



NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF  
**CHRONIC DISEASE DIRECTORS**

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# NEVADA: Improving School Nutrition, Strengthened by a State Wellness Policy



2015

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The National Association of Chronic Disease Directors (NACDD) extends its appreciation to the following people who provided valuable advice and input in the development of this document.

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These case studies were produced under a cooperative agreement 5U58DP002759-05 with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Its contents are solely the responsibility of the author and do not necessarily represent the official views of NACDD or CDC.



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# NEVADA: IMPROVING SCHOOL NUTRITION, STRENGTHENED BY A STATE WELLNESS POLICY

Schools play an important role in promoting healthy eating among students. They are key to providing children with the appropriate nutrition that they need for optimal growth and development and reduced risk of obesity and other health conditions. Schools offer opportunities for students to consume nutritious foods and beverages and to learn about and practice healthy behaviors.<sup>1</sup> State health departments and other partners provide valuable support to schools and help make improving the school nutrition environment across the nation achievable.

This case study highlights work and accomplishments of Nevada in implementing policies and practices to improve school nutrition, with an emphasis on the Nevada Division of Public and Behavioral Health (NDPBH) in the Nevada Department of Health and Human Services. It features Nevada's School Wellness Policy (SWP)

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as a major accomplishment that drives school nutrition changes, including how Nevada has addressed advertising, promotion and marketing of foods and beverages on school property. The case study also highlights a project funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) per *CDC RFA DP13-1305: State Public Health Actions to Prevent and Control Diabetes, Heart Disease, Obesity and Associated Risk Factors and Promote School Health* that provides support for school nutrition. Nevada's approach and response to challenges offers ideas for other states to improve their own school nutrition environments, including through enhanced wellness policies.

## School Nutrition in the State of Nevada: An Overview

The Nevada Department of Agriculture (NDAG) is the state agency administering the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Child Nutrition Programs including the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs. In 2013, the Office of Child Nutrition and School Health, within the Nevada Department of Education (NDOE), moved to NDAG as a result of legislation passed in an effort to consolidate food and nutrition services in the state of Nevada. The formed School Nutrition Services unit currently has seven staff members to administer its programs. As of 2014, NDPBH provides additional



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staffing support, made possible by CDC DP13-1305. NDPBH created an internal school health program coordinator position to manage nutrition and physical activity efforts in schools and collaborate with other agencies in the state.

The catalyst in Nevada's strengthened school nutrition environment in recent years is the adoption of a wellness policy at the state level. In 2006, NDOE adopted a state School Wellness Policy (SWP) that removed soda from schools, which was progressive at that time, and created nutrition standards for food items (e.g. foods of minimal nutritional value were not allowed, items had to meet specific portion sizes). Each of the 17 local education agencies (LEAs), or school districts, in Nevada then adopted local school wellness policies (LSWP) aligned with the SWP and began to implement them with assistance from state and local health and education agencies. In 2014, NDAG engaged a taskforce to revise and reissue the state wellness policy in alignment with the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, which included USDA's Nutrition Standards for all Foods Sold in Schools (i.e., Smart Snacks in School nutrition standards). With a new SWP now in place, LEAs are developing and implementing revised LSWP that reflect these federal and state requirements.

Legislative action and grant funding, including support of CDC DP13-1305, has furthered progress. School nutrition is a priority for Nevada Governor Brian Sandoval, and his state address in 2015 championed school nutrition with a reference to the passing of "Breakfast After the Bell" legislation that requires schools with high percentages of low-income students to serve breakfast to students after the start of the official school day. In addition, Nevada used part of its American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds to develop sustainable community programs including school gardens in rural Nevada. The school gardens have increased fruit and vegetable consumption for low-income children and communities.<sup>2</sup>

### Nevada Student Population

- 459,172 public school students in pre-K – grade 12<sup>3</sup>
- 17 school districts, 645 public schools<sup>4</sup>
- Hispanic 40.56%, White 35.98%, African American 9.92%, Asian 5.59%, Pacific Islander 1.33%, American Indian/Alaska Native 1.06%, Two or more races 5.57%
- 15.02% of students are English Language Learners
- 52.95 % of public school students qualify for free and reduced lunch<sup>5</sup>
- 14.6% of high school students are overweight and 11.4% are obese, below national rates.<sup>6</sup>

## Nevada's School Nutrition Team

NDPBH works with numerous partners around school nutrition, in addition to NDAG. NDOE is a key partner, although collaboration mostly pertains to the wellness policy and physical activity since NDOE no longer has staff dedicated to school nutrition. NDPBH, NDAG, and NDOE staff meet on monthly calls convened by NDPBH to discuss updates around school wellness and LSWP implementation by LEAs. These meetings set priorities and identify ways each organization can provide support to schools. The



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organizations collaborate on statewide communication efforts like joint statements and other opportunities as feasible to provide professional development (PD) and technical assistance (TA).

Examples of additional key partners are the American Heart Association, Nevada Association of School Nurses, Nevada Association of School Superintendents, Nevada School Nutrition Association, and Nevada Legislators. NDPBH works closely with the University of Nevada Cooperative Extension and contracts with a researcher from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) for SWP evaluation and other activities. Local health departments have been instrumental in promoting the SWP at the local level and revising LSWP. Within each LEA, NDPBH primarily collaborates with school wellness coordinators and advisory committees around school nutrition, and NDAG mostly works with nutrition services directors and staff.

## Nevada's School Wellness Policy

NDAG led the process to revise the SWP in 2014 and created a Best Practices Manual to aid LEAs in implementing the new policy. A need to define fundraising exemptions under Smart Snacks nutrition standards provided an impetus for Nevada to revise guidelines. The SWP went into effect in July 2014, and the policy is stronger than federal standards in four areas:

- requires that all food items sold or given away meet Smart Snacks nutrition standards (e.g., incentives, rewards, fundraisers, vending machines, school stores, snack shacks);
- allows adequate time to consume meals (at least 15 minutes at breakfast and 20 minutes at lunch);
- requires that schools provide the opportunity for students to have at least 30 minutes of physical activity each school day; and
- prohibits any carbonated beverages in schools.

In addition, Nevada chose to not allow any fundraising exemptions, and the SWP recommends recess before lunch in elementary schools.

To revise the SWP, NDAG formed a taskforce with representation from multiple sectors including industry, education, health, community-based organizations, advocacy groups, and government with expertise in both nutrition and physical activity. The taskforce convened January through April 2014 to draft the SWP and met four times as a full group. Members reviewed the 2006 policy and compared it to the new USDA requirements to bring all topics to at least the minimum federal standard. Taskforce members also used their expertise in various areas to provide the most current recommendations from the Institute of Medicine, CDC, and the Society of Health and Physical Educators (SHAPE America). The taskforce determined all nutrition standards to be followed in the SWP. As part of the process, NDPBH representatives led a workgroup on SWP evaluation and convened internal meetings to discuss SWP development.

Once the SWP was in effect, LEAs then began to adopt revised LSWP to address all of the federal and state standards. Going forward, the SWP will be updated as needed to comply with federal minimum requirements, and LEAs must update their LSWP to adhere to any changes.



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## Marketing to be Consistent with Smart Snacks Nutrition Standards

The marketing component of the SWP is as follows:

Only marketing consistent with Smart Snacks Nutrition Standards is allowed on the school campus. This includes any advertising or other promotions on the school campus during the school day (oral, written, or visual).

School districts must identify and eliminate all marketing and advertising on school property which does not currently meet the Smart Snacks Nutrition Standards as leases, agreements, or contracts are renewed or items are replaced.<sup>7</sup>

The taskforce's decision to limit marketing to only that consistent with Smart Snacks nutrition standards came easily, and has not been met with pushback thus far. By focusing on the fact that these items are not to be sold on school campus during the school day, it made a strong case for not allowing these items to be marketed. Moreover, the taskforce decided to phase in provisions over time rather than expect immediate changes, which helped garner support from LEAs, vendors, and others to implement this policy. The American Heart Association stated Nevada was 'Leading the nation when it comes to ensuring that children are not bombarded with junk foods and junk food marketing on school property.'<sup>8</sup>

## Promoting School Nutrition through Nevada's School Wellness Policy

Upon adoption of the new SWP, NDAG and NDPBH widely promoted the policy to LEAs targeting school administrators, school wellness coordinators, and nutrition services directors and staff. Taskforce members and their respective organizations collaborated to increase awareness statewide. NDPBH and a researcher from UNLV conducted presentations at two monthly meetings attended by all superintendents in the state. NDAG also made key food and beverage distributors in the state aware of SWP requirements.

NDPBH and NDAG provide LEAs with PD and TA to assist with adoption and implementation of a revised LSWP. Through the CDC DP13-1305 project, NDPBH provides PD and TA for school wellness coordinators on food service guidelines and nutrition standards per the SWP requirements and national best practices. The project targets Clark County School District and Washoe County School District that together represent 71% of public schools in Nevada,<sup>4</sup> and it is expanding to rural counties. NDPBH provides TA to develop LSWP to all 17 LEAs, if requested. NDAG conducts annual PD in three different locations on school nutrition topics including SWP and provided a SWP webinar series. Webinars in the series included: *Introduction to Nevada's School Wellness Policy*, *School Wellness Policy Best Practices Manual*, *How to Form a School Wellness Advisory Group*, *School Wellness Support/Funding Opportunities*, and *School Wellness Policy Evaluation*. Their resources and tools for LEAs to develop and implement LSWP effectively are all accessible online. Examples include an e-learning school wellness module, a local school wellness policy checklist to help LEAs develop a LSWP that reflects all SWP minimum standards, with inclusion of optional national best practices should schools elect to exceed state standards, and a product list of foods and beverages that meet criteria for the Smart Snacks nutrition standards and Nevada state standards.





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## Early Implications for School Districts Adopting and Implementing Revised Local Wellness Policies Aligned with Nevada's School Wellness Policy

All 17 LEAs have revised LSWP to align with the SWP requirements or are in the process of completing the revision in 2015. LEAs submit their LSWP drafts to NDAG for review, and LEAs must either have a compliant policy or a plan to get their policy in place in order to have National School Lunch Program application renewals approved. All LSWP submitted to NDAG have stated that marketing will be consistent with Smart Snacks nutrition standards.

Nevada is also evaluating LSWP implementation and nutrition practices. Evaluation is built into the SWP, as it requires that all schools submit an annual progress report on LSWP implementation to NDAG. NDAG developed an online resource *Nevada's School Wellness Implementation Reporting Tool* to collect this information, and this tool asks high-level questions around wellness including school performance measures per CDC DP13-1305. NDPBH provided an incentive of physical activity packs (estimated \$600 value) to the first 17 school districts or schools that completed this LSWP assessment, and all LEAs completed the first annual implementation reporting in the spring of 2015. University researchers also conducted a statewide assessment of nutrition and physical activity practices summarized in the *School Wellness Practices Statewide Report*. Data show that LEAs employ successful strategies at varying levels within the state and also reveal areas for improvement to be targeted by the state, such as participation in fruit and vegetable programs and designation of school wellness coordinators in all schools to improve nutrition practices.<sup>9</sup> NDPBH plans to expand on these efforts to assess the extent to which schools meet the full nutrition standards per SWP, have a local wellness coordinator, and participate in school breakfast and lunch programs. This assessment might explore other areas, like LSWP enforcement.

LEAs that have begun to implement LSWP changes based on the SWP have provided positive feedback to NDAG and NDPBH regarding how it has improved the school nutrition environment. In addition, other organizations providing support across Nevada such as the American Heart Association, Nevada PTA, and Nevada School Nutrition Association have given positive feedback. NDAG and NDPBH are optimistic that more positive changes will be coming from LEAs in future academic years.



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### A Local School District Success Story

Clark County School District (Clark County), the fifth largest LEA in the nation with 357 schools mostly located in the city of Las Vegas. Clark County was the first LEA in Nevada to adopt a new LSWP in 2015, closely mirroring state guidelines. It adopted the LSWP in less than one year, with time for public comment. Two key factors that contributed to a smooth policy adoption process were: 1) board briefings that educated the 7-member school board individually or in pairs and provided a crosswalk from the old LSWP to the new one and 2) PD and TA from NDAG, NDPBH, and the local health department. Clark County is implementing its revised LSWP, including marketing for consistency with Smart Snacks nutrition standards. A new vending contract already incorporates the approved policy. Since marketing changes are not immediate, Clark County does not anticipate any challenges in implementing this policy at the time leases, agreements, or contracts are renewed or items (e.g., signage) are replaced.

## Successes and Challenges with Nevada's School Wellness Policy Affecting School Nutrition

A primary factor that contributed to the success in creating the new SWP in a short timeframe was having a diverse, passionate group of stakeholders in the taskforce. Community members engaged in the taskforce continue to be the biggest champions for the policy across the state. The SWP was a strong collaborative effort at the state level and within localities, demonstrating that leadership in this area needed to involve the entire state. While the SWP taskforce existed for only months, NDAG convened a group of stakeholders to advise development of *Nevada's School Wellness Implementation Reporting Tool* and would like to identify additional opportunities to bring varied expertise together around wellness and school nutrition at the state level.

During the development of the revised policy, a few SWP components were more contentious than others. One strategy that helped was having an outside facilitator present to create dialogue and bring the group to a consensus. Having a facilitator also indirectly strengthened comprehensive wellness, with nutrition and physical activity sharing equal importance. An emphasis was placed on research and to create a policy that promotes "What is Best for Nevada Students," which helped keep the taskforce focused on the end goal of the regulations.

Overall, the process of LEAs revising and adopting LSWP has been successful. The 2006 policy paved the way in school nutrition, and it provided a platform and time for LEAs to work out local implementation





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challenges. LEAs have gradually become more comfortable with the moral obligation to promote children's health in schools. SWP development brought LEAs to the table, including administrators, which helped make the SWP achievable and better positioned locally. Part of Clark County's ease in adopting a revised LSWP is due to how the new SWP is written. The SWP provides clear overall guidelines with nutrition information being written in language that both schools and laypeople can understand.

As schools implement revised LSWP, Nevada anticipates that there will be some resistance to the changes. Key barriers include staff time, scheduling, perceived loss of revenue, students' acceptance, and resistance to change. Keeping the goal in mind is critical: to promote what is best for Nevada's students, along with evidence to support the policies. There is also recognition and messaging that even one step at a time can make a difference over the long term. The marketing component of the SWP is an example of how Nevada supports incremental improvements made by LEAs.

Nevada has learned that while school district leadership is largely aware of the policy, key groups such as teachers, support staff, parents and families do not have the same level of awareness of the revised SWP and LSWP. NDPBH will lead a public awareness campaign, which includes partnering with the Nevada Parent Teacher Association (PTA) to provide education to parents and families through local PTAs. One of the goals is to also help improve the consistency of marketing with Smart Snacks nutrition standards since PTAs are frequently involved in vendor relations for school-sponsored events and activities.

Additional challenges relate to LSWP enforcement. Nutrition services staff and school wellness coordinators are not generally in an authoritative role to enforce revisions. Because the state lacks legislative mandates for Smart Snacks nutrition standards, the SWP lacks "teeth" at this time without it being legally binding and enforceable by law. The SWP specifies recordkeeping requirements to demonstrate compliance with the LSWP, however. There are no current penalties evoked by the state for non-compliance, and LEAs are encouraged to determine any penalties and incentives locally.

## Looking Forward

Nevada has demonstrated significant progress and leadership in improving the school nutrition environment. Many priorities lie ahead for NDPBH, and ongoing efforts are anticipated to be collaborative and build upon the foundation of promising work already happening in the state, such as the new SWP and activities under CDC DP13-1305. Several examples of priorities NDPBH plans to undertake this year and next are listed below:

- Partner with SHAPE Nevada and NDAG to provide a nutrition curriculum and expand PD including online training.
- Reinforce NDAG's upcoming requirements for nutrition education standards and PD per the final professional standards rule from the USDA that became effective July 1, 2015.
- Create a School Health Taskforce with key partners to strengthen relationships and communications on school health matters. Involvement in collaborative activities like monthly meetings between NDPBH, NDAG, and NDOE around the SWP and internal meetings at NDPBH on obesity prevention bolstered by CDC DP13-1305 will continue.



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- Establish a projected PD schedule with LEAs and enhance PD and TA tracking systems and documentation of follow-up support provided by NDPBH and partners.

NDPBH, NDAG, and the many partners involved across the state share a similar goal of school wellness, which is to provide a school environment that offers what is best for Nevada's students to learn and be healthy. NDPBH and NDAG understand that changes to reach that goal can be challenging and that improvements will take time. Together, they press LEAs to be better than yesterday and focus on making the SWP and the nutrition guidelines achievable. And, as exemplified in having marketing be consistent with Smart Snacks nutrition standards, there is also support for improvements to be made one step at a time.



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