

Local Wellness Policy Development Innovation in Rural Versus Non-Rural Schools in Arkansas

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BACKGROUND: Due to the serious long-term consequences, many experts agree that decreasing childhood obesity is a priority in our fight against the obesity epidemic. Since 2003, many states have passed legislation to address the issue by creating healthier public school environments. Arkansas is recognized as a pioneer in childhood obesity prevention policy. In 2003, Arkansas was the first state to enact body mass index (BMI) legislation, via AR Act 1220, that required measurement and confidential reporting of BMI information to parents of public school children. The following year, President Bush signed the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004 (CNWRA) into law. The Act expands the availability of nutritious meals and snacks to school children and improves the quality of food in schools by requiring school districts participating in the national school lunch program develop and implement local Wellness Policies (LWP) for students and staff starting in fall of 2006. Although commendable, such requirements can be taxing on local school districts, especially those in rural areas with fewer staff to implement such initiatives.

PURPOSE: This study evaluates the comprehensiveness of LWPs in rural versus non-rural Arkansas school districts. **HYPOTHESIS:** Non-rural LWPs will be more comprehensive than those in rural school districts.

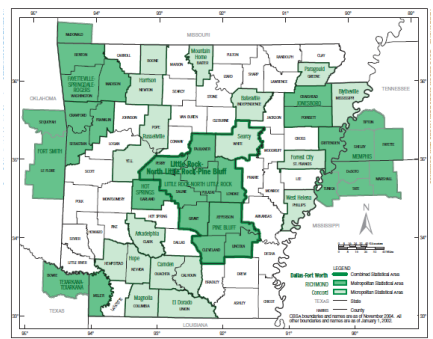
METHODOLOGY: 89 school districts provided data between January and June 2009. Wellness Policies were evaluated using the Robert Wood Johnson/University of Chicago, Illinois LWP coding tool. Wellness Policies were evaluated using the Robert Wood Johnson/University of Chicago, Illinois LWP coding tool. Sectional and overall scores were calculated and comparisons were made between rural and non-rural districts. Coding and data analysis is on-going.

Robert Wood Johnson/University of Chicago, Illinois LWP coding¹

Coding	
Scoring of school wellness policies is based on the coding of seven sections, containing a total of 90 policy items. The sections include:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Section 1: Nutrition Education (page 4) Section 2: Standards for USDA Child Nutrition Programs and School Meals (page 6) Section 3: Nutrition Standards for Competitive and Other Foods and Beverages (page 10) Section 4: Physical Education (page 14) Section 5: Physical Activity (page 24) Section 6: Communication and Promotion (page 26) Section 7: Evaluation (page 29) 	
Each policy item is coded as "0," "1" or "2," using the definitions below. This coding manual lists each item followed by an explanation of the item and examples of "1" and "2" statements.	
Code	Explanation
0 = Not Mentioned	The item is not included in the text of the policy. Code an item as a "1" when the item is mentioned, <u>but</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the policy will be hard to enforce because the statement is vague, unclear, or confusing; statements are listed as goals, aspirations, suggestions, or recommendations; there are loopholes in the policy that weaken enforcement of the item; the policy mentions a future plan to act without specifying when the plan will be established.
1 = Weak Statement	Weak when used inside may, can, could, should, might, encourage, suggest, urge, some, partial, make an effort, and try. An exception to this would be if the district is unable to enforce action on the item, such as teacher's role modeling healthy behaviors (in this case the item would be coded as a "2"). Code an item as a "2" when the item is mentioned, and it is clear that the policy makers are committed to making the item happen because <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the item is described using specific language (e.g., a concept followed by concrete plans or strategies for implementation); and strong language is used to indicate that action or regulation is required, including, shall, will, must, have to, must, require, all, total, comply and enforce.
2 = Meets / Exceeds Expectations	One method for deciding between a "1" and a "2" is to consider the scenario of a parent approaching a school district's board of education to discuss something happening in a school. If the policy is written such that it is not clear exactly how the school should behave regarding the issue at hand, code the item as a "1." If the policy is written such that the parent and board of education will have no trouble deciding if the school is or is not compliant with the policy, code the item as a "2."
Coding hint	
State law may regulate items in this coding tool. State law supersedes the authority of school wellness policies, so unless otherwise indicated, code according to the strength of state law when it exceeds standards in a policy or when it mentions items not included in a policy. For example, if state law prohibits soda in schools, but the policy does not, code as if the policy explicitly prohibits soda.	
The federal wellness policy requirements are incorporated into the beginning of each section, as appropriate, and are labeled "Federal Wellness." The language for these items is taken from these federal requirements (Public Law 109-265, The Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004).	

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<p>Section 2. Standards for USDA Child Nutrition Programs and School Meals</p> <p>NE2</p>	
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HER Under 3 (6/2008)
LWP Revised 11/10/09

WELLNESS POLICY REQUIREMENT #1:
Goals for nutrition education, physical activity and other school-based activities that are designed to promote student wellness are a mandatory requirement for all school districts. State Regulations become part of a district's Wellness Policy based on Compliance.

WELLNESS POLICY REQUIREMENT #2:
A plan for ensuring implementation of the local wellness policy including designation of a committee within the local educational agency or an advisory committee, as appropriate, charged with operational responsibility for ensuring that each school fully implements the policy is a mandatory requirement for all school districts.

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RESULTS: The preliminary study results (based on currently coded plans) indicated lower LWP scores for rural districts than for non-rural (52.42 vs 59.14). However, component results indicate considerable variation: Nutrition Education (R, 76; NR, 74), Nutrition Standards (R, 43; NR, 43), Competitive Food Standards (R, 52; NR, 56), Physical Activity (R, 56; NR, 48), Physical Education (R, 68; NR, 80), Communication and Promotion (R, 42 NR, 56), and Evaluation (R, 30; NR, 50). Rural districts scored lower in more resource-intensive policy areas.

¹Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. (2008). *School Wellness Policy Coding Tool*. University of Illinois, Chicago: Institute for Health Research and Policy, LLC.
²Arkansas Department of Education (2006). *School District Wellness Policy Reporting Form*. Retrieved 12/2008, from <http://cmh.k12.ar.us/Wellness/ACSIP-WellnessPolicy.html>