Outcomes from a Montana School Wellness in Action Mini-Grant Program and Implications for Sustaining Long Term Policy Support

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Objective

- To provide a financial incentive to support the implementation of the federally mandated school wellness policy in Montana school districts.
- To learn effective methods and best practices that school districts utilize for building and sustaining a healthy school nutrition environment.

Methods

A summary of wellness projects, leadership methods and specific outcomes was developed by analyzing data from the final reports and follow-up surveys from three cycles of the School Wellness in Action Mini-Grant Program. Key factors, best practices, and implications for long-term implementation of the local wellness policy and/or sustainability of a student wellness initiative were identified.

- a total of 34 school districts received mini-grants.
- 30 (97%) completed the final report.
- 20 (62%) completed a follow-up survey.
- Grants ranged from $1,000–$5,000.

Results

The success for determining sustainability of wellness initiatives and long term policy support was obtained by the following tools:

- Mini-Grant Final Reports
- Post (one year) Follow Up Survey to mini-grant’s coordinators.
- Percentages of responses and comments obtained by the reports, surveys, and the number of schools that applied for a Healthier US School Challenge award were also utilized.

Key Factors for Success of Long Term Policy Support for Wellness Initiatives

- Active School Health/Wellness Committee that meets at least 3 times per year. Presence of a wellness champion.
- Administrator, staff or community buy-in.
- Commitment to student wellness initiatives.
- Financial support and technical assistance.

Barriers to Long Term Policy Support for Wellness Initiatives

- Lack of buy-in from staff; change in school leadership.
- Lack of time; other issues take priority over wellness.
- Lack of funding for wellness leader or projects.
- Lack of communication and/or enforcement of wellness policies.

Conclusions and Implications

Results from this project indicate:

- A competitive mini-grant program is an effective method for jump-starting school wellness initiatives in rural school districts.
- Funding a part-time wellness coordinator is a best practice that can build long-term support with grassroots backing.
- With leadership from a local school wellness champion and mini-grant funds, positive changes in school wellness policy can be achieved.
- Continual funding is often necessary to sustain action steps but can be obtained by local funds with positive mini-grant outcomes.

Popular Funding Uses of Wellness Mini-Grants

1. Fund a part-time wellness coordinator to lead the school health committee or wellness project.
2. Support a healthy snack initiative or strengthen compliance to the USDA’s Smart Snack rule.
3. Fund farm-to-school projects: garden-based nutrition education, field trips, or exploration of local food procurement.
4. Increase physical activity opportunities for students.
5. Provide professional development for school staff.

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50% of the schools that completed a follow up survey reported they were able to maintain a School Wellness Coordinator.

Learn more about local school wellness policy at:

Montana School Wellness Initiatives

70% of the schools that completed a follow up survey reported they continued most to all of the school wellness projects funded by the mini grant.