

# GET THE WORD OUT ABOUT SCHOOL NUTRITION AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY POLICY

## COMMUNICATION TIPS

A school wellness policy is the foundation of a comprehensive approach to obesity prevention in schools. Policy is the mechanism that allows consistent standards and enforcement procedures to be passed from one superintendent to the next at the district level and from one principal to the next at the school level. People and programs may come and go but a policy lasts and can provide guidance to new leaders.

Development of the written policy is an important first step but *communication* of the policy is the key to successful implementation. Students, staff, parents and the community need to know why the policy is important, key elements of the policy, and why the school setting is an important place to promote physical activity and good nutrition.

### Communicating the importance of a school wellness policy



*It's about promoting good health.*

The main purpose of a wellness policy is to promote good health among students, staff, parents and the community. A wellness policy creates an environment where students are encouraged to make healthy choices that will help reduce diseases related to being overweight and obese. Policy helps change social norms as consistent

messages are communicated, modeled and enforced in the school setting.

A wellness policy is not meant to target individuals who are overweight or obese. The policy does, however, make it clear that the school supports physical activity and healthy nutrition standards on school grounds and at school functions.

## Communication Strategies

There are basic communication strategies that can be used in many different settings. These tips can be used as starting points to develop specific communication strategies that are customized to your school and community needs.



### General Strategies to Reach Students, Staff, Parents and Community

- Get community input on policy messages and test messages with influential community leaders such as tribal elders or opinion leaders before posting them publicly.
- Prominently place signs on school grounds proudly and attractively advertising the healthier foods that are now available and/or promoting physical activity breaks. Adapt signage to be culturally appropriate whenever possible.
  - Where? School building entrances, cafeterias, school stores, vending areas, athletic fields and indoor facilities, buses, school vehicles, entrances to school grounds.
- Post an announcement about the wellness policy on district and school web pages.
- Use popular, local means of communication (e.g. messages on VHF radio, community message boards or small newspapers) to get the message out.

### Key Messages In Alaska

- One out of three Alaska children are overweight or obese.
- Two out of three Alaska adults are overweight or obese.
- Seventy percent of obese 5- to 17-year-olds have one or more conditions that put them at risk for heart disease, such as high blood pressure or high cholesterol. Forty percent have two or more heart disease risk factors.
- Childhood obesity increases the risk of a variety of chronic diseases, including diabetes and heart disease. There is also a greater risk of asthma, joint problems, fatty liver disease, depression and low self-esteem.
- School-aged children who are overweight or obese may experience a lower quality of life – physically, emotionally and academically.

## Strategies for Communicating with Different Audiences

### *Communicating to Parents/Guardians*

- Send a letter to each parent or guardian that: 1) explains the wellness policy, and 2) provides the health, academic and social reasons for the policy.
- Discuss the policy at PTA, PTO or similar meetings.
- Include an article outlining the policy and implications of the policy in PTO/PTA newsletters and school or community newspapers.

### *Communicating to Employees*

- Discuss wellness policies at staff meetings and new staff orientation.
- Listen to concerns and find ways to empathize without condoning unhealthy environments. Focus on the many healthy options available and the necessity of change.
- Always talk about why the environment needs to change (to support individuals in making healthy choices). Avoid focusing on why individuals need to change.
- Provide concrete, positive suggestions for how to improve the classroom food and physical activity environment.
- Include information in staff newsletters or payroll notices.
- Involve respected and well-liked school personnel in sharing messages with staff groups.
- Use the internal staff website, worksite wellness committee meetings and insurance benefit meetings to communicate and reinforce the policy.
- Remind employees, faculty, and staff that they are all role models and are part of creating a healthy learning environment.

### *Communicating to Students*

- Highlight the policy in student handbooks and orientation materials.
- Make announcements about healthy foods, water, and physical activity over morning broadcasts. Have students write and record their own announcements.
- Spread policy information through student organizations, activities and newspapers.
- Have students design posters, banners, buttons and signs to communicate the policy and promote healthy eating and physical activity.
- Involve or create student groups to advocate for a strong wellness policy (e.g. student leadership).



## Weight and food can be sensitive issues

Stigmatizing people who are overweight is not effective at changing personal behavior or changing policies. Review all materials and remove elements that stigmatize overweight individuals.

- The goal of the wellness policy should be to improve health of the entire school community, not to help individual people reach an ideal weight.
- Use positive messages, e.g., eating better and getting more physical activity helps everyone be healthier.
- In short, avoid approaches that shame and blame. Fight obesity, not obese persons.

## Smoothing the path to compliance

Communicating policy effectively to students, parents, staff and the community will make enforcement easier. Clear, positive and consistent messages communicated on an ongoing basis will help prevent and negate confrontations with employees, parents and visitors.

## Remember Core Messages

*Childhood obesity is the predominant public health threat facing Alaska today. Too many of our kids are overweight or obese.*

*We need to create an Alaska where every child lives, learns and plays in an environment filled with healthy choices.*

*We can do this if we work together.*

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## Resources to help with positive communication of school wellness policies:

State of Alaska, Gold Standard Wellness Policy <http://redegroup.co/opcp-wellness-policy>

Healthy Classroom Celebration announcement/ideas - [http://cspinet.org/new/pdf/healthy\\_school\\_celebrations.pdf](http://cspinet.org/new/pdf/healthy_school_celebrations.pdf)

Healthy Fundraiser ideas [http://www.cspinet.org/new/pdf/Fundraising\\_Ideas\\_Fact\\_Sheet.pdf](http://www.cspinet.org/new/pdf/Fundraising_Ideas_Fact_Sheet.pdf)

Peaceful Playgrounds (physical activity zones) - <http://www.peacefulplaygrounds.com/>

Play Every Day/Healthy Futures morning announcements - <http://dhss.alaska.gov/dph/PlayEveryDay/Pages/resources.aspx>

Smarter Lunchrooms (marketing healthy food choices) - <http://smarterlunchrooms.org/>