

Assessing Wellness Policy Implementation: The Who, the Why, and the How

The National Perspective

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National Wellness Policy Study

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Agenda

- **National Wellness Policy Study: The National Perspective**
- **State laws and district policies on evaluation**
- **Superintendents' perspectives on evaluation**

National Wellness Policy Study

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What Works? Strategies Used by Food Service Directors to Implement the Revised School Meal Standards



Background

School meals offer strong potential for widespread impact on students' health at a population level. In 2012, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) issued a final rule updating meal patterns and nutrition standards for the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs for the first time in 15 years: *Nutrition Standards in the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs*.¹

What Is This Brief About?

Food Service Directors (FSDs) play a critical role in the implementation of the revised school meal standards. This brief shares the strategies of FSDs to implement the fruit and vegetable (F&V), whole grain-rich, and sodium requirements, as a way to offer 'lessons learned' and ideas for other FSDs who may still be working to increase student acceptance to changes in the school meal program. Further information about FSDs' perceived outcomes and impacts of school meal reform, as well as how these were communicated to the school community, can be found in the companion brief, ["Speaking from Experience: Food Service Directors' Perspectives and Lessons From Implementing the Revised School Meal Standards."](#)

Strategies for Implementing the Revised Meal Standards: What Did Food Service Directors Say?

FRUIT AND VEGETABLE REQUIREMENT

The revised standards required that students select F&Vs as part of their reimbursable meal. FSDs reported that initially, this led to an increase in plate waste, as students threw away unwanted items. However, they also noted that plate waste has decreased over time, as students' acceptance of school meal reform has grown. In addition, FSDs reported that despite the initial increase in plate waste, overall students were consuming more F&Vs. This section presents strategies that were employed by FSDs to promote F&V consumption, as well as decrease plate waste associated with the F&V requirement.

■ **Showcase F&Vs in an appealing, easy-to-consume manner.** FSDs reported that F&Vs can be made more appealing, for example, by slicing them and serving them in individual bowls so they are easier to consume. In addition, FSDs note that offering a variety of F&Vs provides students

REVISED NUTRITION STANDARDS FOR SCHOOL MEALS



The revised nutrition standards required schools to increase healthy food offerings, including fruits and vegetables and whole grain-rich products, as well as reduce levels of sodium, saturated fat, and trans fat in school meals and set grade level-specific calorie requirements. School districts were required to comply with the revised federal meal standards beginning July 1, 2012, with provisions phased in through school year 2022–2023.

We have 3 fruits and 3 vegetables that are offered each day at lunch. So just having a variety on the menu that children can select from, I think they're more likely to select something that they will actually eat. – MS FSD

High School Students' Insights on School Meal Reform



Background

School meals have the potential to impact student health at a population level. In 2012, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) issued a final rule updating meal patterns and nutrition standards for the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs for the first time in 15 years (hereafter referred to as school meal reform).¹ Research has pointed to emerging successes of school meal reform^{2,3} nationwide; however, high schools continue to have poorer food environments compared to elementary and middle schools.⁴ This disparity suggests that high schools may have challenges with fully implementing school meal reform. Thus, it is important to better understand the perspectives and experiences of high school students who are directly impacted by changes to school food environments in order to obtain useful insights for supporting healthier school meal environments.

What Is This Brief About?

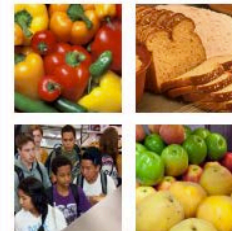
This brief highlights experiences and perspectives about school meal reform from a critical stakeholder group: high school students. Based upon students' experiences and insights, we also provide practice-relevant strategies that may be considered by local decision makers and school practitioners. Such strategies are outlined in a [Full Report](#) and a companion brief, ["Student Recommendations for Improving the School Food Environment: Insights Following School Meal Reform."](#)

What did High School Students Say about School Meal Reform?

STUDENTS SUPPORT HEALTHIER SCHOOL MEALS

Students asserted their support for school meal reform efforts, yet were frustrated that youth were portrayed in popular media as preferring junk foods and the old school meals. In fact, most students reported that they liked the increase in fruits and vegetables in their school meals. In describing their support for school meal reform, many students stated appreciation for the First Lady Michelle Obama's broad efforts to address children and adolescents' health:

REVISED NUTRITION STANDARDS FOR SCHOOL MEALS



The revised nutrition standards required schools to offer more fruits and vegetables and whole grain-rich products; reduce levels of sodium, saturated fat, and trans fat in school meals; and offer meals within calorie ranges established for three grade groups. School districts were required to comply with the revised federal meal standards beginning July 1, 2012, with provisions phased in through school year 2022–2023.

If she [Michelle Obama] didn't push for it [healthier school environments], it wouldn't have been a topic in the first place. So, I'm thankful for that. I think that whole healthy movement was very beneficial.

Speaking from Experience: Food Service Directors' Perspectives and Lessons From Implementing the Revised School Meal Standards



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What Is This Brief About?



Food Service Directors (FSDs) play a critical role in the implementation of the revised school meal standards. This brief shares FSDs' perspectives on the implementation and perceived outcomes and impacts of the revised meal standards. Further, this brief shares how FSDs communicated about school meal reform and their potential impacts to the wider school community.

This brief highlights the perspectives of FSDs in districts where high schools have been awarded USDA recognition for exhibiting strong nutrition practices in schools. Through these insights, we aim to provide an understanding of strategies that some districts have used to facilitate implementation of the school meal standards and to understand likely implementation challenges. Such strategies are outlined in the companion brief, ["What Works? Strategies Used by Food Service Directors to Implement the Revised School Meal Standards."](#)

Outcomes of School Meal Reform: What Did Food Service Directors Say?

ENHANCED NUTRITION AWARENESS

FSDs perceived that the school meal revisions are influencing students' awareness about healthier eating. As one FSD notes, the standards now align with what students are learning about healthy eating in the classroom. FSDs stated that this has been a positive and promising impact with the potential for long-term change.

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It's something kids see in health or a classroom now, they see also in the school cafeteria where it all matches. It finally comes together and makes sense. – VA FSD

State Law

The Active Role States Have Played in Helping To Transform the School Wellness Environment Through Policy

School Years 2006–07 through 2014–15

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NATIONAL
WELLNESS
POLICY STUDY

- How are states supporting district-level evaluation and reporting? 2006-2007 to 2014-2015
- States play an important role in oversight to ensure district-level compliance with provisions assessment and reporting
- URL: go.uic.edu/ActiveRoleStates

NATIONAL
WELLNESS
POLICY STUDY

Figure 5. Prevalence of state laws that include selected evaluation provisions, SY 2014-15

% of states nationwide with laws that include...

■ % strong ■ % weak policy ■ % no policy

State provisions addressing ongoing district-level health/wellness advisory committee

24

14

63

State provisions for monitoring of schools/districts for compliance with state/federal requirements

22

2

76

State provisions for TA to districts for WP implementation

18

8

74

State provisions that impose penalties for district failure to comply

8

4

88

State provision to create corrective action plan for schools/districts for non-compliance

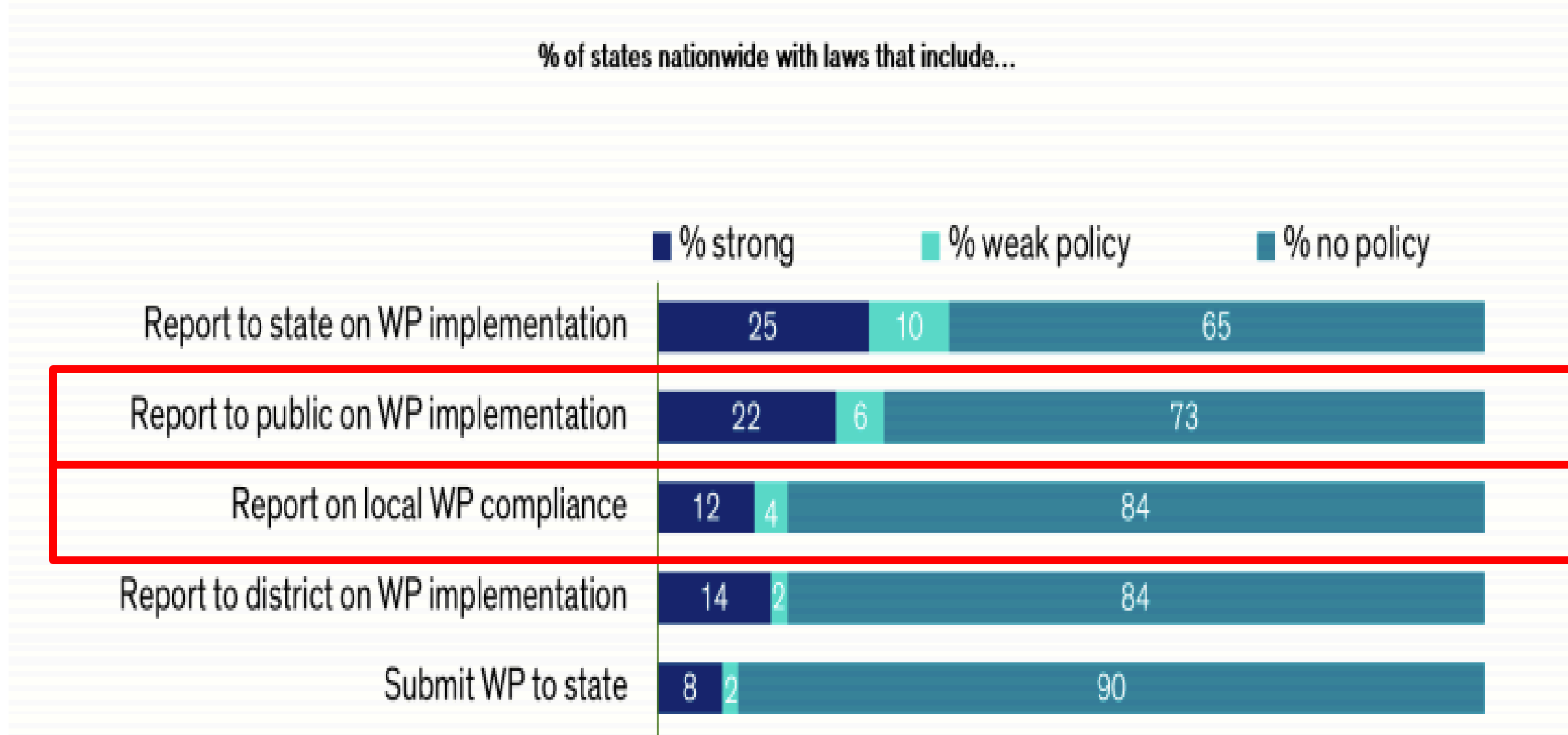
0

100

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

Due to rounding, some percentages may not sum exactly to 100.

Figure 6. Prevalence of state laws that include selected reporting provisions, SY 2014-15



Recommendations to states

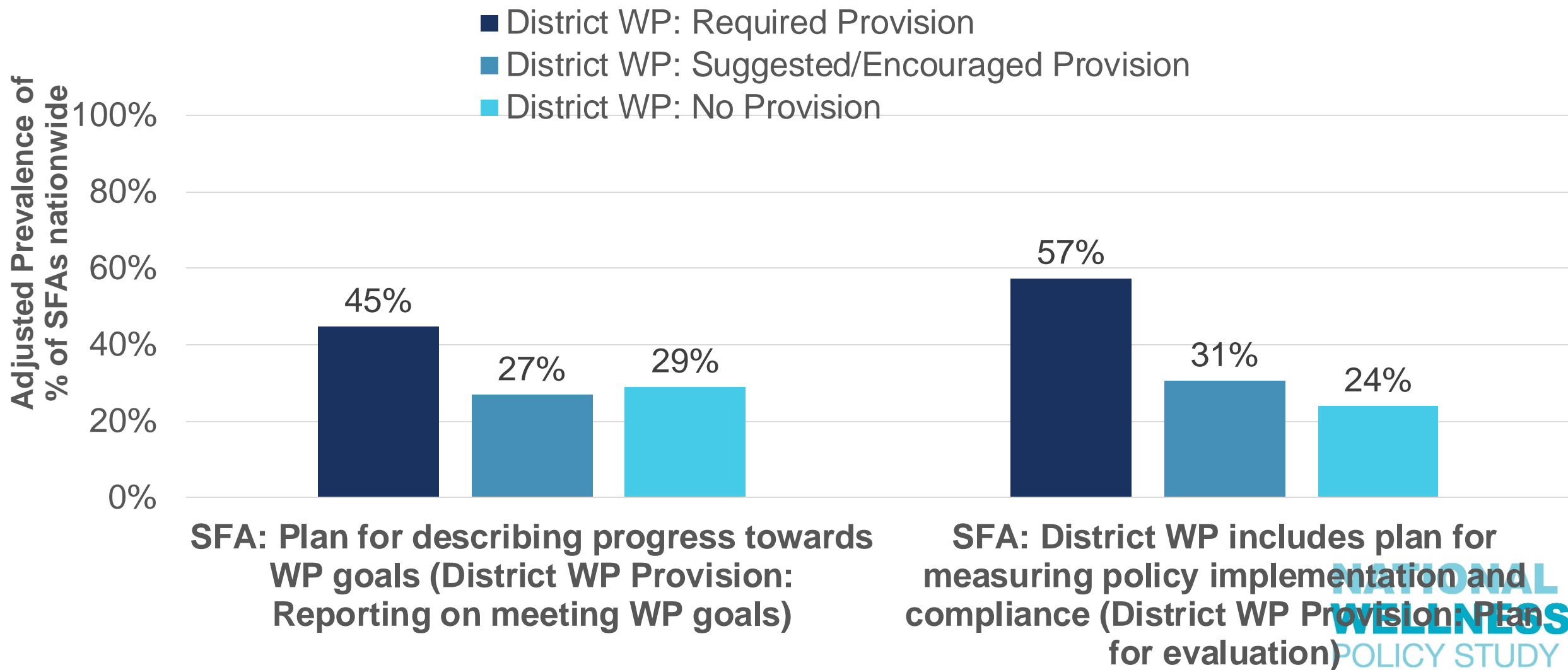
- **Set up means of providing technical assistance**
- **Provide guidance on reporting to the state and to the district/community on wellness policy compliance efforts**
- **Ensure that districts have identified a “point person” responsible for implementation and oversight**

National district policy snapshot

School year 2014-2015

- 19% required an evaluation plan
- 25% required triennial assessment
- 41% required plans for revising the policy
- 26% required reporting to the public
- 9% addressed making the policy available online

Districts more likely to report full implementation of monitoring/evaluation in districts with wellness policies requiring them



Superintendents' perspectives on evaluation

- **Focus groups at The School Superintendents Association (AASA) (March 2017) national meeting + follow up interviews (May-July 2017)**
- **Total of n=39 Superintendents**
- **Focus on experiences and perspectives on local school wellness policies, including monitoring and evaluation**

Superintendents reported challenges with assessment

- *...what's the benefit of this policy and practice? ...we feel like every time we are trying to decide whether that made a difference academically, we look back and go **'yeah but we made these other 18 different changes.'** So we haven't really found a way to assess whether or not an improvement, other than maybe physical health but not from an academic standpoint.*

Superintendents requested best practice tools & resources

- *If there was **a tool we could use that had been vetted**, that would help us evaluate our wellness program, that would be easy to administer to principals and teachers and provide reasonable data....[whether] we're making a difference, we're not making a difference....and where can we make changes.*

The role of state law and accountability measures

- *I know for a lot of my peers, everything we're focused on is about student achievement and improving test scores **because that's how we're being graded at the state level.** ...so I think about wellness, but a lot of my colleagues would be like, that's just kind of a checkbox. What do I need to do, **what's the bare minimum I need to do?** If I can't tie that directly to student achievement, I don't want to put a lot of energy and effort into it. I just need to do whatever I'm mandated to do.*

Transparency and stakeholder input

- *There's a new piece [of the policy] that we have to have **community input, parent input**. Making sure that we're reaching out to the school community and involving them in the process of refining and re-tooling as needed, our policy.*

Conclusions

- **State laws and technical assistance play an important role in evaluation of LWPs nationwide**
- **Nationally, district policies matter for facilitating evaluation and reporting practices**
- **In both state and district levels, lots of room for improvement!**
- **Superintendents expressed challenges with evaluation but strongly interested in links to academics and accountability**
- **Superintendents requested assessment tools and reaching out to technical assistance bodies**

Contact Information

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National Wellness Policy Study Products:

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