

Letter From Dorothy - Spring 2011
Local Wellness Policies Play Large Role in RI School Health

Hello Everyone,



Some of the most common concerns we hear at Kids First come from people who want to make healthy changes in their school district. "Why do so many of our fundraisers, student rewards and classroom celebrations promote unhealthy foods to our students?" "Our foodservice program is serving more fruits, veggies and whole grains, but we have concerns that these foods go into the trash --- how do we help our children try these new foods?" "Why does it seem as if students are getting

less and less time for recess and Physical Education (PE), when we know that inactive lifestyles contribute to our obesity problem?"

One thing that these concerns have in common is the answer we give to the community members raising the questions: **Join Your Health & Wellness Committee.** It may seem like a very simple step, but we've found that the most significant and longest lasting changes occur from *within* a school community - especially when a group of committed people have a vested interest in making healthy change happen and they have the organizational structure in place to support them. Health and Wellness Committees in RI serve that exact function.

A little history and some facts: To encourage (and formalize) the role schools play in promoting student health, Congress passed a national law in 2005 that required educational districts in every state to establish local wellness policies for their school communities. Recognizing that the responsibility for the development of a wellness policy rested fully at the local level, Rhode Island took an additional step and established a law requiring each of the 36 school districts to form a Health & Wellness Committee, comprised of

". . . members of the general public, a majority of whom are not employed by the school district, including at least one parent, and are encouraged to include teachers; administrator; students; community and school-based health professionals; business community representatives; and representatives of local and statewide nonprofit health organizations. The subcommittee will be chaired by a member of the school committee." **One of the primary functions of a local**

Health & Wellness Committee in RI is to make certain that all district wellness policies are being actively implemented, critically assessed and continuously updated.

It's now been five years since most RI school districts developed and approved their very first wellness policies. While most of the principles and fundamentals contained in a district wellness policy remain timeless, a few RI school districts are finding that some of the language within the

policies is not strong enough given that we now have increased national attention to the critical role schools have in teaching and modeling healthier habits. *Let's Move*, First Lady Michelle Obama's campaign to raise a healthier generation of American kids, has created much greater awareness across the country and within every RI community.

Right now, more than ever, each RI school district needs to be actively taking a look at its wellness policy so that its schools have a current and clear set of guidelines to adhere to in order to ensure healthier day-to-day routines in schools. We recommend that wellness policies contain language that provides solid guidance and rationale for making daily decisions. We also recommend including more specific language that can be put into practice consistently in each school building across the district.

Kids First provides technical assistance to all RI district Health & Wellness Committees through a contract with the RI Department of Health. Staff members Karin Wetherill and Carole Toselli are members of most district Wellness Committees and are available to help. As an organization, Kids First is committed to encouraging positive change by helping Wellness Committees share best "healthy school practices" and understand the existing RI laws and requirements surrounding student health.

By revisiting the language in their wellness policies, Portsmouth, Pawtucket, Foster and Barrington school districts are encouraging critical discussion among their Wellness Committee members about the effectiveness of their current policies in addressing specific and timely student health issues such as nutritional quality of school meals, healthy fundraising, food in classroom celebrations, withholding of recess as a punishment, amount and quality of PE provided to students and increased awareness about food safety.

We encourage everyone concerned about our children's health in every RI school district - whether you are a parent, a teacher, a school nurse, a cafeteria staff member or a student to get involved in your Wellness Committee to enact positive change. For everyone who currently serves on their district Wellness Committee, we applaud your hard work and invite you to continuously reach out to new staff members, new families and new students so that everyone in your school community knows about your mission and is familiar with your district's policies (or at least knows where to find them to reference them!). In Bristol-Warren, Coventry, Pawtucket and Lincoln, parent-friendly, tri-fold brochures have been successful in outlining wellness policy to school communities - please contact Karin or Carole if you would like to see an example of these communication tools.

After you join a local Wellness Committee, you might want to also join the statewide organization working towards healthier schools - [The RI Healthy](#)

Schools Coalition. Through meetings, events and web-based updates, you can learn more about people who are working in organizations statewide to improve RI school health.

Together, through policy and environment, ongoing education and discussion, we can make a lasting difference for all of our RI kids.

Dorothy Brayley

Executive Director, Kids First