

# Wellness Policy Best Practices

## A Guide for Coordinated School Health

### **What are Wellness Policies?**

The local school wellness policy is a **written document that guides local educational agency's (LEA) efforts to establish a school environment that promotes students' health, well-being, and ability to learn**<sup>1</sup>. Wellness policies have been required in all school districts participating in the National School Lunch (NSLP) or School Breakfast Program (SBP) since 2004. Requirements have been updated in 2010 and 2017. Each district has the ability to customize their individual wellness policies based on their own specific circumstances to best improve the health of their students<sup>2</sup>.

### **Who Oversees Assessing, Reviewing, and Updating Wellness Policies?**

Each LEA has discretion in determining who is responsible for overseeing the wellness policy, including assessments<sup>2</sup>. USDA regulations do not specify the title or position of the designated wellness official(s), but simply require that the responsible official(s) be designated<sup>2</sup>.

In an effort to foster transparency and inclusion, LEAs are also required to allow parents, students, teachers of physical education, school health professionals, the school board, school administrators, and members of the general public to participate in the development, implementation, and periodic review and update of the local school wellness policy<sup>2</sup>. LEAs are also required to annually notify the public about the content of the local school wellness policy and any updates to the policy<sup>2</sup>.

Regardless of who is named as the designated official(s) to oversee the wellness policy process, the [CDC's case study examination](#) found that in successful schools, a "wellness champion" serves as the driving force for developing and implementing the wellness policy<sup>3</sup>. This champion plays a critical role in starting the process and keeping it going when challenges arise<sup>3</sup>. In Tennessee, this would be the role of Healthy School Team leads being aware of local wellness policy goals and what is permitted within the school day.

### **What are the USDA Requirements for Wellness Policies?**

#### ***Wellness Policy Language***

While there is room to customize your LEA's wellness policy, there are three requirements that must be within your wellness policy<sup>2</sup>:

1. **Specific goals** for nutrition promotion and education, physical activity, and other school-based activities that are designed to promote student wellness.
2. **Standards and nutrition guidelines** for all foods and beverages available on the school campus during the school day that are, at a minimum, consistent with Federal regulations for program meals

and the Smart Snacks in School nutrition standards designed to promote student health and reduce childhood obesity.

3. **Policies that allow marketing or advertising of only** those foods and beverages that may be sold on the school campus during the school day, i.e., those foods and beverages that meet the Smart Snacks in School nutrition standards.

### ***Wellness Policy Maintenance***

To maintain the impact and quality of your district's wellness policy, the USDA also requires LEAS to periodically<sup>2</sup>:

1. **Review and consider evidence-based strategies** in determining local school wellness goals.
2. **Involve, inform, and update the public** (including parents, students, and other stakeholders) about the content and implementation of the local school wellness policy.
3. **Conduct an assessment, at least once every three years**, to determine compliance, progress, and the extent to which the policy compares to model local school wellness policies.
4. **Update or modify** the local school wellness policy as appropriate.

### ***Wellness Policy Triennial Assessments***

At a minimum, wellness policy assessments must be conducted by LEAs once every three years<sup>2</sup>, this is referred to as the "triennial assessment." LEAs must designate at least one LEA or school official(s) as responsible for determining the extent to which each school under their jurisdiction is following their wellness policies<sup>2</sup>. In addition to the official(s) identified, other stakeholders must be permitted to be involved in the review process<sup>2</sup>. The USDA does not specify the frequency of updates to the local school wellness policy, however it is recommended that the policy is updated, at a minimum, after conducting the triennial assessments<sup>2</sup>.

After conducting assessments regarding school compliance with the district's wellness policies, the LEA must develop a triennial assessment report that describes<sup>2</sup>:

1. **The extent to which its schools comply** with the local school wellness policy.
2. **The extent to which the local policy aligns** with model policies.
3. **A description of progress** towards attaining policy goals.

There is local discretion on the format of the report, but this report must be made available to the public<sup>2</sup>. Evidence of this report is required in audits conducted by the State of Tennessee's School Nutrition Program, and therefore it is extremely important to work with your school nutrition director in this process. The triennial requirement was written into USDA requirements in 2017 and was set to be in effect throughout all LEAS by 2020. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the target date for first assessments was waived multiple times and eventually moved back to July 1, 2023. Therefore, triennial assessments are a more recent requirement and possess an extraordinary amount of opportunity for coordinators to be involved in shaping their local wellness policy.

## **How Coordinated School Health Impacts Wellness Policies**

### ***Healthy School Teams and Wellness Policy Assessments***

For a wellness policy to be successfully implemented, there needs to be a member within the district that “champions” the goals and regulations included in the policy. The prime candidate to assume that role is the school health coordinator, as they are already a champion of student health and well-being.

One of the primary pillars of the wellness policy is being able to measure its implementation levels. Because school health coordinators are well acquainted with the school health index and lead each school’s healthy school teams, coordinators already have the means to measure a wellness policy’s implementation level. This does not mean the coordinator should assume all responsibility of the wellness policy, but that the coordinator should be involved in reviews and updates to the wellness policy alongside district personnel and provide insight from School Health Index data.

### ***Coordinators Working Locally on Their Wellness Policy in School Year 2021-2022***

#### **Physical Activity as a Form of Discipline or Punishment: [Andrew Martin, Germantown Municipal School District’s Wellness Policy](#)**

In October 2021, the Germantown Board of Education approved the addition of “*Physical activity shall not be employed as a form of discipline or punishment*” to the Commitment to Physical Activity and Physical Education section of their wellness policy. This addition was a joint effort that included other district stakeholders such as the district lead nurse, assistant superintendent of student services, and the director of schools.

#### **Commitment to Mental Health: [Laura Roberts, Clinton City Schools’ Wellness Policy](#)**

In May 2022, the Clinton City Board of Education approved the addition of a Commitment to Mental Health section of their district’s wellness policy. This addition included the wording “*The Board recognizes that student mental health is extremely important to the overall health of a child. Schools shall support and promote mental well-being through school counseling, guidance classes, and other school-based supports. Mental health activities may be integrated into any areas of the school program through mindfulness and restorative practices.*” The Board of Education also approved the removal of wording that was no longer applicable, such as parts of the wellness policy regarding access to vending machines. These changes were a comprehensive effort that included input from school staff on the district wellness team.

#### **Commitment to Physical Activity and Physical Education: [Jenna Stitzel, Rutherford County Schools’ Wellness Policy](#)**

In February 2022, the Rutherford County Board of Education approved additions to their Commitment to Physical Activity and Physical Education section of their district’s wellness policy. This addition included the wording “*All students in grades PreK-12 will be provided physical activity in accordance with T.C.A. § 49-6-1021. For elementary school students, a minimum of one hundred thirty (130) minutes of physical activity per full school*

*week. For middle and high school students, a minimum of ninety (90) minutes of physical activity per full school week. Physical education and physical activity equipment on school grounds will meet accepted safety standards for design, installation and maintenance in order to ensure the delivery of safe play areas, facilities and equipment in all physical education classes. Appropriately offer supervised structured recess to encourage regular physical activity. Teachers and other school and community personnel will not use physical activity (e.g., running laps, pushups) or withhold opportunities for physical activity (e.g., recess, physical education) as punishment.”*

**Commitment to Curriculum:** [Erika Phillips, Hawkins County Schools' Wellness Policy](#)

In June 2022, the Hawkins County Board of Education approved the addition of a Commitment to Curriculum section in their wellness policy based upon suggestions from the model wellness policy provided by the Tennessee School Board Association. This addition included adding the wording “*All applicable courses of study shall be based on State-approved curriculum standards*” to their wellness policy. This addition was discussed in a publicly announced wellness policy review meeting that included central office supervisors in attendance.

**Commitment to Nutrition Education and Promotion:** [Bethany Allen, Weakley County Schools' Wellness Policy](#)

In August 2021, the Weakley County Board of Education approved changes to the Commitment to Nutrition Education and Promotion section of their wellness policy. Wording was added to the wellness policy regarding stigma associated with reduced price meal qualifications that reads “*Schools will make every effort to eliminate any social stigma attached to, and prevent the over identification of, students who are eligible for free and reduced-price school meals.*” Access to water fountains during lunchtime were already in the wellness policy, but provisions to allow students water access during the day were added through the wording “*Hydration stations will be made available to all students in the cafeteria during mealtimes and in the school building during school hours.*” Provisions for school nutrition to provide cafeterias as “learning laboratories” for students to acquire nutrition education were removed from the policy and substituted with “*Nutrition education shall be a cooperative effort between the instructional staff, school nutrition program, and community partners that allow collaboration in the classroom to incorporate agricultural education by: creating and promoting school growing food activities, promoting education about healthy, local and regional foods, encouraging farm tours and cooking demonstrations, increasing both local and fresh food served in the cafeterias.*” Revisions to their wellness policy were a cooperative effort between the School Health Coordinator and the CTE Coordinator, School Nutrition Director, Public Relations Manager, and School Nurse Supervisor.

**Resources for Local Use**

***Assessment Tools***

[Alliance for a Healthier Generation Wellness Policy Checklist](#): This checklist includes reviewing ten essential components of local school wellness policies and can be completed online or on paper.

[CDC School Health Index \(SHI\)](#): This tool assesses the school environment along the components of the CDC model and can be completed online or on paper.

[CDC Wellness Policy in Action Tool \(WPAT\)](#): This tool takes the results of the WellSAT 3.0 and the SHI to crosswalk the results to measure implementation levels of the wellness policy in each school. This tool can be completed online.

[WellSAT 3.0](#): This tool helps to score and improve the wording of your wellness policy through an interactive assessment that can be completed online or on paper.

### **Guidance For Wellness Policies**

[Alliance for a Healthier Generation Model Wellness Policy](#)

[USDA Overview of Wellness Policies](#)

[USDA Wellness Policy Guidance and Q and As](#)

[WellSAT Triennial Assessment Guidance](#)

### **Tools for District Level Outreach**

[Alliance for a Healthier Generation Wellness Policy Communication Checklist](#): This checklist helps give guidance on best practices to communicate wellness policy objectives to faculty and families, as the word “policy” can be a major barrier for people to invest interest in advancing the local wellness policy.

[USDA Wellness Policy Outreach Toolkit](#): This toolkit includes letter templates to send to families, presentation templates to use with principals and leadership, and sample social media posts to educate on the impact of your local wellness policy.

### **References**

1. *Local School Wellness Policies*. Food and Nutrition Service U.S. Department of Agriculture. (2022, August 15). Retrieved December 27, 2022, from <https://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/local-school-wellness-policy>
2. Child Nutrition Programs, USDA. (2017, April 6). Local School Wellness Policy: Guidance and Q&As. Retrieved December 27, 2022, from <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/cn/SP24-2017os.pdf>
3. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2021, February 15). *School health guidelines*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrieved December 27, 2022, from <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/npao/strategies.htm>