



Communication Issues Hamper School Wellness Policies

Foodservice directors listen up! Are you communicating effectively with your school principals?

Even as schools gear up for new wellness policies mandated by the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004, communication failures and weak enforcement policies are getting in the way, according to a study by Pennsylvania State University researchers.

The researchers surveyed foodservice directors at half (271) of the public high schools in Pennsylvania and 100 principals at the same schools. They received a whopping 84% response from the directors and 79% from the principals. The schools were representative of the entire population of high schools in the state, based on region, rate of free and reduced-price lunch participants, enrollment and percent of rural students.

One of the key problems identified by the survey was that perceptions held by foodservice directors and school principals differ as to the success of wellness policies. In particular, the two groups differed on the effectiveness of “competitive food” policies, revealing a need for better communication among key stakeholders.

More principals than foodservice directors, for example, reported the existence of enforced competitive foods policies, while more foodservice directors said that such policies exist but are “not always enforced.” According to the researchers, these results suggest that competitive foods may be vying directly with school meals even in schools with policies aimed at discouraging this practice, as a result of weak enforcement.

Principals and foodservice directors also differed on nutrition standards for a la carte foods. Nearly 40% of principals reported policy enforcement here, as opposed to only 15% of school foodservice directors.

New menu strategies foster more healthful choices

Even as Penn State researchers find missteps in effecting wellness policies involving competitive foods, researchers at the University of Texas report more upbeat findings concerning school meal strategies.

They discovered that schools making even “a minimal effort” to decrease the number of “high-fat, popular entree options” see an increase in numbers of children making lower-fat choices. “A reduction in available choices had a significant impact on the selection patterns of elementary school children,” they state. “Specifically, low-fat entrees were selected more than twice as often when they were paired with one rather than two alternative entrees.”

New Program Helps Schools Help Kids

The Alliance for a Healthier Generation has announced a program to help schools create environments to foster healthy lifestyles and ultimately to prevent obesity among students.

The Alliance, a joint initiative of the William J. Clinton Foundation and the American Heart Association, was formed in May 2005 to address the issues that

contribute to childhood obesity and encourage children to develop lifelong healthy habits.

The program sets standards for schools, including goals to improve nutrition value of food served in and out of cafeterias, goals to increase physical activity during the school day and after school, and goals to implement classroom lessons on healthful lifestyles, as well as programs for staff wellness.

During the first year, the Healthy Schools Program will focus on recruiting approximately 300 schools in 13 states. Emphasis will be placed on reaching schools with limited resources and serving students of disadvantaged socioeconomic status. Applications will be available as of July 1, 2006, at www.healthiergeneration.org or at 1-800-AHA-USA1.