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Julie Brewer
Chief, School Programs Branch
U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)
Policy and Program Development Division,
Child Nutrition Programs, Food and Nutrition Service (FNS)
P.O. Box 66740
St. Louis, MO 63166-6740

Re: Local School Wellness Policy Implementation Rule

Dear Ms. Brewer:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the USDA Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) proposed rule for Local School Wellness Policy Implementation. California Food Policy Advocates (CFPA) supports robust school policies that create healthy, supportive learning environments that will build the foundation for a lifetime of healthy behaviors where children spend a majority of their day.

CFPA is a statewide advocacy organization committed driving evidence-based policy change in support of low-income Californians' access to healthy food. We value the role that the National School Lunch (NSLP) and School Breakfast Programs (SBP) play in providing nutritious food to over 3.3 million California students. While the implementation of the new nutrition standards has faced some challenges, the changes have also given school districts the opportunity to rethink and revitalize school meals and the school nutrition environment in order to attract new customers.

CFPA is currently pursuing statewide policies and initiatives to ensure that school cafeterias play a powerful and active role in improving student eating habits. A robust rule on Local School Wellness Policy Implementation will complement the many efforts underway in California as well as in other states to increase participation in the school meal programs, reduce food waste, and enhance the school district's bottom line.

For over 20 years, CFPA has cultivated policy solutions that strengthen the federal nutrition programs. Our comments are based on our observations and experiences in California to improve school meals. Below is a summary of our responses to the sections outlined below:

- We strongly recommend that the accountable person be at the school district's leadership level.
- We support local wellness policies as a vehicle to: 1) establish standards for all foods available on campus, and 2) ensure students have adequate access to the school meal programs.
- We encourage USDA to require greater implementation of no-cost Smarter Lunchroom strategies.
- We support engaging diverse stakeholders in the policy development process and encourage USDA to consider engaging local university researchers.
- We encourage USDA to require that the local wellness policy and subsequent progress reports be posted at the school site.
- We support nutrition promotion and education that encourage students to participate in the NSLP and SBP.
- We strongly support the requirement that the wellness team conduct an assessment of the local wellness policy at the same time as the district's Administrative Review.

Local School Wellness Policy Leadership

We support the requirement that there be one or more LEA or school official(s) who will serve as a designated contact for the wellness policy. We strongly recommend that the accountable person be at the school district's leadership level (i.e. Board member, Superintendent, etc.) because many changes need the authority of district leadership to ensure that each school complies with the policy.

School food professionals should be involved in the development and monitoring of the wellness policy, but not necessarily be designated as the responsible party because only a portion of the wellness policies are under the jurisdiction of school food service administrators. We recommend that the proposed rule require Superintendents to participate in the process and sign the policy.

Nutrition Guidelines for All Foods

We fully support the alignment of local wellness policies with USDA's school meal and Smart Snacks standards. Local wellness policies are the perfect vehicle to establish standards for all foods available on campus, including those offered in classroom parties and celebrations, snacks served at school that are not part of a federally reimbursed snack program, and food rewards and incentives. In the decade since school districts in California established competitive foods sales restrictions, junk foods remain available on school campuses, even at elementary sites, during classroom parties, special events and afterschool programs. The benefit of cutting-edge competitive foods policies will be fully realized when all foods offered at school teach the same nutrition lessons.

Content of the Local School Wellness Policy

As reported in "Bridging the Gap", there continues to be a wide gap between stated policies and actual practices on the ground.¹ We strongly agree that wellness goals should be measurable over the short- and long-term, and should clearly identify *who* will make *what* change, by *how much*, *where*, and by *when*. Having measurable goals will lead to improved compliance and enforcement of policies.

School districts, for example, can use CA Project Lean's "policy implementation action plan" template to outline steps in meeting goals.² We are also pleased that USDA will provide guidance, as well as model policy language, for LEAs to use to create strong, clear goals. The Water Works Guide includes model policy language aimed at increasing students' access and consumption of water at lunch.³ We encourage USDA to share resources and model language with school districts.

We support USDA's requirement for LEAs to review and consider evidence-based strategies to establish wellness goals. Instead of only encouraging LEAs to review Smarter Lunchroom tools and strategies, we believe LEAs and/or schools that face declining participation in the school meal programs should be required to implement, at a minimum, no-cost Smarter Lunchroom strategies, such as verbal prompts and creative naming of menu items. California is pilot-testing a statewide Smarter Lunchrooms Initiative to train food service directors and technical assistance providers on nudging students to make healthy food choices.⁴ Early results are promising. A school district in Firebaugh, CA was struggling to sell a new fish entree. Uptake of the fish entree increased simply by changing the pan in which the fish was served, adding sprigs of fresh parsley and displaying a sign with the entree's name. The cafeteria staff did not hear one negative comment about the entree. Additionally, USDA should require state agencies to actively promote Smarter Lunchroom strategies through trainings, on the state agency's website and with the inclusion of Smarter Lunchrooms in Administrative Review documents.

Local wellness policies can serve as a vehicle to maximize student participation in the school meal programs. We encourage USDA to require the inclusion of goals that will ensure that students have enough time to eat and that low-income students are not missing out on a nutritious meal.

Millions of California students miss out on the benefits of school lunch every day, often because they do not have enough time to eat. Many factors impact students' time to eat, including long lines, school activities that conflict with lunch, and recess scheduled after lunch, which results in students rushing through their meals. While there is no one size fits all solution, LEA's have the responsibility to assess whether their students have adequate time to eat and work with food services administrators to develop solutions. If states do not have policies setting a minimum expectation for the length of time to eat, LEAs should be expected to set a policy that ensures all students have at least 20 minutes to eat lunch after being served.

The local wellness policy can also serve as a means to provide schools with guidance and support to expand participation in NSLP and SBP. The wellness policy should include goals such as increasing breakfast participation through Breakfast in the Classroom or after the bell breakfast; providing meals after school, on weekends, and during the summer; eliminating a la carte sales; improving the appeal and presentation of meals, and marketing and promoting school meals.

Public Involvement in Local School Wellness Policy Development

We are supportive of the requirement to involve a variety of stakeholders in the development, implementation, and periodic review and update of the local school wellness policy. CFPA's experience has been that school nutrition environments look different to students, teachers, parents and researchers. A stronger and more effective policy might result from including all interested voices and perspectives. Local university researchers are one example of a stakeholder not specifically identified in the proposed rule. In Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), there is currently research underway measuring the effectiveness of Smarter Lunchroom strategies and use of salad bars. Including local researchers on the local school

wellness policy team can lead to the implementation of evidence-based strategies that have the potential to benefit students.

We are also supportive of greater coordination between local school wellness policy teams and SNAP-Ed. SNAP-Ed coordinators should be required to participate in local school wellness policy teams as they can provide low-income school districts with the technical assistance to implement evidence-based strategies. In California, several SNAP-Ed teams participated in a 2014 statewide training on Smarter Lunchrooms with the goal of working with partner school districts to implement behavioral economic strategies in the cafeteria. SNAP-Ed coordinators can also play a role in helping school districts expand students' water access during mealtimes (i.e., Section 203 HHFKA).

While we support the presence of school wellness policy teams at the school level, we do encourage USDA to require an LEA level team instead of just encouraging both LEA and school level teams. Without an LEA team monitoring and upholding minimum standards, school districts run the risk of facing uneven implementation of school wellness policies at the site level. Additionally, the LEA should be required, rather than encouraged, to make available the names and position titles of the wellness committee members (but not contact information) as a way to improve transparency and accountability.

Informing the Stakeholder

We applaud USDA's effort to improve the transparency of local wellness policies in order to improve the implementation and impact. Requiring LEAs to actively notify households of the policy, as well as provide periodic and detailed updates, are key strategies to ensure success. To further facilitate transparency we encourage USDA to require the local wellness policy and subsequent progress reports be posted at the school site (e.g., front office or main entrance), in addition to being readily available on the school and district website. The LEAs should also be required to take reasonable steps to ensure the local wellness policy is available in the languages that represent the school community. We also urge USDA to move quickly to propose the transparency requirement under Section 209 of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, so that LEAs can begin to report on the school nutrition environment alongside their local wellness policy planning.

Nutrition Promotion and Education

We support nutrition promotion and education that encourage students to participate in the NSLP and SBP. Research shows that behavior change correlates positively with the amount of nutrition instruction received.⁵ Linking nutrition promotion and education throughout the school and community reinforces consistent health messages and provides multiple opportunities for students to practice healthy habits. One such method would be to integrate nutrition as a core component of health education classes as well as integrate nutrition throughout the various core subjects.

We strongly recommend coordinating school food service programs with classroom lessons to allow students to connect with the school cafeteria. Making the cafeteria a laboratory for nutrition education increases the value of the school food and nutrition program to students, parents, teachers and administrators. Activities such as menu planning, taste testing, and cooking demonstrations are already underway in California. These activities provide students with hands-on experience and allow food service staff to gather valuable feedback on school meals. These

experiences lead us to believe that USDA can and should require national standards for nutrition education.

Implementation, Assessment and Updates

Requiring LEAs to issue a detailed annual progress report, as well as a triennial comprehensive assessment on its local wellness policy will improve the effectiveness and credibility of the policy. We strongly support the requirement that the wellness team conduct an assessment of the local wellness policy at the same time as the district's Administrative Review. This will reinforce that wellness policies are important. The Administrative Review should also involve the official designated by the LEA who is responsible for the local wellness policy and the district's food service director. Additionally, we ask USDA to encourage LEAs to incorporate their wellness policy implementation into the school district- and school-level strategic plans in order to further increase visibility and support.

Conclusion

We commend USDA for developing a robust rule for local school wellness policies that will strengthen existing policies and lead to more effective leadership, implementation, stakeholder involvement, accountability, assessment, and transparency. We encourage USDA to develop a final rule as soon as possible so that, ideally, schools districts can implement the rule starting in the 2015-16 school year. We hope our experience and observations will be helpful in informing the development of the final rule for Local School Wellness Policy Implementation.

We appreciate this opportunity to provide comments, as well as our ongoing partnership with FNS and USDA. If you have any questions or need additional information related to our comments, please do not hesitate to contact Ariana Oliva or Jeannie Wakamatsu at (213) 482-8200 ext. 203 or 207.

Sincerely,



Ariana Oliva
Nutrition Policy Advocate
California Food Policy Advocates

References:

- (1) Bridging the Gap. *Local School Wellness Policies*. 2013. http://www.bridgingthegapresearch.org/_asset/13s2jm/WP_2013_report.pdf
- (2) Project Lean. Developing Your Implementation Plan Worksheet. http://www.google.com/url?q=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.californiaprojectlean.org%2Fdocuserfiles%2FWorksheetC.doc&sa=D&sntz=1&usg=AFQjCNF2mJVmFbLUx1Qfge_FupOilewxPQ
- (3) Water Works - A Guide to Improving Water Access and Consumption in Schools. 2014. <http://waterinschools.org/pdfs/WaterWorksGuide2014.pdf>
- (4) How Smart is Your Lunchroom? California Food Policy Advocates. 2014. <http://cfpa.net/losangeles/smart-lunchroom#more-3304>
- (5) Guidelines for a Coordinated Approach to School Health. Connecticut State Department of Education. July 2007. <http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/LIB/sde/PDF/deps/student/Sec4SH.pdf>