Promoting Health in Minnesota Schools:

SCHOOL HEALTH COUNCILS

As society becomes more aware of and concerned with children’s health issues, communities are turning to their schools to provide a school environment that promotes both healthy eating and physical activity.¹ School policies supporting healthy eating and physical activity are an important component of school efforts to promote the health and well-being of school children. Good nutrition and physical activity help “contribute to improved academic performance, attendance rates, behavior, and lifelong health and well-being.”² Developing a School Health Council is a critical step in promoting health and wellness in schools.

What is a School Health Council?

A School Health Council is a team of school and community members who work in partnership to improve health in the school setting.³ Some councils are created to comprehensively address a school health program (including health education, physical education, safe school environment, health services, school counseling, food service, school site health promotion for faculty and staff, and integrated school and community programs) while others are created to address specific goals.⁴ School Health Councils provide advice to the school on issues related to school health, but are not a part of the administrative structure of the school district and have no legal responsibilities within the school system.⁵ While School Health Councils often advise an entire school district, individual schools within a district may find having a separate council helpful (these councils tied to a single school are often referred to as the “school health team” or “school wellness committee”).

Why are School Health Councils important?

School Health Councils bring together school personnel and community members who are interested in creating and maintaining a healthy environment for students. A School Health Council can ensure that a school’s wellness policy is well written, properly implemented, and regularly updated and enforced. Studies indicate that having a School Health Council can result in a more comprehensive approach to school wellness.⁶ Members of a School Health Council can be appointed or elected, and can be volunteers.
Membership in a School Health Council can include:

- School administrators
- Teachers
- School food authority
- School district medical consultant
- School health services
- School board members
- Coaches
- Parents
- Students
- Medical professionals
- Social service agencies
- Business/industry
- Volunteer health agencies
- Churches/synagogues
- Public media
- Public health agencies
- Civic and service organizations
- Colleges/universities
- Attorneys and law enforcement officials
- Youth advisory members
- Professional societies
- Government officials

Do any federal or Minnesota laws require a School Health Council?

No. However, while schools are not required to have a School Health Council, schools participating in federal school nutrition programs are required to have a school wellness policy. School Health Councils are often used to help schools create and implement their school wellness policy. The federal Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 requires school districts that participate in federal school nutrition programs to:

- Designate at least one person (either within the district or at each school) to ensure that each school complies with the local wellness policy, and
- Allow parents, students, representatives of the school food authority, the school board, school administrators, and the general public to participate in the development, periodic review, and update of the local school wellness policy.

A standing School Health Council also makes it easier for a school district to stay in compliance with the law. In Minnesota, schools receiving funding through the Minnesota Statewide Health Improvement Program (SHIP) (comprising more than half the state) must create and maintain School Health Councils.

Does the Minnesota School Boards Association (MSBA) Model Wellness Policy address School Health Councils?

No. The MSBA Model Wellness Policy does not include a School Health Council. However, the MSBA Policy does include the following provision:

The school district encourages the involvement of students, parents, teachers, food service staff, and other interested persons in implementing, monitoring, and reviewing school district nutrition and physical activity policies.
Could existing MSBA policies be used as support for the creation and management of a School Health Council?

Yes. The MSBA has several policies that could be used to support the creation and management of a School Health Council, including:

- 213 (School Board Committees)
- 302 (Superintendent)
- 305 (Policy Implementation)
- 601 (School District Curriculum and Instruction Goals)
- 603 (Curriculum Development)

How can Minnesota schools incorporate a School Health Council into a wellness policy?

The following language can be incorporated into a school board policy modeled after the MSBA’s model policy. This language can also be individually tailored to fit into a school board policy that does not follow the MSBA’s model policy.

Addition to the MSBA School Wellness Policy

IV. IMPLEMENTATION AND MONITORING

E. School Health Council

1. The School Health Council will provide advice to the entire school system on the district level about aspects of the school health program.12

2. The school district will permit parents, students, representatives of the school food authority, the school board, school administrators, and the general public to participate in the development and periodic review and update of the local school wellness policy.

3. The superintendent will ensure the formation and implementation of a district-wide School Health Council by developing guidelines or procedures for the School Health Council.

4. The School Health Council will include representatives from appropriate stakeholder groups as determined by the superintendent. The School Health Council may include students, parents, teachers, food service staff, and other interested persons.

5. The superintendent will ensure the School Health Council provides an annual report to the school board, individual schools, and the public on the implementation of and compliance with the School Wellness Policy and any other wellness objectives identified by the superintendent.

6. The superintendent, with the assistance of any existing School Health Council, will develop guidelines and rules of procedures to govern the School Health Council. These guidelines will include:
   a. School Health Council membership;
   b. School Health Council decision-making process;
   c. Frequency of meetings;
   d. School Health Council responsibilities; and
   e. Resources to support the School Health Council.
In what other ways can schools support the creation of a School Health Council?

In Minnesota, the superintendent is responsible for implementing and enforcing school board policy. Superintendents issue protocols, procedures, and guidelines to help implement the school board’s policies. The following language can be incorporated into existing guidelines. However, as school boards and superintendents may adopt more specific or general guidelines based on their needs and goals, policy language can be interchangeable with the guidelines listed below.

School Health Council Guidelines

- The School Health Council is critical in developing, implementing, monitoring, reviewing, and revising policies impacting school nutrition and physical activity policies, including the Wellness Policy.

- The School Health Council, as directed by the superintendent, will be responsible for:
  - Advising the superintendent and school board on school and community health issues.
  - Identifying student and staff health needs.
  - Monitoring and evaluating the implementation of school wellness policies.
  - Supporting the school in developing a healthier school environment.
  - Assisting with policy development to support a healthy school environment.
  - Planning and implementing programs for students and staff.
  - Identifying funding and resources for student and staff wellness.

- The School Health Council will include representatives from each school, and may include members from the following groups:
  - Administration
  - Classroom teachers (including PE/health specialists)
  - School food nutrition staff
  - School health services staff
  - Parents
  - Students
  - Appropriate tribal officials
  - Community partners
  - Coaches
  - Community health professionals
  - School board members
  - Other members of the public

- The School Health Council will include and foster participation of representatives with varying linguistic, cultural, racial, gender, sexual orientation, and socio-economic backgrounds of the student population.

- Recommendations to fill future vacancies will be made to the superintendent by the School Health Council.

- The superintendent, with the assistance of the School Health Council, will determine any limitation on tenure or membership requirements.
• The superintendent, with the assistance of the School Health Council, will determine the decision-making process. The superintendent will designate one member to be the presiding officer.

• The School Health Council will use an assessment mechanism such as the School Health Index or Healthy Schools Builder\textsuperscript{14} to evaluate areas of deficiency.

• The School Health Council will develop a feedback mechanism for the superintendent to use that allows students, teachers, other school employees or the public to report on policy compliance and provide suggestions for promoting nutrition and physical activity in the school setting.

• The School Health Council will develop indicators of success and ways to measure them.

• The School Health Council will develop an annual action plan and monitor its implementation, progress, and outcomes. The superintendent, or designated member of the Council, will present this plan to the School Board for approval.

• At least once every two years, the School Health Council will review and make recommendations to the superintendent and/or the school board regarding the School Wellness Policy and any other policies, programs, or other factors related to the school health environment.

• On an annual basis, the School Health Council will assess and report to the School Board on policy compliance and other factors affecting the general state of nutrition and physical activity in the school setting. The report will consider nutrition, physical education, physical activity, family and community involvement, health education, and any other relevant topics.

• Reports provided to the School Board by the School Health Council will be distributed to the school health council, parent/teacher organizations, school principals, school health services personnel in the district, and the public as appropriate.

• The superintendent, with the assistance of the School Health Council, will identify and develop an action plan to obtain needed resources.

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Endnotes


5 Id.
7 Bellian, supra note 4, at 8.
8 For more information on the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, please visit www.publichealthlawcenter.org.
10 LEAGUE OF MINNESOTA CITIES, HANDBOOK FOR MINNESOTA CITIES 17:14 (2012), available at http://www.lmc.org/media/document/1/chapter17.pdf (“The Minnesota School Boards Association (MSBA) supports, promotes and enhances the work of public school boards. MSBA is a private nonprofit organization that provides technical assistance; cost-saving programs; and advocacy, training, research, and referral services for all of Minnesota’s public [school members]. Membership in MSBA is voluntary.”).
13 Id. at 11.
14 Id. at 17.