



STEPPING UP TO THE PLATE

# The Physical Educator's Role in Enacting the Mandated School Wellness Policy: School Nutrition

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*Physical educators can successfully promote healthy eating among students.*

“**N**ew federal regulations celebrated in schools.” While a more unlikely headline might be hard to imagine, school physical educators should be delighted with the recently mandated school wellness policies. For the physical education profession, these policies offer new ways of improving student health. The root causes of such health threats as obesity and inactivity are clearly identified: students are eating too much of the wrong kinds of food and moving too little. Unfortunately, effective strategies for solving these problems are harder to identify.

Access to healthy foods in public schools is critical. Schools provide most of the total daily dietary intake of food and nutrients for many children (Gleason & Sutor, 2003). Because the vast majority of children in the United States spend most of their day in public schools, teachers can certainly influence students' eating habits. What children learn about nutrition in schools almost certainly plays a role in their food choices outside of school, and these choices will affect both the quality and length of their future life (Olshansky et al., 2005).

Efforts to promote healthy and active lifestyles will not succeed without changing students' diets. The Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004 may prove to be a significant catalyst both for improving children's health and for rethinking the role of the public school physical education teacher. In this article we will examine some of the nutritional issues that physical educators should consider addressing.

## School Meals

Each day, schools across the country face the challenge of serving hundreds of nutritious meals to their students and staff. They contend with meeting United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) guidelines, limited budgets, navigating the USDA commodity program, and satisfying the picky palates of many children (Hudson, Watmough, Cirillo, & Nelson, 2006).

Every day approximately nine million students eat breakfast as part of the School Breakfast Program (USDA, 2006b), and 29 million students participate in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP; USDA, 2006a). Despite popular criticism about the quality of these meals, there is evidence that students who participate in the NSLP eat more fruits and vegetables than children who eat from snack bars or home-prepared snack lunches (Presidents Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, 2006). The meals these students receive are required to meet the minimum nutritional standards for school meals established by the USDA, which have been consistent with *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* since 1996 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & USDA, 2005). These guidelines include serving meals with reduced levels of total fat and saturated fat and meeting federal standards for energy and key nutrients.

Within these minimal guidelines, school food service directors have autonomy to construct their own menus. The director decides whether students are served salads, baked potatoes, fresh vegetables and fresh fruit, or corn dogs, french-fries, burgers, and donuts. And while the best choices might appear obvious, especially to individuals trained to know the difference between good and bad nutritional choices, food service directors face difficult decisions. The need to maintain a balanced budget is fundamental to school food-service operations. Schools simply do not have the extra funds to support unprofitable food-service operations. Coupled with the high cost of fresh fruits and vegetables, schools cannot offer meals that students refuse to eat. And in the minds of many food service directors, students will not willingly choose fresh vegetables in place of cookies, or leafy salads rather than hamburgers and fries.

While students who eat in free lunch programs cannot afford to be picky, those who purchase school meals directly affect the food service budget. If students and staff choose not to eat school meals, and bring sack lunches or eat off of the school campus, food services risks losing money and jobs. Not surprisingly then, many school menus model typical fast-food choices, which also happen to be supported by food service vendors, and are often cheaper, easier, and faster to prepare. These meals are offered because it is assumed that they are more likely to please students and make money.

It is essential to address and resolve food service concerns when discussing changes to school meals. While it is wrong to conclude that food service staff does not care about children's health, changes that threaten staff employment must be avoided. Fortunately, there are many success stories illustrating that change is both possible and profitable in school dining. Here are just a few examples worthy of review:

- The Vermont FEED (Food Education Every Day) program ([www.vtfeed.org](http://www.vtfeed.org)) and the Edible Schoolyard Program in California ([edibleschoolyard.org](http://edibleschoolyard.org)) are two examples of successful ways that communities, schools, and service organizations can work together to provide lifelong lessons in nutrition, cooking, and eating. In Vermont FEED, students participate in growing, harvesting, and preparing nutritious foods offered in the school dining program. Through the Edible Schoolyard, urban public school students are provided with a one-acre organic garden and a kitchen classroom. Students learn how to grow, harvest, and prepare nutritious seasonal produce.

- In the Burlington (Vermont) School Food Project (n.d.), students develop recipes, help prepare food items, and conduct taste tests with their peers. Items that make it through the taste tests and are judged to be viable are likely to find their way into the menu. Community connections are made through the use of locally grown ingredients in school meals.

- The Appleton (Wisconsin) Area School District ([www.aasd.k12.wi.us/](http://www.aasd.k12.wi.us/)) has formed a partnership with a bakery and health company founded by a couple who believed that students served nutrient-dense fresh food would focus better in the

classroom. The company sponsored a kitchen in the alternative high school where they incorporated whole grains, fresh vegetables, and fruits into breakfast, a healthy snack, and lunch.

Although each of these programs is structured differently, they share many commonalities. Students are involved from start to finish in selecting, growing, preparing, and serving the foods offered in their school meals. Students are also exposed to unfamiliar foods and given opportunities to expand their eating options.

## Competitive Foods

Outside of the federally regulated school breakfast and lunch programs, students have many opportunities within schools to purchase foods and beverages. Collectively, these options are often referred to as "competitive foods." Competitive food options include à la carte dining, vending machines, school stores, concession stands, after-school programs, fundraising sales, class parties, and student incentive and reward programs. For many years there were no guidelines as to the types of foods and beverages that should be offered. More recently, competitive foods have attracted intense interest because of studies that have shown that easier access to snack foods and beverages appears to be associated with higher body mass indexes (BMI) among students and the related health threats (Kubik, Lytle, & Story, 2005).

The new school wellness policy forced school districts to examine the availability of these uncontrolled foods and beverages on their campuses. As a result, some districts have taken steps to reduce student access to unhealthy choices. Vending machine access and product choice have, to date, received most of the attention. Many schools, however, have come to rely on the revenue from vending machines to supplement their budget. Removing these machines or offering unpopular items threatens the viability of popular school programs. While vending machine critics argue that schools should not be selling student health for profit, organizers and supporters of school clubs, athletics, and other programs that depend on vending profits for their existence point out that lost revenues would reduce potentially health-promoting student programs. Healthier-beverage guidelines for drinks sold in schools—limiting portion size and offering only lower-calorie and nutritious drinks—the result of a voluntary collaboration in May 2006 between the leading beverage companies, have helped to soften this contentious issue (Alliance for a Healthier Generation, 2006a).

More recently, in October 2006, a second breakthrough affecting school vending machines and snack foods made available outside of the school meal program was achieved through the collaboration between the Alliance for a Healthier Generation (2006b) and five of the nation's leading food manufacturers. The new guidelines limit the calories, fat (saturated and trans), sugar, and sodium of foods offered to students through vending machines, à la carte lines, school stores, snack carts, and fundraisers.

In view of the potential negative impact that snack foods and sugared soft drinks pose to student health, these two



The “competitive foods” dispensed from vending machines undermine school nutrition, but some schools have recently succeeded in ameliorating this problem.

agreements were significant. Physical educators, however, need to remain vigilant. Compliance with the new guidelines is voluntary. School districts can choose to accept, ignore, or modify these suggestions, and special interest groups within and outside the school may be unaware of these changes. In particular, individuals and groups that profit from the sales of unhealthy snack foods must be convinced that the benefits of these changes on the diet and long-term health of children outweigh the short-term financial benefits. Aware and knowledgeable of these industry agreements, physical educators should review their school’s current wellness policy and, if appropriate, continue advocating for even more healthy choices.

Physical educators can also be a positive influence in discussions about competitive foods by pointing out the negative association between foods with minimal nutritional value (FMNV) and declining student health, and by suggesting alternative ways to raise funds. In *Making It Happen: School Nutrition Success Stories* (USDA & Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2005), 32 schools and school districts nationwide were showcased for their efforts to improve the school nutritional environment. Of the many lessons learned from these success stories, perhaps the most pertinent is that, contrary to initial fears, students *will* buy and consume healthful foods and beverages and that schools can make money from healthful options.

### Nutrition Education and Resisting School Marketing

Physical educators have unique opportunities to positively influence student health by developing lessons that teach the relationship between caloric intake and expenditure. While students may conceptually understand that the foods and drinks they consume affect their health and body weight, practical physical education lessons can give students more meaningful and potentially behavior-changing learning experiences. For example, teachers could have students walk for the approximately 45 minutes (based on body weight) it takes to burn off the typical 160 calories in a 12-ounce can of soda. Subsequently, they could explain, through showing

the calculations, that the result of drinking sodas daily for 22 days and not burning the calories will add one pound to body weight. Continued for one year, the same students would gain close to 20 pounds. To emphasize the point, and have students feel the difference to their bodies, teachers could then have students do some physical activities while carrying a 20-pound weight.

Physical educators can also help students understand the contrast between the number of calories burned when sedentary or when doing different physical activities. Students can better appreciate how their choices of food and activity will affect their health and body weight if teachers take time to discuss the number of calories in popular foods. It could be argued that this kind of instruction, in preparing students for life, should be one of physical education’s most important goals. The reality is that, from a health perspective, the nutritional and activity choices that students make outside of class are much more important than what they do in the 30 or 50 minutes during which they are in physical education.

Another change that physical educators can support is the effort to minimize or eliminate the uncontrolled marketing of unhealthy foods in schools. Only recently has there been a greater and more widespread awareness of the subtle yet pervasive marketing and advertising practices that daily expose students to unhealthy messages. In a publication entitled *Captive Kids: Selling Obesity at Schools* (California Project LEAN, 2006), it is pointed out that students are routinely exposed to product sales, direct advertising, indirect marketing, and market research, all of which are funded by commercial entities motivated solely to profit from children’s consumerism. This is hardly surprising. Annual estimates of children’s spending range from \$25 million to \$140 million. This does not include the influence of children on family choices.

The National Association of State Boards of Education (1999) developed a policy on school and business relationships that states, “Selling or providing access to a captive audience in the classroom for commercial purposes is exploitation and a violation of public trust” (p. 2). Critics of school marketing point out that schools contain captive audiences and that preparing students to become consumers for any specific product is inconsistent with the goals of public school education. In view of the billions of dollars spent annually by commercial food and beverage companies on advertising targeted specifically at children and youths, there can be little doubt that this kind of marketing is effective. Physical education teachers need to recognize that the promotion of unhealthy foods and beverages through machines or other kinds of marketing on school property undermines the efforts they might make to promote healthy nutrition.

Community opposition to school marketing and advertising has led to positive changes. In 1999, the San Francisco School District passed a “Commercial-Free Schools Act” (California Project LEAN, 1999). Then in 2001, the Seattle School Board approved policy to restrict commercial advertising on or within district-owned property (California Project LEAN, 2001). The policy also prohibited the district from

entering into a district-wide exclusive contract with a soda or snack company. Today, an increasing number of national and state organizations are calling for tighter restrictions on advertising unhealthy foods and beverages to children and youths. For physical educators, supporting or being advocates for such policy changes involves recognizing that what takes place in schools not only affects the nutritional choices students make during the school day, but what they choose to eat and drink after school (American Dietetic Association, 2006).

## Changing School Policies

With the increased national concern about children's health and the predictable social and financial consequences of poor health and obesity, getting schools to change nutrition-related policies and practices has become easier. Without a good understanding of the process of school policy change, however, health advocates can easily become frustrated and disillusioned.

Setting or changing school policy is the responsibility of the locally elected, usually five- or seven-member school board. School boards have financial, curricular, and academic responsibilities. Nowhere in the description of school board responsibilities is there likely to be any mention of student health, and many school board members would probably argue that student health is a parental and not a school board responsibility. Approaching a school board to change policy with a focus on student health requires careful planning. In addition, proposing a change that has negative financial consequences is almost certainly destined for failure.

School board members are elected to represent community interests. As such, it should be incumbent on them to be responsive to the values, beliefs, and priorities of the community. One successful approach, particularly in relation to eliminating commercial advertising and marketing, is to point out the inconsistency of mixing commercial messages with the district's educational mission and goals. The fact that a district might have budgetary woes does not justify any actions that have negative health consequences for students.

Another effective approach, especially in relation to issues about school meals and competitive foods, is to point out the connections between healthy students and academic achievement. Obviously, students who miss school due to poor health also miss academic instruction. Healthier students seem to experience fewer social problems (Duran, 2006), and a positive relationship between students who eat breakfast and academic performance has also been shown (American Dietetic Association, 2004). Finally, the 2001 California statewide study of student physical fitness and academic performance provided compelling evidence that the physical well-being of students directly affects their academic achievements (California Department of Education, 2002).

One of the reasons for making academic and health connections is to effectively address a school board's reluctance to accept responsibility for student health. It can be argued that if students are not healthy they will not do well in school,

and this will affect the school's academic performance, which is a primary responsibility of the school board.

With the growing national interest about the threats that unhealthy diets pose to the health of children and youths in schools, physical educators should seriously consider becoming active participants in the development and implementation of effective local wellness policies. The following three points summarize some of the ways physical education teachers can contribute:

**1. Join the Wellness Policy Writing Committee.** With the federally mandated wellness policy in place, now is the time to join other proponents of children's health in furthering positive change in school nutrition and physical activity. Take the initiative to address any issues that remain unresolved or problematic in your existing policy.

**2. Incorporate nutritional information into your physical education lessons.** Making connections between activity intensity or type and caloric intake and expenditure provides students with information that they can apply to their life outside of class. Teaching appropriate dietary habits offers wonderful opportunities for integrating science, math, biology, technology, English, and physical and health education. Seek out colleagues in the classroom who might be interested in collaborating. Your students will learn more and the value of physical education will be enhanced.

**3. Suggest alternatives to nutritionally deficient competitive foods.** Knowing that classroom teachers, coaches, and activity coordinators have traditionally used snacks and sodas as rewards and for celebrations or fundraisers, physical educators can suggest healthy alternatives.

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~~unique ideas, particularly designed for the physical educator, that have been successfully implemented in different school districts throughout the nation, and each presents different models that can be adapted to meet the idiosyncratic needs of students and community members in a particular school district. Whereas part one of this wellness feature focused primarily on physical activity during school hours, part two addresses how the policy extends to before and after school hours, nutrition, and the larger community.~~

~~In the first article, "Physical Activity Opportunities Before and After School," Peter Hastie addresses the many ways in which schools can provide physical activity opportunities for students by taking advantage of hours that students might otherwise spend idly waiting for school to begin or engaged in computer games after school has ended. The article presents creative strategies for engaging students in activities that are inexpensive, such as activity prompts, intramurals, and facility sharing, as well as ideas that require more effort and community collaboration, such as the Walking School Bus. Hastie also presents strategies that have worked well not only in the United States, but in countries as far away as New Zealand.~~

~~In the second article, "The Physical Educator's Role in Enacting the Mandated School Wellness Policy," Stephen Jefferies (editor of *Pelinks4u* and a former school board member) and Kirk Mathias (director of a PEP grant) discuss the wellness policy in relation to nutrition education. The authors provide unique vantage points because of their respective jobs and have researched some of the most interesting national initiatives for engaging students in nutrition education and encouraging healthy eating. They also provide suggestions for how the physical educator can contribute to developing students who are committed to eating a well-balanced diet.~~

~~The final article, "School Wellness Policy: Community Connections," by Dolly Lambdin and Heather Erwin, addresses how physical educators can make connections to the larger community. They discuss how to better inform community physical activity leaders and coaches about appropriate instructional practices and how best to inform students about the available community activities. They end the article by offering suggestions for how to invite the community into the school and promote the use of school facilities for community activities.~~

~~There is no better time than today for the physical educator to assume a leadership position in the creation and implementation of his or her school's wellness policy.~~

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