Tips from the Field: Re-Energizing a District Wellness Committee

From Slice & Dice March 2016

An Interview with Caitlin Lazarski, a food service director for the Newburgh Enlarged City School District (NECSD). In this urban district in Newburgh, NY, there’s over 11,000 students in 14 schools, and a free/reduced priced meal rate of 72%. When Caitlin joined NECSD in 2014, the district's wellness committee had not met in many years. She worked with the local cooperative extension, Eat Smart New York, to re-establish a functioning, working wellness committee with a group of committed school district employees.

Kelly Beckwith (KB) from AASA interviewed Caitlin in November 2015.

KB: What was the impetus for you to re-establish your district's wellness committee?

Caitlin: When I started as the Food Service Director at NECSD, the wellness committee was combined with the district's Health and Safety Committee. Although this committee has value for the district, it was not focused on promoting student wellness. The Health and Safety Committee was also lacking key members such as parents, community partners, and teachers. As a Registered Dietitian with a background in child nutrition, I knew that a revitalized Wellness Committee would be beneficial to help advocate for the overall health and success of the students in our district. One focus that brought many to the committee was around our alternative breakfast programs and the grant from AASA.

KB: As mentioned, your district received a grant from AASA, The School Superintendents Association, to increase breakfast participation. Why did you decide to include this breakfast work as part of the wellness committee?
Caitlin: As a part of our grant with AASA, we created a School Breakfast Team. This team was comprised of our Superintendent, the Food Service Director, the Executive Director of Buildings and Grounds, a Secondary Principal, our District Communication Specialist, a school nurse, and our community partners from Eat Smart NY, the Orange County Department of Health, and the American Dairy Association. We decided that the best way to start our newly formed Wellness Committee was to merge it with our already formed School Breakfast Team. We focused wellness efforts for our first year on establishing and monitoring the alternative breakfast programs. The combined group allowed for more feedback on the breakfast program and gave the Wellness Committee a first task. It was a win-win for both groups.

**KB: What assistance does Eat Smart New York offer to the wellness committee?**

Caitlin: One of the biggest challenges I knew I would face was recruiting members for "another meeting." Our partners at Cornell Cooperative Extension/Eat Smart NY, Shayna and Stefanie have taken the lead in organizing meeting objectives and facilitating meetings. Shayna suggested a variety of recruitment methods and we made it an ongoing process. They will do this for the whole school year and gradually turn the leadership role over to me. So far our objectives have included recruitment of additional key members (parents, board members, and students), establishing a regular meeting time and day, and developing a mission and vision for the committee. Our Superintendent is passionate about the role of a mission and vision and how it relates to the work of the district and committee. The mission our committee decided on is "Empowering the NECSD community to embrace a culture of wellness."

In addition, Eat Smart NY was a huge support throughout the grant application process for AASA and the communication efforts leading up to the kickoff of our district wide alternative breakfast program. They provided newsletters for our families, marketing and communication efforts throughout other Newburgh community agencies, and training and support for our teachers and staff on the benefits of school breakfast.

**KB: Has the wellness committee had any successful outcomes so far?**
Caitlin: We have successfully switched over all of our in cafeteria breakfast programs to alternative feeding models including traditional breakfast in the classroom for K-5, grab and go breakfast for 6-8, and reimbursable breakfast vending in our high schools. So far we have increased participation in the breakfast programs from 35% to 56% and we are continuing to expand our reach every day.

KB: What advice do you have for people who might want to start up their own district-level wellness committee?

Caitlin: One of the biggest pieces of advice was to set a meeting time that worked for the majority of people and stick to it. Our meetings are an hour long on the first Wednesday of the month. We make sure to be respectful of our member's time. We have an agenda and a purpose for meeting, and we take time to celebrate wellness related success. People are more likely to participate in a meeting if they know what to expect and they can see progress being made.

Caitlin and Colleagues at NECSD enjoying smoothies.
Do you have ideas, questions or concerns about nutrition policy and practices at school? What resources would be helpful? Be sure to look for additional opportunities to learn more with AFHK webinars and online resources. Look for more updates regarding wellness policies in upcoming newsletters. For references, further information, or to share your experiences, comments or questions, please contact: Jill Camber Davidson.

Hungry for More?

If you haven't already, sign up for your own issues of Slice & Dice School Nutrition and learn about effective nutrition policy and procedures. Sign up now.
Mark your calendars for these AFHK Webinars!

Action for Healthy Kids offers a wide variety of virtual learning opportunities. From school breakfast programs and recess before lunch to wellness policy implementation and more, most sessions are of no cost and are open to any interested individual or group. Register using the information below!

**TX: SHACS in Action - Partnering for School Health**
(Feb)
Tuesday, February 23, 2016 (11:30AM - 12:30PM)
Hosted by Texas AFHK
Learn about the 2015 SHAC Winners as they share their models. Tuesday, February 23, 2016, 11:30 AM-12:30 PM CT (60 minutes)

**School Breakfast: Creative Breakfast Service Models**
Tuesday, February 23, 2016 (3:00PM - 4:00PM)
Hosted by Action for Healthy Kids
Join us for this webinar to learn creative alternative models that have been effective in other schools. Tuesday, February 23, 2016, 4:00-5:00 ET, 3:00-4:00 CT, 2:00-3:00 MT, 1:00-2:00 PT (60 minutes)
FL - A Conversation with FL Healthy District Coordinated School Health Component Area Experts
Wednesday, February 24, 2016 (1:00PM - 2:00PM)
Hosted by FL Action for Healthy Kids and FL Coordinated School Health Partnership
The second webinar of a two part series to provide information and technical assistance for the Florida Healthy District Self-Assessment (FHDSA). This webinar will provide attendees the opportunity to participate in an open dialogue with Coordinate School Health (CSH) component area experts. Wednesday February 24, 2016, 1:00-2:00 PM ET

2016-2017 School Breakfast Grant Opportunities Webinar
Tuesday, March 01, 2016 (3:00PM - 4:00PM)
Hosted by Action for Healthy Kids
Join this webinar to learn more about school breakfast grant opportunities for the 2016-2017 school year from Action for Healthy Kids. Receive tips for applying and writing a grant. Tuesday, March 1, 2016, 3:00-4:00 ET, 2:00-3:00 CT, 1:00-2:00 MT, 12:00-1:00 PT

2016-2017 Game On Grants Webinar
Wednesday, March 02, 2016 (2:00PM - 3:00PM)
Hosted by Action for Healthy Kids
Thanks to our partners CSX Transportation, IU Health, Tyson Foods, Materne Go Go Squeeze and Saputo, Action for Healthy Kids is pleased to offer grants for the 2016-2017 school year as part of our School Grants for Healthy Kids program. Join this webinar to learn more about our Game On grants that support physical activity and nutrition programming. Grants ranging from $500 to $2,500 are available. Wednesday, March 2, 2016, 3:00-4:00 ET; 2:00-3:00 CT; 1:00-2:00 MT; 12:00-1:00 PT
Wellness Wednesday: Growing Your School Gardens
Wednesday, March 09, 2016 (3:00PM - 3:30PM)
Hosted by Action for Healthy Kids
Join Action for Healthy Kids for our March Monthly AFHK Wellness Wednesday Webinar to learn more about growing your school garden. Wednesday, March 9, 2016, 4:00-4:30 ET, 3:00-3:30 CT, 2:00-2:30 MT, 1:00-1:30 PT (30 minutes)

Engaging Your Parent Community in School Health and Wellness
Tuesday, March 15, 2016 (1:00PM - 2:00PM)
Hosted by Action for Healthy Kids
Parents are largely an untapped resource in the movement towards healthier schools. This webinar will feature success stories, effective strategies and practical pointers for engaging parents in your school community as powerful partners in your school wellness efforts. Tuesday, March 15, 2016, 2:00-3:00 ET, 1:00-2:00 CT, 12:00-1:00 MT, 11:00-noon PT

TX: SHACS in Action - Partnering for School Health (March)
Tuesday, March 22, 2016 (11:30AM - 12:30PM)
Hosted by Texas AFHK
Want to know what an effective nutrition policy should look like? What type of policy you need for vending and fund raising? Join our March webinar! Tuesday, March 22, 2016, 11:30 AM-12:30 PM CT (60 minutes)
Register for any of these webinars by clicking on the webinar name or the register now button.