Building Healthy SCHOOLS
A Collaborative Approach to Improve School-Based Wellness Initiatives
THE PROBLEM

Childhood obesity is a national epidemic. Nationally, one in three children ages two to 19 are considered overweight or obese. This is triple the rate from just one generation ago. The 1.8 million school-age youth in Pennsylvania (PA) spend most of their waking hours in school. This time significantly influences what they eat and drink and how often they can move around during the day. Schools can play a critical role in obesity prevention by establishing policies and practices that support good nutrition and encourage physical activity.
The PA Department of Health provided funding to PRO Wellness through two federal funding sources to facilitate programs focused on healthy eating and physical activity in up to 15 school districts (81 schools) across the Commonwealth through the Building Healthy Schools (BHS) program. The BHS program took place over a five-year period, beginning the 2014-15 school year and ending in June 2018. The invited districts were divided into three participation rounds and enrolled for two-year cycles.

Through the BHS Program, Penn State PRO Wellness (PRO Wellness) provided personalized technical assistance to help school districts create realistic, long-term action plans around nutrition and physical activity and education over a two-year period. The BHS Program used the Comprehensive School Physical Activity Program (CSPAP) model, designed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Society of Health and Physical Educators (SHAPE) America, as a framework for planning and implementing wellness changes in school districts. This model was expanded to include additional components from the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child Model to address nutrition and include a wellness policy assessment to ensure long-term sustainability of wellness efforts.

**WHAT IS TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE?**

With a focus on wellness policy and programming in schools, key national organizations in the fight against childhood obesity call upon the use of technical assistance (TA) and professional development as a best practice for advancing overall student health. TA can be delivered in many forms, including assisting schools in assessment, professional development, identification of administrator support, community partnership development, program implementation and wellness council development. In addition, TA can be used to facilitate program planning and policy updates and has been shown to increase the effectiveness and sustainability of both.
Data provided from the PA Department of Health was used to identify school districts throughout PA for participation in the BHS Program. Out of the 15 school districts invited, 13 agreed to participate in the program. Recognizing the importance of community and family involvement within our 13 school districts, two districts were enrolled in an adapted version of the BHS Program. The BHS Affiliate Program was a condensed version of the BHS Program, taking place in approximately one and a half years and focusing on sustainable improvements of CSPAP, as well as family and community engagement.

- **2,913** average number of students per district (median = 1,849)
- **58%** of schools had a free and reduced lunch program participation rate of **45% or greater** – indicating a lower socioeconomic status among the school communities.\(^5\)
- **3%** obesity rates higher than national average

The 11 represented counties reported a higher obesity rate (mean 20%) than the national (17%) average.\(^1,6\)

11 out of 15 school districts were located in rural regions
In the first year, each district identified both areas of strength and gaps where improvement was needed in wellness practices and policies and created a plan to take action.

**Who Were the Wellness Champions?**

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<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Count</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Health PE Teacher</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurse</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal of Academic Affairs</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director of Student &amp; Community Services</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family &amp; Consumer Science Teacher</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food Service Director</td>
<td>1</td>
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Each district identified one person to serve as their district wellness champion (champion). This person was the main point of contact for PRO Wellness staff and facilitated BHS Program activities within their district.

Each district assembled or enhanced an existing wellness council to guide implementation of BHS Program activities.

**Self-Assessment** – PRO Wellness assisted each wellness council in completing a self-assessment of the current state of nutrition and physical activity practices within the district. The Alliance for a Healthier Generation’s Healthy Schools Program (HSP) framework served as the primary self-assessment tool due to its comprehensiveness in the areas of physical activity and nutrition.

**Wellness Policy Review** – PRO Wellness reviewed each district’s wellness policy using the Wellness School Assessment Tool (WellSAT 2.0), producing a policy-level snapshot of wellness in the district to supplement the information gained through self-assessments.

Using the assessment information, wellness councils identified areas for improvement and developed a plan for implementing policy and practice changes at both the building and district level.

Each participating school district was eligible to request up to $1,000 to:

- support a district wellness champion for efforts needed to coordinate and plan activities; and/or
- fund a district kick-off campaign designed to raise awareness of Building Healthy Schools Program.
“Make it personal..identify key stakeholders and make the importance of wellness important to them.”

DEER LAKES AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT WELLNESS CHAMPION
In year one, the wellness needs and gaps identified in self-assessment results and wellness policy reviews were used to by each district to guide action planning. Additionally, these identified needs were utilized by PRO Wellness in planning professional development opportunities and resources that could best support each district.

**Top District Wellness NEEDS According to SELF-ASSESSMENT Results:**

**NEED 1:** Accessible physical activity and fitness programming for staff

**NEED 2:** Non-food fundraising opportunities

**NEED 3:** Staff healthy eating and physical activity behavior (modeling) support

**NEED 4:** Student and family opportunities to provide suggestions for school meals

**Top District Wellness NEEDS According to WELLNESS POLICY REVIEWS:**

**NEED 1:** Healthy fundraising

**NEED 2:** Increased professional development opportunities

**NEED 3:** Increased family/community involvement

**NEED 4:** Health promotion for staff
“We learned the importance of continually reviewing and revising our District Health and Wellness Policy. In addition, we better appreciate the need for staff health and wellness activities as they relate to stress management and healthy eating.”

ALBERT GALLATIN SCHOOL DISTRICT WELLNESS CHAMPION
In the second year, each district focused on implementation of the action plan developed in year one. In addition, PRO Wellness staff provided TA to help wellness councils with revisions to their wellness policy - the key to program sustainability.

District wellness councils implemented activities based on their action plan. Data was collected to inform the success of their programs and to plan future activities.

Districts revised their wellness policies to reflect wellness plans and changes made through program participation.

Each district participated in a final evaluation which was used to evaluate the success of the program.

In the second year of the program, each district received up to $10,000 to support wellness activities.

“It takes patience and perseverance to implement change.”

TUSSEY MOUNTAIN SCHOOL DISTRICT WELLNESS CHAMPION
PARTICIPANT SATISFACTION

All wellness champions completed an exit assessment at the conclusion of the BHS Program. Participants consistently reported a positive experience with the program and many benefits for their school district.

OVERALL SUSTAINABILITY

Exit assessment results revealed wellness champions’ confidence in continuing with all the necessary steps in BHS to develop, implement and evaluate future wellness activities. Fourteen of the 15 districts (93%) reported having an active wellness council. An active wellness council is defined as a group that holds meetings at least four times per academic year, has completed a self-assessment and has identified wellness priority areas. By developing or enhancing a wellness council, coupled with wellness policy revisions, participating districts were able to create sustainable wellness changes.

DO YOU FEEL THE WELLNESS COUNCIL IN YOUR SCHOOL DISTRICT WILL BE ABLE TO COMPLETE THE FOLLOWING ACTIVITIES, INDEPENDENTLY, IN THE FUTURE (N=15)
SCHOOL LEVEL OUTCOMES AND INITIATIVES

Districts implemented several new initiatives as a result of BHS Program. Wellness champions’ exit assessment results indicated that district action plans were comprehensive and sustainable:

- 77.7% of action plan items were considered sustainable beyond the BHS Program.
- 100% of wellness champions believed that their action plans were implemented as planned.

Action plan items included the following initiatives:

### PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION INITIATIVES:
- classroom energy/brain breaks district-wide;
- Nutrition Habit Challenge;
- professional development for teachers;
- inclusion of heart rate monitors in PE;
- classroom mindfulness; and
- discounts for students/staff at local YMCAs.

### NUTRITION INITIATIVES:
- compliance with USDA Smart Snacks Standards;
- introduction of healthy options as samples/taste tests in the cafeteria;
- incorporation of MyPlate into curriculum lessons;
- promotion of healthy nutrition (i.e. healthy bulletin boards and posters);
- nutrition updates to district webpages;
- healthy snack option before/after school; and
- hydration stations to provide access to free water.

### FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVES:
- “open to the community” fitness classes;
- Passport to the Parks Program, increasing outdoor play and visits to local parks;
- community access to school facilities; and
- partnerships with local community organizations to create and promote walking clubs.

Thirteen of the 15 (86%) participating districts revised their wellness policy based on their self-assessment results and policy review, contributing to long-term sustainability of wellness initiatives.

**Note:** WellSAT 2.0 provides two scores: Comprehensiveness, which reflects the extent to which content areas are covered in the policy, and Strength, which describes how strongly the content is stated. Both scores range from 0-100, with higher scores indicating more content and use of directive language. 

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<th>POST</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL COMPREHENSIVENESS</strong></td>
<td>49.27</td>
<td>69.46</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL STRENGTH</strong></td>
<td>22.33</td>
<td>44.31</td>
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“Our partners from Penn State PRO Wellness and the conferences I attended were invaluable.” MAHANOY AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT WELLNESS CHAMPION
Within their first of two years of participation, each district was invited to participate in the annual Building Healthy Schools Institute (BHSI) training. This annual training provided the opportunity for district teams to receive professional development and training on a variety of topics related to program objectives and identified areas of need (per self-assessment results and wellness policy reviews). District teams were also asked to share successes and challenges, and learn from other districts.

Additionally over the course of the five year program, PRO Wellness and the PA Department of Health co-presented several Comprehensive School Physical Activity Program (CSPAP) trainings. PRO Wellness, in partnership with the PA Departments of Education and Health, Action for Healthy Kids and other partners reached over 300 individuals across 38 counties through wellness trainings facilitated across the five-year period.

“As a direct result of the conference attendance, we are implementing “brain breaks” in the classroom throughout the academic day.”

BANGOR AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT WELLNESS CHAMPION
“Our overall success is attributed to the increased awareness, need and significance of continual physical activity for members of the entire school district.”

ALBERT GALLATIN SCHOOL DISTRICT WELLNESS CHAMPION

OUTCOME AND LESSONS LEARNED

Opportunities made available through PA Department of Health funds, and delivered through PRO Wellness, assisted schools to overcome barriers and create sustainable wellness changes. Technical assistance provided districts with the expertise in program operations, data collection and evidence-based resources. Participating districts demonstrated commitment to creating sustainable practice and policy changes by creating or enhancing a wellness council, participating in professional development opportunities and regular communication with PRO Wellness. Thanks to the efforts of wellness champions and wellness councils, the health and wellness in over 80 schools in PA has been improved.

Throughout the partnerships with the participating districts, several common challenges were present, including:

- availability of resources (time, staff, money, space) to support school-based programs that are evidence-based;
- consideration of timing needed to execute planning and collaboration on school and community-based partnerships; and
- the design of a unique program that will both directly address the self-assessment needs of a district and be sustainable once the grant funds have been exhausted.

These challenges provide valuable insight for any community or school-based organization wanting to improve wellness environments through sustainable initiatives in a school or district.
The longstanding partnership between the PA Department of Health and Penn State PRO Wellness has made the Building Healthy Schools program successful. The next generation relies on support from teachers, administrators and community members who help secure a safe and healthy school environment for all. PRO Wellness is proud to be a part of the PA Department of Health’s mission to improve the health and wellbeing of children and families throughout PA. The Building Healthy Schools program would also have not have been possible without the support and hard work of the 15 participating school districts.

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ABOUT PENN STATE PRO WELLNESS

Penn State PRO Wellness is committed to educating and inspiring youth and their families to eat well, engage in regular physical activity, and become champions for bringing healthy choices to life. PRO Wellness provides healthy eating and active living strategies to approximately 800 schools in Pennsylvania, as well as communities and corporate business partners. Advised by over 50 corporate, government and academic officials, PRO Wellness is highly visible in the health and wellness arena and positioned as a statewide thought leader in obesity prevention. As an integral component of Penn State Health Milton S. Hershey Medical Center’s community service mission, our approach of prevention, research and outreach provides schools, communities and like-minded organizations with program development and implementation, assessment and evaluation, capacity building, technical assistance, collaborative partnerships and access to proven wellness interventions. For more information, visit med.psu.edu/prowellness.

REFERENCES

7. Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity. WellSAT: Wellness School Assessment Tool. www.wellsat.org
Building Healthy SCHOOLS

PennState PRO Wellness Champions for bringing healthy choices to life.

For more information please visit: MED.PSU.EDU/PROWELLNESS

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