Effectiveness of school wellness policies

By Gayle Coleman

Background. A 2010 position paper by the American Dietetic Association, School Nutrition Association and Society for Nutrition Education states that comprehensive, integrated nutrition services in schools are an essential component of school health programs and will improve the nutritional status, health and academic performance of children. Similarly, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention emphasize the importance of policy change and improving the environment to more effectively improve the health and nutritional status of children. Although school meals are only one dimension of school wellness policies, they may soon have a new set of federal standards in the form of the Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act. The act’s proposed revisions to standards for school food are based on the Institute of Medicine’s 2009 report School Meals: Building Blocks for Healthy Children.

The U.S. Child Nutrition and WIC reauthorization act of 2004 was designed to improve the school nutrition and physical activity environment. It required all schools who received federal reimbursement for school meals to implement a local wellness policy by the 2006-2007 school year. As a result, most schools have had wellness policies in place for three years or more, but little is known about the effectiveness of the policies.

New Study. Researchers compared the school environment in a random sample of 45 low-income, rural Colorado schools. The School Environment and Policy Survey was completed by food service managers, physical education teachers and principals in these schools in 2005 (before) and 2007 (after) local wellness policies were adopted. Results from the surveys indicate that:

- Inside the lunchroom there was an increase in the number of fresh fruits offered daily (0.8 choices in 2005 vs. 1.15 choices in 2007; P<0.04).
- Outside the lunchroom there was an increase in the percent of schools with policies that stipulated predominantly healthy items be offered in classroom parties (21.4% in 2005 vs. 48.7% in 2007).
- More schools reported using skinless poultry in school meals (26.7% in 2005 vs. 58.8% in 2007; P<0.01).

There was little if any change in other environmental changes such as the number of fresh vegetable choices offered at lunch, fruits or vegetables placed at the front of the lunch line or vending machine options.

Key informant interviews were conducted with foodservice managers in 11 of the 45 schools approximately two years after the local school wellness policies went into effect. These interviews focused on foodservice managers’ knowledge and familiarity with their districts local wellness policy, and how
they perceived the policy had influenced their lunchroom and school environment. Results from these interviews indicate that:

- Eight of the 11 foodservice managers were familiar with their district’s policy.
- None of the foodservice managers believed the policy influenced their lunchroom practices or meals, although several mentioned that it influenced food served at classroom parties and the content of the school soda vending machines.
- Five of 11 foodservice managers mentioned lack of financial resources to provide a selection of healthy foods, especially fresh fruits and vegetables.

The authors concluded that local wellness policies have had a modest effect on the school nutrition and physical activity environment in Colorado’s rural, low-income elementary schools. They recommend providing schools with more information about evidence-based practices, as well as technical and financial assistance for implementation.

**Implications for Extension Educators:** Extension Educators are well positioned to contribute to the effectiveness of local school wellness policies. Through their work with schools or their membership in school wellness committees Extension Educators might teach or identify research-based nutrition education curricula that fit their school’s wellness priorities and help the school meet Wisconsin’s statewide nutrition education standards (see below). They may also offer advice on how schools can implement and monitor complementary educational activities and initiatives to achieve their wellness goals.

**Sources:**


Wisconsin Team Nutrition and other resources to support school wellness policies [http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/fns/wellnessplcy.html](http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/fns/wellnessplcy.html)