



JOHN W. GARDNER CENTER
for Youth and Their Communities

Healthy Schools Initiative: Implementation Study in Four San Mateo County School Districts

Executive Summary

Study Background

The Sequoia Healthcare District (SHD), in partnership with four San Mateo county school districts, launched the Healthy Schools Initiative (HSI) in August 2010.¹ The initiative focuses on enhancing health and wellness programs and activities in local schools using the Center for Disease Controls' (CDC) Coordinated School Health (CSH) model. To that end, the initiative provides funding in each of the four school districts to support: 1) a wellness coordinator to assist implementation of the CSH model, 2) wellness programs, 3) wellness curriculum, and 4) health-related staff positions such as nurses and counselors.

Over the last two years, the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities (JGC) at Stanford University has partnered with SHD and the school districts to conduct an implementation study of the initiative. The study was designed to explore the ways in which the Healthy Schools Initiative has affected the coordination of health and wellness programs and activities in schools and districts and how this, in turn, has influenced awareness and accessibility of programming.

Research Methods

Researchers conducted nearly 100 interviews and focus groups with school and district staff, parents, and high school students. JGC collected data at a total of eight schools – two in each of the four partner school districts. Study sites were selected in cooperation with initiative partners and represented schools with the highest levels of economic and ethnic diversity and the greatest involvement by HSI wellness coordinators at the time of data collection.

Study Findings

- Nearly 100% of study participants valued health and wellness in schools.
- Study participants who were familiar with HSI believed that the initiative positively influenced awareness of health and wellness in their schools; however, just 25% of those interviewed were knowledgeable about the initiative.

¹ Belmont-Redwood Shores School District, Redwood City School District, San Carlos School District, Sequoia Union High School District

- All study schools coordinated health and wellness programs and activities prior to the implementation of HSI; where wellness coordinators became involved, coordination was described as more strategic and intentional.
- Teachers and other school staff who were committed to student wellness played an important role in increasing student access to health and wellness information, programs, activities, and resources.
- As reflected in the illustration below, our analyses revealed that effective and purposeful coordination was associated with increased integration of health and wellness programs within and across schools and districts, reaching more students equitably and leveraging resources.



Implications and Considerations

Findings from this study have actionable practice and policy implications:

Increasing knowledge about the Healthy Schools Initiative has the potential to foster increased awareness of health and wellness. Study participants familiar with HSI believed that the initiative generated increased awareness of health and wellness in their schools. Findings suggest that increasing awareness of the Healthy Schools Initiative, its goals, and the wellness coordinator among school staff and families may support stronger implementation and increased awareness of health and wellness issues more broadly.

Improving coordination can result in increased integration of health and wellness activities, reaching more students equitably. Informal wellness champions, teachers, and other staff collaborated with one another to integrate wellness activities in their schools and districts prior to HSI. Our analyses confirmed that where wellness coordinators established relationships with these individuals, supported their activities, and invited them to join new efforts, more students were reached. Findings suggest that wellness coordinators can further capitalize on existing efforts and collaborate with school and district staff, as well as students and families, to pursue common health and wellness goals.

Supporting teachers is essential to school-wide wellness efforts. Across all school districts, study participants agreed that teachers play an important role in connecting students with health and wellness resources and modeling healthy lifestyle choices. While all teachers believed health and wellness should be addressed in schools, they reported having little time, resources, and support to pursue these activities and were challenged by existing channels of communication and referral systems. Identifying opportunities to support already overburdened teachers in these areas may positively contribute to school-wide wellness efforts and reach more students.

Involving youth in planning and implementing wellness activities can result in increasing student access to health-related information and resources. At the high school level, students who were involved with their schools' health and wellness efforts were seen by their peers as important sources of information regarding wellness programs, activities, and resources. Identifying new opportunities to include youth of all ages in developmentally appropriate leadership roles related to school health may have the positive effect of reaching more students.

School district support of wellness advisory committees can enhance coordination and leverage resources. All school districts had a wellness advisory committee in place and each committee had a different historical context, varying degrees of alignment with district wellness goals, and varying levels of collaboration with district and school staff. Identifying opportunities for wellness advisory committees to set and pursue common health and wellness goals in collaboration with schools and school districts may contribute to improved coordination for the benefit students and families.

Investing in effective coordination and integration of health and wellness can leverage valuable resources. Districts face unprecedented budget challenges and have been grappling with the effects of high-stakes testing for the last decade. While integrating health and wellness into schools is valued by all, it may be challenging to identify and promote it as a priority. Given this challenging context, schools and districts need flexibility in how they implement health and wellness programming in order to meet the unique needs of their students and cultivate a culture of wellness. They could also benefit from support in advocating for meaningful policies to advance this work at the local and state levels.

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