

Massachusetts School Wellness Needs Assessment

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The John C. Stalker Institute
of Food and Nutrition
AT FRAMINGHAM STATE UNIVERSITY



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The John C. Stalker Institute (JSI) of Food and Nutrition, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), Office for Food and Nutrition Programs and the Food and Nutrition Department at Framingham State University partnered to conduct the Massachusetts School Wellness Needs Assessment (MSWNA). The purpose of the MSWNA is to determine what factors enable schools to implement wellness policies and what factors act as barriers to implementation. This information will be helpful to inform the development of wellness-related resources for schools throughout Massachusetts (MA).

The MSWNA was conducted in 5 phases from September 2018 through August 2019. Phases 1 and 2 entailed the development and implementation of an online survey. The survey was distributed to schools throughout MA. Phase 3 consisted of telephone interviews with MA school wellness stakeholders. Analysis of the data collected through the surveys and telephone interviews was conducted in Phase 4. Preliminary results were reviewed with the JSI Advisory Board in Phase 5. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was received for this research project.

Highlights from Findings

Practices

Schools are following a variety of positive wellness practices. Practices including offering a la carte items that meet the State Nutrition Standards and Federal guidelines and providing nutrition and physical activity education for all students were reported to be fully/partially in place by 80% of survey participants. These are important foundational elements for a school wellness policy and schools should strive to meet these benchmarks. However, the majority of practices listed in the survey fall below an 80% threshold. Data from the MSWNA can be used to set benchmarks for these practices and future progress can be measured against these indicators. Additionally, practices with thresholds less than 80% should be a focus of future trainings and resources developed and delivered by the School Wellness Initiative for Thriving Community Health (SWITCH) Coalition, DESE, and JSI.

Enablers

People play an integral role in the success of a school's wellness policy. The SWITCH Coalition, DESE, and JSI should leverage the best practices of School Foodservice/Nutrition Staff, Administrators, Parents/Families and School Wellness Committees (top people-related enablers). Engaging these groups to role model their best practices may provide a template for schools currently having difficulty implementing school wellness policies.

Current enablers related to the process of implementing a school wellness policy vary across schools. Top process-related enablers include: how the policy is implemented; coordination of

services related to health and wellness; what's included in a school's wellness policy; overall nutrition/physical activity and school wellness (social, emotional, mental) resources (e.g., curriculum and materials); and state regulations. Continuing to develop resources that feature the best practices of top enablers across the wellness spectrum (food and nutrition, physical activity, and overall wellbeing) should be a priority to help keep a positive momentum going forward.

Barriers

The implementation of school wellness policies are shaped by the many barriers that schools experience. Parents/Families, Classroom Teachers, Administrators, and Students may act as barriers. Administrators in particular are a group to focus on since they act as both enablers and barriers. This may reinforce the influence Administrators have over the wellness culture and the ability of schools to implement wellness policies. It will be important to reach out and engage Parents/Families, Classroom Teachers, Administrators, and Students at the local and when appropriate the state level in an effort to move from barriers to enablers.

Barriers related to processes include lack of time, foods served/offered outside of the cafeteria, funding for wellness, the overall wellness culture within the school, and how the policy is implemented. These are key areas that should be addressed moving forward. The SWITCH Coalition, DESE, and JSI are primed to be the leaders in developing and providing free resources for schools to use in the implementation of school wellness policies.

SWITCH Coalition Activities

Of the three proposed SWITCH Coalition activities (summit, website, and event guide for a wellness week) participants were more likely to use a website and event guide than attend a summit). This may largely be related to two noted barriers: time and funding. Creating a free, easy to use website that includes information for all school wellness stakeholders that capitalizes on identified enablers and focuses on providing resources to overcome identified barriers may be a valuable asset for schools throughout the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

Key Take to School Messages

Shifting the wellness culture within schools may take time and may be related to the positive actions of people and processes. In many instances, people and processes act as both enablers and barriers indicating the importance of framing wellness as a positive bottom up effort. Schools want free, convenient, and easy to use materials that will reduce the current burdens of developing and implementing wellness policies. The SWITCH Coalition, DESE, and JSI are uniquely poised to provide support, resources, and trainings to meet the school wellness-related needs and wants of schools.