

A New School Board Ally: Student Wellness Councils

Introduction

In *A New School Board Ally: Student Wellness Councils*, CSBA provides an overview of a district-based structure that supports the work of school boards and provides for student academic achievement. Through informed conversation, collaboration and focus on barriers to student success, student wellness councils assess the needs of young people that negatively impact learning. These councils also identify resources and procedures to address the impacts to learning, as well as support policy development, implementation and evaluation. Establishing a student wellness council is a fundamental step to demonstrate that healthy students make better learners.

You will learn:

- a) Ways Student Wellness Councils assist the governing board in the execution of their five responsibilities;
- b) The alignment of student wellness policy elements with the boards policy development cycle; and
- c) The utilization of the Student Wellness Council to bolster parent and community communication and involvement.

Student Wellness Council and the role of the board

The authorization and creation of a Student Wellness Council assists the governing board in the fulfillment of its primary role: to ensure that the school district is responsive to the community's values, beliefs and priorities. A school board fulfills this role through the execution of five responsibilities:

1. Set direction
2. Establish the structure
3. Provide support
4. Ensure accountability
5. Act as community leaders

It is within the board's execution of these responsibilities that the SWC can be of significant support. The work of the SWC assists the board in demonstrating accountability to the community by supporting the policy development cycle in the following ways:

1. Informs the board of policy needs;
2. Provides suggestions for policy language;
3. Assist in policy implementation;
4. Assist in monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of policy; and
5. Make recommendations for continuous improvement.

Citizen oversight of local government is the cornerstone of democracy in the United States. The role of the trustees who sit on locally elected school boards is to ensure that school districts are responsive to the values, beliefs and priorities of their communities. Boards fulfill this role by performing five responsibilities while working as a governance team with the superintendent to make decisions that will best serve all the students in the community.

Boards govern by:

1. Setting the direction for the community's schools

Of all the roles and responsibilities of governing boards, none is more central to the purpose of local public school governance than ensuring that a long-term vision is established for the school system. The vision reflects the consensus of the community, the board and the district staff as to what students need in order to achieve their highest potential.

2. Establishing an effective and efficient structure for the school district

The board is responsible for establishing and maintaining an organizational structure that supports the district's vision and empowers the professional staff. Although the board does not implement policies or programs, board members are responsible for:

- Employing the superintendent and setting policy for hiring of other personnel;
- Overseeing the development of and adopting policies;
- Setting a direction for and adopting curriculum;
- Establishing budget priorities, adopting the budget and overseeing facilities issues; and
- Providing direction for and accepting collective bargaining agreements.

3. Provide support

Through its behavior and actions, the board has a responsibility to support the superintendent and staff as they carry out the direction of the board. This involves:

- Acting with a professional demeanor that models the district's beliefs and vision;
- Upholding district policies the board has approved;
- Making decisions and providing resources that support mutually agreed upon priorities and goals;
- Ensuring a positive personnel climate exists; and
- Being knowledgeable enough about district efforts to explain them to the public.

4. Ensure accountability to the public

As community representatives, the board is accountable to the public for the performance of the community's schools. The board establishes systems and processes to monitor results, evaluates the school system's progress toward accomplishing the district's vision and communicates that progress to the local community. In order to ensure personnel, program and fiscal accountability, the board is responsible for:

- Evaluating the superintendent and setting policy for the evaluation of other personnel;
- Monitoring, reviewing and revising policies;
- Serving as a judicial and appeals body;
- Monitoring and adjusting district finances
- Monitoring student achievement and program effectiveness and requiring program changes as indicated;
- Monitoring the collective bargaining process; and
- Evaluation its own effectiveness through board self-evaluation.

5. Act as community leaders

The board has a responsibility to involve the community in appropriate, meaningful ways and to communicate clear information to the community about district policies, educational programs, fiscal condition and progress on goals. As the only locally elected officials chosen

solely to represent the interests of schoolchildren, board members also have a responsibility to speak out on behalf of those children. Board members are advocates for students the districts' educational programs and public education. They build support within their communities and at the state and national levels.

Effective policymaking

Healthy children are better learners. Although this is a commonly held belief, it is only recently that schools and school districts have worked to create a coordinated and more comprehensive approach to address barriers to learning. A coordinated and more comprehensive approach enables students to achieve their highest potential.

Identification of the need for a new policy or the revision of an existing policy

In order to address the need for wellness, the district governance team must assess whether new policy is necessary or current policy can be revised to respond to change in law, an educational trend, a new district vision statement or a change in the governance team.

Policy development via legislative change occurred with the passage of a federal requirement that all school districts that participate in the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program must have, and implement, local wellness policies with the goal of promoting better nutrition, physical activity, and wellness (Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act, 2004). Educational trends also support the expansion of local wellness policies to address additional physical, mental and psychosocial needs of students.

Additional impetus for new policy adoption or revision is derived from two other important developments: 1. A clearer understanding of the inextricable connection between health and learning; and 2. Trend analysis indicating that poor nutrition and physical inactivity will create a generation of children who are not expected to live as long, nor have as great a quality of life as their parents.

A systematic approach to school wellness: Student Wellness Councils

Although parents, community and school personnel have recognized the correlation between health and academics for many years, the escalated awareness of the link between health, academic achievement and future quality of life is prompting new attention to student wellness councils. The publication of *Health is Academic: A guide to coordinated school health programs* in 1998 echoed the 1987 landmark work by Allensworth and Kolby that communicated the need for school/community councils.

These school health councils were introduced as a requisite beginning to the development of a coordinated school health program/process designed to foster school/community communication, collaboration and problem solving and to construct student wellness recommendations that enable academic success for all students.

The state of California does not mandate the formation of a student wellness (sometimes also referred to as school health) councils. However, the 2003 Health Framework for California Schools encourages districts to develop school wellness/health councils to address specific needs.

“Many different types of school wellness councils can be formed; there is no single established or accepted model and no specific mandate or type of funds for school wellness councils. Rather, the concept of SWCs has been advocated by several leadership

organizations, most notably the American Cancer Society, and school districts are encouraged to develop SWCs that address their specific needs.”

Researchers estimate that if we did all that we already know to do about nutrition and physical activity, two-thirds of the cancers diagnosed annually in the United States would be prevented.

For this reason the American Cancer Society has created resources for the advancement of student wellness councils.

The establishment of a new SWC is often built upon the parent/community group formed to provide input during the wellness policy development phase (Section 204 of the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004, item 5).

The parent/community group includes parents, students and representatives of the school food authority, the school board, school administrators and the public in the development of the student wellness policy. In addition, persons who provide services for a myriad of health issues are also often included on the SWC.

Benefits of a Student Wellness Council

Schools and school districts who look seriously to their SWCs for thoughtful guidance regarding student wellness issues and the link to learning find that there are important outcomes for the school/community as well as for students and staff. These outcomes are particularly powerful when the SWC is also integral to school improvement planning. Such councils have the following benefits:

- Increase parent and community involvement in the school;
- Maximize strategic use of community health resources;
- Generate support for the school/district in developing healthier school environments;
- Provide a mechanism to research the improvement of school health policies and programs; and
- Provide citizenry with opportunities to learn about school and health/learning issues.

SWCs impact student environments and student behavioral outcomes. When SWCs are integral to school improvement planning and collectively lead to address student health issues they:

- Increase school attendance;
- Decrease discipline problems;
- Improve graduation rates;
- Lower the incidences of tobacco and alcohol use;
- Increase participation in physical fitness activities;
- Increase interest in healthier diets; and
- Lower rates of sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies.

Student Wellness Councils support the role of the board

The SWC supports the school and the school district in developing a healthier school environment. The SWC examines, informs, makes policy recommendations and assists in the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of district efforts to remove health-related barriers to student academic success. The SWC is therefore an important source of

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information about student needs and the connection between health disparities and learning. In addition to being a helpful and positive conduit among all stakeholders, SWC representatives have an important part to play in school improvement planning and can engage all sectors of a community in working to reach school and district goals.

As the ultimate decision-making body within a district, the school board has the opportunity to influence children's health. With the assistance of a SWC, districts can focus resources in new and more effective ways to address student physical health, emotional health, and social health. As a result, districts are better able to reach school and district educational goals.