

**School wellness** encompasses healthy eating, adequate physical activity, nutrition education, and physical education for all students. Improving school wellness practices is essential to decreasing childhood obesity and preparing children to live healthy, active, productive lives.

**Progress or Promises? What's Working For and Against Healthy Schools** is an Action for Healthy Kids Report that examines efforts to improve nutrition and physical activity in schools. It provides a comprehensive evaluation of current school wellness practices, reflecting findings from a recent survey of more than 2,000 national experts and professionals in the field. In addition to analyzing new and existing data, the report also includes the authoritative voices of numerous leaders in education, children's health, and school wellness. This brief provides report highlights – and important action steps – for school administrators.

**Why do school administrators need to further improve school wellness?**

Childhood obesity is a costly problem, in many ways. A growing body of evidence indicates that poor nutrition, physical inactivity, and obesity are associated with lower levels of student achievement. Unhealthy eating and inactive lifestyles also contribute to many chronic illnesses and set children up for poor health throughout their lives — at a significant cost to them, their communities, and society.

**Hasn't some progress already been made?**

Over the last five years, Action for Healthy Kids and many others have elevated awareness at all levels about the importance of nutrition and physical activity, and spearheaded new initiatives in schools and communities across the country. Important steps – large and small – have been taken toward addressing the childhood obesity crisis.

Unfortunately, significant gaps exist. Gaps in perception of the problem; in attention and access to healthy food choices in schools; in physical education and school-based physical activity opportunities; in wellness policy implementation, monitoring, and evaluation;

in interest and perceived responsibilities; in addressing underserved communities; and in systemic support are all facets of the school wellness challenge.

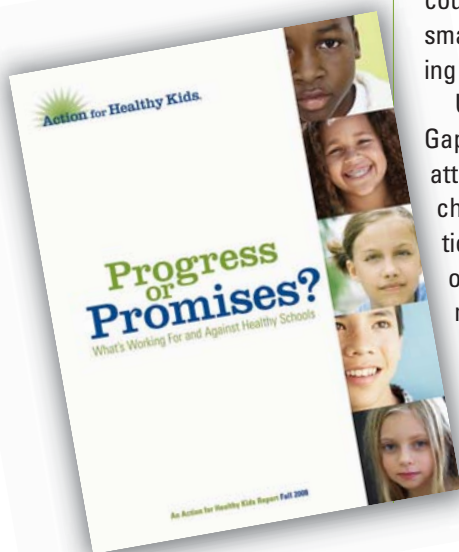
**How do school administrators view school wellness as compared with other stakeholders?**

Findings from recent Action for Healthy Kids research reveal startling gaps in perception between those with school governance and leadership roles and those with school wellness implementation roles. For example:

> Over 60 percent of superintendents and principals say that schools have effective wellness policies. Yet more than three out of four community health professionals disagree. School health professionals and school nutrition professionals are split: about half feel that schools have effective policies, and half don't.

> Seventy-seven percent of superintendents and 54% of principals feel that most schools are doing an adequate job implementing their wellness policies. But at least 70 percent of school health professionals, community health professionals, and physical education teachers say no.

> While most superintendents say schools do provide access to healthy, youth-appealing foods and beverages (82 percent), and that schools limit access to foods that are high in calories and low in nutrients (71 percent), other stakeholders



**An executive summary and the full report is available at [www.ActionForHealthyKids.org](http://www.ActionForHealthyKids.org).**



disagree — teachers, parents, and community health professionals most of all.

> About half of school board members, superintendents, and principals feel that most schools provide quality daily physical education programs for all students, while nearly 80 percent of physical education teachers feel improvement is needed, as do at least 70 percent of parents and students. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, just 4 percent of elementary schools, 8 percent of middle schools, and 2 percent of high schools provide daily P.E. to their students.

> Over half of school administrators and board members believe schools have effective policies to encourage daily physical activity, while two-thirds or more of P.E. teachers, parents, students, and community and state education and health professionals disagree.

### Is it possible that the real “change agents” are not on board?

The individuals best positioned to move school wellness forward are viewed by many as the least supportive of school wellness. In a recent Action for Healthy Kids survey, school administrators, school board members, and classroom teachers — extremely powerful and influential groups in schools — were viewed as not very supportive of school wellness. In fact, only 28 percent of respondents rated school administrators as “very supportive” of school wellness.

Until all stakeholders can align on the state of school wellness, supported by meaningful data from district- and statewide monitoring efforts, progress in strengthening school wellness likely will be hampered.

### Why are school administrators so important to improving school wellness?

Because they set the agenda for their schools. When school administrators make school wellness a priority, then it usually happens, and everyone wins.

## Advancing School Wellness: Action Steps for School Administrators

**Elevate the importance.** Set school wellness as one of your key priorities and resource it adequately.

**Leverage the learning connection.** Proper nutrition and adequate physical activity both fuel student learning. Initiatives that focus on student wellness will help support student learning and therefore will serve the academic mission of the school.

**Track and report impact.** Assess nutrition, physical education, and physical activity as key elements of the school improvement plan, and report to the school board and other policy- and decision-makers.

**Get others involved.** Principals and teachers do not have to make school wellness changes on their own. Develop and maintain a school health advisory council to assist. At both the

district and building levels, include parents, caregivers, and students in the planning and implementation of school wellness efforts.

**Make a broad, sustained commitment.** Implement nutrition education, physical education, and physical activity programs and initiatives. To maximize their effectiveness implement ongoing, year-round, sustained efforts that offer students the chance to learn and practice healthy behaviors.

**Create a healthy environment.** Ensure that numerous physical activity opportunities and healthful food options are available. Through the school meal program and at other times when food or snacks are served, healthy food choices should emphasize fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat and fat-free milk and milk products.

**“The catalyst for improving school wellness is leadership. Whether it’s a superintendent, a principal, a motivated school board member, an active and interested parent, or all of the above, school wellness has to start with one committed individual or constituency.”**

*David Satcher, MD, PhD,  
16th U.S. Surgeon General and  
Founding Chair of Action for Healthy Kids*

### Are there success stories of administrators involved in school wellness?

There are many stories of promise and even breakthroughs — and countless lessons learned in the field to date about school administrators’ successful engagement in creating healthy schools that promote proper nutrition

and adequate physical activity.

For example, the Indiana Action for Healthy Kids Team devised the “Healthy Hoosier School Award” to recognize schools that have put policies and programs in place to help create healthy students. To apply for the award, school principals must submit an application that requires extensive information regarding their school’s food and physical activity environments including details on school lunch policies, whether the school has on-campus health personnel, and whether vending machines are turned on during classroom hours.

School-leader-involvement success stories are featured in numerous Action for Healthy Kids Field Reports and in the archived webinar titled “The Role of School Wellness in Creating High-Performing Schools,” available at [www.ActionForHealthyKids.org](http://www.ActionForHealthyKids.org).

“Educators see their role as producing kids who are excited about learning, and giving them strong academic and life skills. But educators sometimes don’t make the connection that health is a huge contributor to success in life. The irony is that as we’ve increased academic expectations, we’ve neglected the health and wellness side of things — which is a total contradiction.”

*Gene Wilhoit, Executive Director, Council of Chief State School Officers; Former Director of the Arkansas Department of Education and Former Commissioner of the Kentucky Department of Education*

**What are the other overall messages contained in *Progress or Promises? What’s Working For and Against School Wellness?***

**Schools’ top priority is not healthy kids.**

Other school priorities — especially the strong focus on addressing academic requirements — are overshadowing efforts to create healthy learning environments and address childhood obesity.

**Resources are inadequate to implement wellness policies.**

Despite the federal mandate requiring schools to adopt local wellness policies, many schools are ill-equipped and ill-prepared to implement their policies.

**Quick fixes have been made. New investment is needed.**

Many of the recent improvements in school wellness have been relatively easy fixes. Significant new investments will be needed to address the more difficult systemic barriers that limit schools’ ability to promote wellness.

**Many kids aren’t getting all of the nutrients they need.**

Improving the nutritional quality of existing foods and beverages served at school is critical to addressing the wellness needs of children.

**Physical education and physical activity are low priorities.**

Despite proven benefits to learning and academic achievement, there is inadequate funding and time for daily P.E. and physical activity.

**Parents are disengaged from school wellness.**

Parents often are disengaged from school wellness efforts and feel ill-equipped to contribute positively to local school wellness efforts.

**Getting “junk food” out of schools is only part of the solution.**

A pressing need is for schools to help students make better food choices by providing tasty, youth-appealing fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat and fat-free milk and milk products.

**School wellness is needed most in underserved communities.**

Children in underserved communities often experience higher levels of overweight and obesity and also face additional hurdles, including the lack of access to grocery stores with fresh, healthful, and affordable foods, and unsafe and inadequate playgrounds and parks.

**There is insufficient monitoring and tracking of school wellness.**

There is significant disagreement among key stakeholders on how much progress schools are actually making with regard to school wellness. Most schools and states have no systems in place to monitor or measure their wellness improvement efforts.

## School Wellness Resources

Visit [www.ActionForHealthyKids.org](http://www.ActionForHealthyKids.org) for information on the Action for Healthy Kids Team in your state as well as a wide selection of tools and resources for all stakeholders in school wellness, including:

*School Wellness Policy Tool* — an online resource that helps schools develop effective wellness policies, plus a forthcoming self-assessment tool that helps schools monitor and evaluate policy implementation efforts.

*Game On! The Ultimate Wellness Challenge™* — developed in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services — shows how to support your school’s long-range, comprehensive wellness policy by making proper nutrition and physical activity part of the rhythm and culture of the entire school.

*ReCharge! Energizing After-school™* — an after-school program that integrates nutrition and physical activity through teamwork-based strategies for youth in grades 3-6, developed in partnership with the National Football League.

*Parents Advocating for School Wellness* — a toolkit that helps unlock the enormous potential of parents as change agents, to engage them as partners in support of healthier schools for their children.

*URWhatUEat* — a forthcoming resource for youth, designed to help them make better food choices.