



# Healthy Kids Healthy Schools

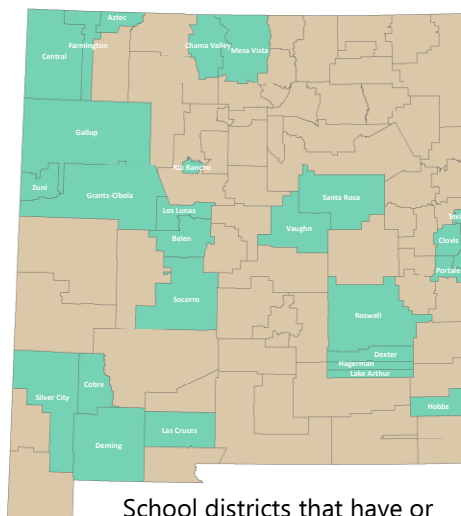
BUILDING HEALTHIER TOMORROWS

School districts across New Mexico are updating their wellness policies as part of a national directive tied to school meals. It's an overwhelming job and another mandate for schools inundated by requirements. But the school districts in New Mexico aren't alone, and they are learning from the State of New Mexico and one another about how to implement and enforce regulations that will help improve the health and wellbeing of their students.

Healthy Kids Healthy New Mexico is partnering with the New Mexico Public Education Department (PED) to guide districts through the process of updating policies and help them achieve the overall goal of improving children's health through quality nutrition and access to physical activity.

Healthy Kids New Mexico aims to make changes where kids live, learn and play so it is easier for families to choose healthy foods and be physically active. One of Healthy Kids' strategies is ensuring that schools follow wellness policies that help children lead healthy lives.

*"The wellness policy is the road to improving the nutritional and physical education environment and staff wellness environments in schools where we are raising our future and hopefully holding onto a valuable resource, our teachers,"* said Rita Condon, program manager for Healthy Kids New Mexico. *"There are a lot of components required in the policies because childhood obesity is a big issue. We've got to impact where we can."*



School districts that have or are working towards updated policies in 2014

Healthy Kids staff and local coordinators worked with 20 school districts to update their policies after federal legislation passed in 2010 mandating stricter nutrition and physical activity standards in wellness policies. As part of that legislation, healthier student meals and more rigorous wellness policies are required by July 1, 2015.

*"We're providing resources and ideas for the efforts,"* said Condon, who leads school and childcare wellness efforts for Healthy Kids New Mexico. *"We work with the coordinator who knows the community and the district to make changes."*

Donia Intriere, nutrition coordinator for the Public Education Department, said her department reviews schools every three years to make sure they have adequate policies in place. Because the requirements are new and involved, she said it is essential to have state agencies working together to help schools.

*“It’s never going to work if we’re doing it by ourselves,” Intriere said. “Everyone on board with the same message – that’s the only way change happens.”*

After working with the original nine counties, Healthy Kids partnered with PED to achieve a statewide reach. Condon joins Intriere in statewide trainings; both are available to assist districts as needed.

“Having the training made schools feel like it was reasonable to be able to update their policies,” Condon said.

Cathy McDonald is the nursing coordinator for the Farmington school district that serves about 11,000 students. At the training she attended, she learned from larger districts about how they communicate between schools, and she shared with smaller districts about how to set up an effective school wellness committee. She said she appreciates the resources Condon sends her, including sample language and implementation ideas.

Laura Jaramillo used the school wellness policies Condon gave her as guides when she worked with a wellness committee to update Grants-Cibola County Schools’ policy. She implemented similar changes as other school districts, including making water available to students throughout the day, discouraging the use of food as reward or punishment and encouraging healthy food for snacks and parties.

## Support Is Critical



Jaramillo’s committee had to compromise and change the policy’s wording from, **“We will”** to **“We encourage”** to get school leaders’ support.

“I think as we keep working on it, we can keep improving it and make it a living document so we can see how we can make it better and improve the environment in the schools,” Jaramillo said. “I thought it was better to get support from the school administrators because ultimately they will be responsible for implementing it in the schools.”

Support from school administrators and others is a key component of a successful policy. Nancy Cathey has been nutrition services director for 20 years in the Las Cruces Public Schools. She has worked with staff to update the wellness policy in a slow, deliberate way by introducing a new policy in a school with a supportive principal and proving the change

works. Then the principal becomes a champion of the change and convinces other school leaders. Once half of the schools are on board, Cathey approaches the school board to make it official policy.

“Change is difficult for everyone, especially when someone else places it upon you,” Cathey said. “If you show the change is effective then it’s easier to make it an across-the-board event. If you create that buy in, when it goes on paper it’s no big deal. You instilled it as the right way to do things. Then it’s not enforcing rules on people who don’t want it.”

Cathey has found creative ways to prove success. When one school scheduled recess before lunch, Cathey’s staff conducted a waste study comparing that school to a similar-sized school that had recess after lunch. They measured a week’s worth of food prepared, served and discarded.

They learned that students who had recess before lunch consumed 30 percent more fruits, vegetables and milk. Cathey and her staff created a video with that information and interviewed adults at the pilot school, including the principal, who observed improved classroom behavior after lunch.

“We developed it as a tool to sell it to the rest of the principals,” she said. “It was step by step. Now all of our schools are doing that. It’s a way for kids to take in more healthy foods, and it didn’t cost us anything to do it – just a mindset change.”



## Finding Voices

Condon has noticed that districts are the most successful when they have health champions at schools, and they make it easy for people to participate in revising policies. For example, Gallup-McKinley County Schools reimbursed committee members for travel to meetings in its rural county.

“You have to keep building support and getting buy-in,” Condon said. “People are busy so how do we make it easy for them to meet and be part of the team that’s doing this.”

People crafting wellness policies in several areas, including Farmington, Grants, Zuni Pueblo and McKinley County, say it is important to include a broad spectrum of voices during the planning process.

Some, like Jaramillo in Grants, made subcommittees of existing groups devoted to health issues. Her committee included school nurses, a retired professor, a college student, school principal, food services coordinator, New Mexico State University Extension Department, community members and representatives from human services and economic development.

“Some of those individuals brought a really good perspective to the table,” she said. “It was collaborative and supportive.”

Creative ideas are born that way. During a conversation about chocolate milk vs. white milk, a nurse talked about the difference in calories. The issue didn’t make it into the wellness policy, but now the food services coordinator no longer offers chocolate milk every day, and principals are considering promoting white milk with school contests, Jaramillo said.

McDonald recommends opening planning meetings to anyone interested. She said she’s learned from the student nutrition manager and from innovative teachers who start their kids’ day with a classroom exercise.

“There is knowledge and talent out there that you might not know about,” she said. “When you include them as part of the team, they have wonderful ideas and ways of implementing programs.”

Getting kids on board is important too, said Jane Batson, one of the coordinators for Healthy Kids Chaves County. Middle school and high school student representatives served on the wellness policy committee for Lake Arthur, a small southeastern town 25 miles from Roswell. Kids talked about wanting water during the day and more fresh fruit in their cafeteria.

“They are the kids who are impacted by this,” Batson said. “It’s important for them to speak up and have their voices heard.”

## Ensuring Compliance



Once the meetings have concluded and school boards have adopted updated wellness policies, the real challenge begins -- making sure people know about and follow the policy.

School districts are required to have a wellness committee so policies are followed. Gallup-McKinley County Schools is having each of its 35 schools form a wellness committee with a leader who is that school’s health champion. The district conducted wellness surveys at every school so the committees will understand the school’s challenges and strengths, said Gary Schuster, wellness coordinator for the Gallup-McKinley County Schools.

Schuster has posted the policy on the district’s website and reached out to principals and the health and wellness champions, but his district is in the infancy stage of promoting the updated policy.

“We need to continue to get the word out through principal meetings and professional development,” he said.

McDonald plans to appoint a wellness representative at each of the Farmington schools to report and monitor how the district’s wellness policy is followed. She can share that information so schools get ideas from one another about healthy activities or food.

“You have to have something to validate what’s being done and it contributes to compliance,” she said.

Jaramillo’s committee is considering including information about healthy activities and snack ideas in school newsletters or e-mail blurbs from the superintendent. They may put a health tip on the school’s marquee once a week. To reach staff, the committee would talk about components of the wellness policy during an in-service training.

“We will keep the school people at the table as we work on this transformation project and keep it on the forefront of people’s minds,” Jaramillo said.

School districts across the state have made many positive changes to their wellness policies to improve the health of their students and staff. Here are some examples:

- *Provide students access to water throughout the day*
- *Not withhold recess as a punishment*
- *Eliminate food as a reward*
- *Encourage or require healthy foods at parties and fundraisers*
- *Establish recess before lunch*
- *Encourage schools to open their playgrounds to the community off-school hours*
- *Offer only water for beverages in vending machines in middle and high schools*
- *Encourage students to walk to school*
- *Encourage schools to provide physical activity before and after school*
- *Encourage purchasing food from local grocers and school gardens*
- *No marketing of unhealthy foods*
- *All staff will promote healthy foods*