



Piecing Together the Student Wellness Puzzle: CSBA Support for School Board Leadership

An article outlining the roles and responsibilities of school board members regarding school health and student wellness.

Research shows that the aspirations of students and their success in school are often hindered by health-related circumstances, such as obesity, poor nutrition, lack of physical activity, mental health disorders, poor oral health, asthma and other conditions. Responding to the health needs of students requires an understanding of all the pieces of the puzzle and the essential role that school boards fulfill in initiating and sustaining change through their active involvement and leadership.

The role of the school board is to reflect the values, beliefs and priorities of the community. The board has specific responsibilities to (1) set direction for the district, (2) establish an effective and efficient structure for the district, (3) provide support to the superintendent and staff as they carry out the direction of the board, (4) hold the system accountable, and (5) engage in community leadership and advocacy. All of these functions can be leveraged to address issues pertaining to student wellness.

The California School Boards Association has set a high priority on assisting boards in their responsibilities related to student health. In addition, because boards and district staff must work closely with parents and families, health professionals, the community, and other stakeholders to make a positive impact on student health, CSBA encourages and is modeling effective collaboration.

CSBA has developed a number of tools and resources to provide health-related information and share best practices, including conferences and workshops, publications, sample board policies and administrative regulations, policy briefs, fact sheets and policy worksheets. These resources are designed to support boards in each of their major responsibilities. For example:

Setting direction. To help boards establish a district vision that reflects what students need in order to achieve their highest potential, CSBA is working to educate boards about the link between health and learning and to raise awareness of student health as a critical goal for districts. CSBA has also commissioned and conducted surveys, focus groups and interviews to better understand the needs and priorities of districts pertaining to student health.

Establishing structure. Boards establish an effective structure for the district through the adoption of policies, curriculum and the budget. CSBA has developed a policy resource guide (Student Wellness: A Health Food and Physical Activity Policy Resource Guide) and policy development worksheets to help guide districts through the policy development process and identify key components that should be addressed in local policies on nutrition and physical activity. Sample policies and administrative regulations provided by CSBA include an overarching policy on student wellness as well as policies addressing such topics as the food services program, other food sales, asthma management, health screening for school entry, administration of medication to students and more. Related curriculum issues, including comprehensive health education and physical education, are also addressed in CSBA sample policies.

Other materials that address student health issues and the link to learning are available at www.csba.org/Wellness.aspx

StudentWellness

To help boards address budget issues, CSBA is examining the fiscal impacts of student wellness policies (e.g., additional staff and facilities needs, potential loss of funding due to healthier vending or fundraising policies) and providing strategies and alternatives that allow districts to responsibly address fiscal needs without negatively impacting student health.

Providing support. Boards do not implement programs, but they do support implementation through their behaviors and actions. CSBA programs designed to strengthen school board governance include educating board members about their obligations to become knowledgeable about district programs, support and enforce district policies, align decisions and resources with district priorities and goals, and model desirable behaviors.

Ensuring accountability. Boards establish systems and processes to monitor programmatic results and communicate the district's progress to the local community. To assist boards in monitoring and evaluating their student wellness policy, CSBA has developed guidelines and a sample format for reporting results to the board (Monitoring for Success: A Student Wellness Implementation Monitoring Report and Guide) which include suggested data sources.

Acting as community leaders. Boards have a responsibility to represent the interests of the community's children and to involve the community in meaningful ways. Because student health is a topic of mutual interest to a wide variety of stakeholders, boards have a responsibility to work with (and to establish an expectation that district staff will work with) parents, health professionals, county health agencies, community organizations and others who may assist in promoting student health. CSBA is arming boards with the information they need to be champions of student health, to educate their communities about the link between health and learning and to engage their community in ways that support district wellness efforts.

CSBA has been assisted in many of these efforts through its partnerships with foundations, the California Department of Education, California Department of Public Health, California Project LEAN (Leaders Encouraging Activity and Nutrition) and other local and state-level partners. CSBA also is providing leadership at the state and national levels through active involvement with California Action for Healthy Kids, the California Youth and Workforce Wellness Task Force, the National Policy and Legal Analysis Network to Prevent Childhood Obesity (NPLAN), and the Centers for Disease Control's National Summit on Legal Preparedness for Obesity Prevention and Control.

By working to strengthen school board governance at the local level and to represent boards in state and national discussions, CSBA hopes to increase opportunities for boards to make changes within the schools and to seek changes within the community which result in healthier school environments and healthier children who are ready to learn. When students are not bounded by their health-related circumstances, the outcomes should include improved school attendance, improved behavior and improved student achievement.