

# A Model for Healthy Change in Our Nation's Schools

*Schools can play a critical role in promoting healthier eating habits through their wellness policies and participation in the National School Lunch Program.*



By Alicia M. Geddis

**T**he general health of school-age children is in the national spotlight, and school lunches are falling under scrutiny. Many of the food options that schools offer seem to be contributing to the obesity problem.

Schools can play a critical role in promoting healthier eating habits through their wellness policies and participation in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP),

and school leaders have the power to create a national model of change.

The change begins with education. According to Lytle and others (1997), children need to learn what maintaining a healthy weight means and how to choose a diet low in unhealthy fats. They must learn how to judge serving sizes and interpret food labels. Schools offer the perfect opportunity to provide the comprehensive edu-

cation that is so desperately needed. Guidance counselors and teachers can take the lead.

Unfortunately, districts often fail to educate those responsible for developing menus, preparing meals, and serving students. They don't educate food service personnel about preparing modified menus, implementing the U.S. dietary guidelines, and making healthy foods more appealing to students (Stang and others 1997). Studies conclude that school districts participating in the NSLP are failing to meet the U.S. government's dietary requirements (Plemmons 2004). Thus, training the food service staff is a critical component of this model.

## Districts often fail to educate those responsible for developing menus, preparing meals, and serving students.

In June 2004, Congress passed the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act, which mandated that school districts that participated in any program authorized by the National School Lunch Act establish a wellness policy to promote healthier eating habits. Closely tied to establishing a wellness policy was the mandate to involve stakeholders and to develop an assessment plan to measure policy implementation. School leaders, in collaboration with all stakeholders, should make wellness a priority and should ensure that the school and district wellness policy is evident in the lunch program.

### Generating Revenue Through the NSLP

Education policy makers realize that producing meals for less than the reimbursement rates will yield higher profits, and those profits are magnified when schools can increase participation. The easiest way to increase participation is to serve foods that student prefer.

Unfortunately, some research suggests that students prefer foods and snacks that are not characterized as healthy (Snelling, Korba, and Burkey 2007). This need for high participation and low costs often drives districts to offer less-than-healthy options.

Another major obstacle in the battle against obesity is the presence of competitive offerings—food and beverages available as alternatives to the NSLP. These foods are sold à la carte; placed in vending machines, snack bars, and school stores; and sold at special events, such as fund-raisers and sporting events. The U.S. government has limited ability to influence the presence of these

foods on campus. Although such foods usually contradict the U.S. dietary goals, the NSLP, and most district wellness policies, they also generate much needed revenue to support school functions (Snelling, Korba, and Burkey 2007).

Competitive foods do not have to be unhealthy; districts can set nutritional guidelines for selecting them. Recent studies found that if healthier food is available in vending machines and at sporting events, students will buy the healthier food (Cullen, Watson, and Zakeri 2008).

### Our Commitment

School districts must promote healthy food consumption to the children they serve. As school leaders we must

- Educate and retrain students on health nutrition.
- Educate the food service staff.
- Get all major stakeholders on board.
- Let the wellness policy drive the NSLP.
- Provide students with healthier food options outside of the NSLP.

Ultimately, the adults in the schools are responsible for implementing the NSLP as a way of improving the health of our children and reducing childhood obesity, so we must become the change we want to see in our children. Until we educate ourselves to make healthier choices, we will be unprepared to teach our children to do so.

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