

Evaluating Your School's Health

The Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004 requires school districts that receive federal funds for their school meals programs to establish school district wellness policies before the start of the 2006-2007 school year. In addition, the law states that school districts must involve parents in the development of the policies. This means that your PTA has a unique opportunity to make sure that children have access to healthy foods and sufficient physical activity at school.

Each local PTA should get involved in the creation of its district's wellness policy as well as a wellness policy or plan specifically for its school. First, do your homework and find out more about the school environment and what is already happening in your district and school. Here are a few tips to get you started:

- **Find out who is working on the wellness policy.** Has a wellness committee been established? Are they reaching out to parents, as required by law? Ask how the PTA can be involved in the development of the policy.
- **Join kids at lunch for a day.** (Ask the school for permission first.) Pack a healthy lunch or eat what the kids eat. Find out what choices are available at the school, and what they taste like. What do kids pick from the menus, how long do they have to wait in line, and how much time do they have to eat?
- **Talk to students about the food at school.** They will definitely have opinions about the time they eat lunch, whether they are rushed, what the food is like, and what they would like to see changed. Also, it's important to get students' support for healthy changes in the school environment.
- **Meet with the school food service staff** and learn about their daily challenges in preparing meals and their suggestions for healthy improvements. Write their ideas down.
- **Take a look at the school's playground and athletic facilities.** Test the equipment. Does the school do a good job of providing students with an environment that promotes physical activity? Ask the principal and teachers how much time is provided each day for physical education and recess.

Once you have gathered information about the state of nutrition and physical activity at the school, speak up about what changes are needed. Schedule a meeting with the wellness committee, and enlist support of the principal, food service staff, and teachers.

Each local unit leader was sent a copy of the Healthy Lifestyles at Home and School Notebook in the Back-to-School Kit in August (2005). The notebook contains more information about how you can make your school a healthier place, a survey to help you evaluate your school, and details about the wellness policy requirement. If you would like PDF files of the notebook pages be sent to you via email, send an email to HealthyLifestyles@pta.org.