to share this testimony. Action for Healthy Kids is committed to supporting the nation's states, districts and school in the development, implementation and monitoring of the Local School Wellness Policies. Creating healthy school environments, that provide sound nutritional options, multiple opportunities for physical activity, high quality physical education and nutrition education as part of comprehensive health education and the ongoing involvement of families and communities will make a difference in the future of our nation's children.