

Are school wellness policies stuck in the Ice Age?

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The Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act, 2004, requires that all school districts have a Wellness Policy if they participate in federal school meal programs. As part of the Wellness Policy, schools are mandated to include nutrition education activities which promote student wellness. A study in the July/August issue of the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* evaluates elementary teachers' overall acceptance and implementation of nutrition competencies in the classroom as part of their School Wellness Policy.

Earlier studies have reported that the majority of school wellness policies include written goals for nutrition education. In the new study, researchers at The University of Mississippi begin development of an instrument to identify the extent of implementation and/or compliance with nutrition education goals. To measure this, Lewin's Organizational Change Model was used to determine elementary school teachers' progression as it relates to the School Wellness Policy. By using this Model, researchers were able to develop an online survey to evaluate whether teachers were in one of the following stages: unfreezing (individuals become dissatisfied with the status quo and believe that change is needed), moving (change comes when individuals have input, allowing them to take ownership), or refreezing (change is complete and has become standard organizational protocol and/or culture).

To ensure that teachers were informed about their School Wellness Policy, only those who answered "Yes" to two items, "My school has a School Wellness Policy" and "I am informed and understand the School

Wellness Policy in my school," were included. Of the 321 Mississippi teachers surveyed, only 69% (221 teachers) of the teachers' answered "Yes", allowing the researchers to evaluate their stage for implementing change in nutrition education. However, of the 221 teachers informed of the School Wellness Policy, 86% supported it and 81% believed it will allow students' opportunities to practice healthful living (unfreezing stage).

Involvement and commitment to a project plays a large role when determining whether teachers are in the moving stage. This study found that 58% of the teachers surveyed thought they did not have adequate classroom time to include nutrition competencies and only 26% thought they would be given time to attend an in-service on strategies to incorporating nutrition education into their lessons. When determining if nutrition education can become a standard of practice for teachers (refreezing stage), the researchers found that the majority of teachers (64%) thought they had the skills to incorporate it into their curriculum, however, fewer than one third of teachers (30%) are actually including nutrition competencies into their lesson plans.

So what seems to be the problem? The researchers found that teachers feel little involvement in implementation of the school wellness policies and therefore "teachers may not view inclusion of nutrition competencies into classroom instruction as a part of the SWP [School Wellness Policy]. A lack of involvement in the SWP development may have led teachers to believe that the role of implementing it is not their responsibility but that of other school staff such as physical education instructors, school nurses, and school food-service staff" says lead author Dr. Laurel Lambert, Associate Professor of Dietetics and Nutrition, University of Mississippi.

Successful implementation of new policies cannot and should not be the sole responsibility of school administration. New policies must also have

the support of a well-rounded team which includes teachers (including physical education), food-service employees, and school nurses. This study documents that teachers need to participate in the development and implementation of School Wellness Policies in order to move out of the unfreezing stage (and out of the "Ice Age").

Within the article, the researchers give recommendations that could support teachers' progression out of the moving and into the refreezing stage. The recommendations to incorporate nutrition competencies into the classroom include, "(1) Involve[ing] teachers in the development of an evaluation tool that can be used to assess how the nutrition competencies are being presented in the classroom. Use results obtained with this tool to recognize those teachers who have demonstrated effective ways to incorporate nutrition competencies within limited classroom time. (2) Inform[ing] teachers of the numerous resources, including credible Internet links that provide nutrition education information and classroom materials. Many resources are available at minimal or no cost from federal government agencies, state extension services, and nonprofit health organizations. (3) Conduct[ing] specific focused in-services on strategies for incorporating state-mandated nutrition competencies into lesson plans. (4) Require addressing nutrition competencies in terms of time (minutes) for scheduled classroom instruction... (5) Create a nutrition education coordinator position within the Mississippi Department of Education [recommendations could be used in other states] to assist school districts on current and effective practices for implementation of [nutrition education](#) programs."

More information: The article is "Mississippi Elementary School Teachers' Perspectives on Providing Nutrition Competencies under the Framework of Their School Wellness Policy" by Laurel G. Lambert, PhD, RD, LD; Ann Monroe, EdD; Lori Wolff, PhD, JD. It appears in the Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior, Volume 42, Issue 4

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