School Nutrition Case Study: Tips and Examples

As schools and districts across the US implement their Local Wellness Policies, many organizations and agencies are collecting case studies of successful improvements in school nutrition environments. An excellent online example of such a collection is the Michigan Healthy School Success Story Web Site sponsored by a coalition of the American Cancer Society, Michigan Action for Healthy Kids, Michigan Department of Community Health, Michigan State University Extension, and United Dairy Industry of Michigan. You can view their stories at http://www.mihealthtools.org/schoolsuccess/

Sharing your school’s nutrition success story has benefits for your department and for other schools too! Your program benefits from the exposure and recognition for healthy changes; other schools can put your good ideas to work in their programs!

The specific format of a case study varies from one group to another. The organization or individual collecting the case studies will usually specify the format for the information they want. They also may provide a specific template for a school to use. One example of an online template can be found of the Mississippi Office of Healthy Schools Web site at http://www.healthyschoolsms.org/ohs_main/success/. The template is also available as a PDF at http://www.healthyschoolsms.org/ohs_main/documents/successful_contract.pdf

Whatever the format, all case studies have several important things in common:

- **Accurate contact information**: Be sure to include an Email address and school nutrition Web site (if available).
- **Descriptive information about your school/district**: Nutrition directors are always interested in the number of students and rate of free/reduced participation. With this information, they can get a rough idea of how your school/district compares to theirs.
- **Details of your successes**: Describe the changes in your meals, foodservice, vending, nutrition education, and/or wellness activities. Provide as much detail in as few words as possible. People want to hear your success story, but everyone is busy!
- **Keys to success**: People also want to know how you did what you did. As you write a case study, take a minute to reflect on how you were able to make the changes that you have made. Your words of wisdom could be about the attitude of your staff or team, grants you received, individuals/groups you partnered with, or helpful resources that you used. Think about a few things that really helped you succeed – things that might help another school make the same sorts of changes.

Here are two examples of school nutrition case studies with different formats for different purposes. The first, written for an online course, is much shorter than the second. When you are writing your case study, you can use these examples and the tips above to tell your story in the most positive and useful way possible.

**One more tip**: Start putting your success story together now – even before someone asks you for one. A case study makes a nice handout for local presentations – and, when you do see a call for a success story or a case study, you’ll be ready to go!!
School Wellness on the “Frontier”

From a 2008 online course developed by the National Food Service Management Institute
Meeting The Wellness Challenge: Becoming A Wellness Champion In Your School
http://www.nfsmi.org/ (note – use specific URL if available)

Let’s take a look at a school nutrition director who has taken steps to address child health problems through School Wellness policies and activities – in Green River, Wyoming.

Out on the range in Wyoming, Dorothy Turner, SNS, is the nutrition director for a small district (2,500 students, 20% free and reduced) spread over a very large area (5,250 square miles). Turner, a past president of the Wyoming School Nutrition Association, a member of Wyoming Action for Healthy Kids, and a trainer for Healthy Edge, has met her geographic challenges head on. Thanks to her efforts, Truman Elementary School was the second school in the nation to receive Gold recognition in USDA’s HealthierUS School Challenge.

With strong support from the Sweetwater County School District #2 Wellness Committee (30+ members in different schools), Dorothy has worked to put the committee’s vision into action: *All staff and students will be educated to promote a healthy, active lifestyle.*

To achieve their vision, the committee has worked to implement several changes in Sweetwater County School District #2. These include:

- **Wellness policy with strong guidelines for healthful options** in classes, concession stands, vending machines, and fundraising. The local community recreation center has adopted similar guidelines for their vending machines.
- **Session on the Wellness Policy and Teachers** at the professional development days beginning the school year, presented by Nancy Eklund, Chairperson of Wellness Committee, and Dorothy Turner, Food Service Director. The Food Service Program catered the refreshments – and all items served met the “Criteria for Sales/Service of A La Carte and/or Vended Items” for the HealthierUS School Challenge.
- **Workshops for school nutrition staff** on: (1) increasing whole grains in baked goods, and (2) designing ‘signature’ sandwiches and salads to increase fruit/vegetable intake (e.g., Green River Fajita Salad, fiery Hot Chick Salad, and Mandarin Chicken Salad Sandwich). With the healthy changes, meal participation increased 20% from 2003 through 2007, even with a 5% decline in student enrollment.
- **Wellness Summits at each school** with energy drink discussions, calcium education, My Pyramid displays, and blood pressure measurements, as well as fitness activities like speed stacking and Dance Dance Revolution® (DDR).
- **New and upgraded physical education (PE) equipment** (pedometers, DDR games, mountain bikes, cardio-equipment, weights, etc.) using grant funds, plus more PE staff and increased minutes of PE class for K-4 students.
- **Healthier choices at Booster Club tailgate parties and a Wellness Fair at the 2007 Homecoming**, including lunch (catered by the Food Service Program) followed by a pep rally and fair with health information, wellness stations, and fitness fun (e.g., beach volleyball, jump ropes, and using pedometers). The milk truck parked by the football field and football players handed out milk to all elementary students.
• **Sweetwater County School District #2 Wellness Committee** has been identified as a promising example of Local Wellness Policies, by a project on *Early Assessment of Programs and Policies to Prevent Childhood Obesity* (sponsored by Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and others). The Green River school district is one of only six districts nationwide selected for a site visit in 2007.

For more information, menus, and newsletters, visit:

Sweetwater County School District #2 Foodservice Department
[http://www.sw2.k12.wy.us/foodservice/default.aspx](http://www.sw2.k12.wy.us/foodservice/default.aspx)

Contact Dorothy Turner at:
TURNERD@sw2.k12.wy.us

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**Fairfax County Public Schools, Fairfax, Virginia**

• 166,000 students in a diverse district near Washington, DC
• 19 percent of students eligible for free and reduced-price school meals

Approaches to improving school nutrition environments
• Influence food and beverage contracts
• Establish nutrition standards for competitive foods
• Make more healthful foods and beverages available
• Adopt marketing techniques to promote healthful choices
• Limit student access to competitive foods

**Words of wisdom**
Our vision drives all the decisions for our program. The visions states:
The Office of Food and Nutrition Services, Fairfax County Public Schools, will assist in developing excellence in each and every student. In an atmosphere that values diversity and human resources, we will be the best Food and Nutrition Services program in the nation by providing students food and nutrition knowledge, skills, and values they will need for a healthy body in an ever-changing global society.

**Key changes and results**
Reported by Penny McConnell, MS, RD, SFNS
Director, Food and Nutrition Services

Since the beginning of the foodservice operations in the 1940s, Fairfax County has had a strong foundation in nutrition. This means that they have not had to make major changes to insure that students have access to healthful food and beverage options.
• Healthful vending and à la carte options are part of Fairfax’s nutrition vision. Since
the 1980s, the district has had a strict competitive foods policy: “Nothing can be sold
in competition with the school foodservice program during the entire school day.”
• All vending in Fairfax schools is done through the Department of Food and Nutrition
Services – in partnership with the school administration. The department determined
that it was necessary to manage its own vending in order to preserve the nutrition
integrity of its program.
• The Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) vending program ($3 million in yearly
sales) includes 1,200 machines in 239 schools and offices, and 14 community
recreation centers for after school sales. The program, which constantly searches for
healthier products to vend in its machines, has introduced baked chips, fruit/granola
bars, milk, and 100% juices.
• FCPS foodservice has developed its own brand, Energy Zone, complete with a mascot
(EZ Bear), official colors (fuchsia, teal, and black), and label for all its packaged
products (such as EZ sandwich wraps and EZ water). For example, Energy Zone
bottled water has become a business itself with 40,000 cases sold in 2002.
• Nutrient analysis and ingredient information are integral parts of the Energy Zone
offerings. The nutrient analyses (calories, protein, and fat) of the most popular items
are posted in the cafeterias. All other details are available upon request. FCPS is
currently working with its suppliers to address trans fatty acid content in products.

Keys to success
• INNOVATIVE ATTITUDE: Be fluid and flexible to meet the challenges of a
diverse student body and a constantly changing food marketplace.
• CUSTOMER FOCUS: Remember that students eat with their eyes; they will eat
what they are served if it is attractive, colorful, and offered in a friendly atmosphere.
• POSITIVE PARTNERSHIPS: Everything depends on partnerships and rapport
with students and their parents, the school community, and the food industry.
• NUTRITION INTEGRITY: Always “walk the talk” to provide customers with the
most nutritious choices possible. As the Office of Food and Nutrition Services motto
says: “We Talk Nutrition. We Serve Nutrition. We Teach Nutrition.”

Description
The FCPS District is the twelfth largest in the US. The Department of Food and Nutrition
Services is a nonprofit $50 million business, serving approximately 150,000 customers
daily at 238 schools, as well as day care centers, private schools, senior citizen programs,
Head Start Programs, and others. Lunch and à la carte items are available in all schools,
and breakfast is offered in 154 schools.

Director Penny McConnell is constantly searching for innovative ways to meet the needs
of her customers and to help them be healthier. The Energy Zone brand was designed to
be kid-friendly and promote positive choices at the same time. According to McConnell,
a good rapport with the food industry is essential if you want to offer students the healthy
choices at a reasonable price. For example, she had a student request for calcium-fortified
juice. At first, she was able to find just a couple of 100% juices with calcium. Now, after
working with the supplier, all FCPS juice products are calcium-fortified.
Education is an important part of the *Energy Zone* concept. Foodservice complements classroom lessons with kids’ cooking classes, and the *EZ* Bear is working hard to promote physical activity.

**Future plans**

- Continue to be recognized as the voice of child nutrition for the district by working with other departments and being visible at all times.
- Collaborate with school administrators to find alternative solutions to problems (such as trying to feed 1,200 high school students in one lunch period).
- Become a more effective nutrition resource for families by providing nutrition columns for parent newsletters and expanding website information for families.
- Examine vending options in depth to investigate what new products are available or could be developed.

**For more information, contact:**

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Fairfax County Schools, *Energy Zone Center*

Food and Nutrition Services

6840 Industrial Boulevard

Springfield, Virginia 22151

Phone: 703-813-4800

[http://www.fcps.edu/fs/food/](http://www.fcps.edu/fs/food/)

**Additional resources:**

As more schools develop, implement and evaluate wellness plans, more case studies will become available. Here are two sources for additional information:

USDA Team Nutrition:

[http://teamnutrition.usda.gov/Healthy/wellnesspolicy_examples.html](http://teamnutrition.usda.gov/Healthy/wellnesspolicy_examples.html)

Healthy Meals Resource System (search on wellness) page at