



## CASE STUDY

# Chicago: Putting Policy into Practice

Local School Wellness Policy Implementation Using Game On



# Every Kid Healthy and Ready to Learn

Great strides have been made in improving child health, including a leveling off of the childhood obesity rate after years of steady increases. In addition, research continues to demonstrate the link between healthy eating, physical activity and academic achievement through what Action for Healthy Kids (AFHK) calls the Learning Connection. Children who are physically active and eat nutritious foods during the school day not only have better overall health, but are better prepared to learn. However, more work is needed to not just level off childhood obesity rates, but also reverse trends and ensure all students are healthy and ready to learn.

Children spend more than 1,200 hours each year in school — the most time spent anywhere outside of the home. Schools have the opportunity — even the responsibility — to teach and model healthful eating and physical activity, both in theory and in practice.

Local school wellness policies are an important tool for school districts to promote student wellness, ensure regular physical activity opportunities for students and provide assurance that school meals meet the minimum federal nutrition standards.

Districts and schools need support in implementing nutrition and physical activity policies and programs that work. *Chicago: Putting Policy into Practice* was designed as a pilot program to allow AFHK to support 20 elementary (K-8) schools in implementing healthy eating and physical activity initiatives to align with the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) Local School Wellness, Healthy Snack and Beverage, and Physical Education policies. The pilot utilized AFHK's Game On program, which was created specifically as a framework to help schools implement and improve their health and wellness environments.

*Chicago: Putting Policy into Practice* demonstrated how schools nationwide can utilize Game On as an effective three-year model for school-level wellness programming and district-level policy implementation in a way that brings schools, families and community partners together to help schools become healthier places for our nation's children.



## How Action for Healthy Kids Works to Create Healthier Schools

Since its founding in 2002, Action for Healthy Kids has worked to mobilize a nationwide network of school professionals, parents and volunteers to implement healthy eating and physical activity programming in schools. Our network of state teams promotes grassroots efforts to employ new systems, inspires new policies and changes the health environments and practices of our schools. We provide a full spectrum of resources, including grants for school breakfast, nutrition education and physical activity,

as well as training for school health teams, administrators, teachers and other school professionals, parents and community members. Our comprehensive flagship program, Game On, provides all the information and resources schools need to host a successful school health program that also earns them recognition as a health-promoting school. **AFHK programs and resources have benefited more than 15.1 million children in 30,000 schools across the country.**

## Chicago Makes the Learning Connection

In a study by AFHK's Urban School Wellness Coalition comparing CPS health and wellness policies with 19 other large, urban districts, CPS had the third strongest and most comprehensive policy.<sup>1</sup> However, Illinois has the ninth highest rate of childhood obesity in the country, with 19.3% of children 10–17 years old qualifying as overweight or obese.<sup>2</sup> Students in CPS schools are disproportionately affected, with 24.9% of students qualifying as obese.<sup>3</sup>

CPS created an initiative called LearnWELL to support schools' progress towards becoming health promoting and served as a CPS district-wide recognition program during the 2013–2014 and 2014–2015 school years. Schools that met the policy components outlined in the CPS Local School Wellness and Healthy Snack and Beverage policies were identified as LearnWELL schools and recognized as such on the CPS annual progress report card, a public document that outlines how a school is performing. In 2015–2016, LearnWELL was incorporated into a larger initiative, Healthy CPS, a comprehensive initiative that recognizes schools excelling in LearnWELL, chronic disease management, health and physical education instruction and school health services.

**For more information on LearnWELL visit [cps.edu/Programs/HealthyCPS](http://cps.edu/Programs/HealthyCPS).**

As one of five strategic partners of the CPS Office of Student Health and Wellness (OSHW), AFHK has supported district-wide health and wellness initiatives since 2011 by providing funding, training and other resources to support school-level implementation of district wellness policies. When CPS passed its Local School Wellness and Healthy Snack and Beverage policies and made a district-wide commitment to support the health of its students, AFHK

and the CPS OSHW teamed up to support policy implementation in 20 schools through *Chicago: Putting Policy into Practice* beginning in January 2013. A three-year program funded by the Otho S.A. Sprague Memorial Institute, *Chicago: Putting Policy into Practice* took place between the 2013–2016 school years, gradually expanding to support schools in implementing all school health policies and the overall integration of health and wellness, with the ultimate goal of ensuring schools met the wellness criteria outlined in LearnWELL.

## Chicago Gets its Game On

During the 2012–2013 school year, AFHK worked closely with the CPS OSHW to recruit 20 schools within five of 17 CPS networks, all located on the Southwest and West sides of Chicago. Common school characteristics included:

- » high rates of childhood overweight and obesity (40–53%)<sup>2</sup>;
- » a large number of students qualifying for free or reduced-price meals<sup>4</sup> (average 92.8%); and
- » an absence of other health and wellness community partners to support wellness policy implementation.

In January 2013, AFHK staff reached out to schools to onboard them to *Chicago: Putting Policy into Practice* and AFHK's Game On program. Developed in partnership with the United States Department of Health and Human Services and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Game On is a free online guide which includes more than 80 Eat Better and Move More activities designed to educate and engage students, staff and families in healthy practices, and to enhance policies so that increased physical activity and better nutrition become sustainable parts of the school environment.

## Chicago Public Schools adopted the following school wellness policies to align with the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010:

### Local School Wellness Policy

Addresses criteria related to school wellness infrastructure, school food, student rewards and punishments, nutrition education, physical education, recess and other physical activity.<sup>5</sup> (Oct. 2012)

### Healthy Snack and Beverage Policy

Establishes nutritional standards for foods sold or served on school grounds (outside of the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program) by addressing criteria related to vending machines, a la carte lines, student celebrations and fundraisers, and reinforcing criteria related to student rewards and punishments.<sup>6</sup> (Nov. 2012)

### Physical Education Policy

Requires that all students in grades K-12 receive regular physical education and also sets standards for high quality physical education programs for the district.<sup>7</sup> (Jan. 2014)





## Taking Recess Indoors

Chicago is known for its cold winters. **Von Linne Elementary School** made sure students got 60 minutes of physical activity each day, even in bad weather, by implementing active indoor recess. The wellness team created physical activity kits that included exercise playing cards, jump ropes, foam fitness dice, foam balls and hop scotch carpets. PE teacher Isaac Vega hosted a professional development session for all recess staff to teach them about the importance of keeping kids active, demonstrate how to use the materials in the kits and review physical activities that work well in small spaces. Now Von Linne students stay active no matter what Mother Nature has in store.

The ultimate goal of Game On is for schools to get nationally recognized as a health-promoting school through the USDA's HealthierUS Schools Challenge: Smarter Lunchrooms (HUSC:SL) initiative or the Alliance for a Healthier Generation's Healthy Schools Program. Such recognition programs serve as a way for schools to celebrate health and wellness and help cement a school's wellness identity, a valuable marketing tool.

When LearnWELL was launched in 2013, applying for HUSC:SL was part of CPS' requirements to become recognized as a LearnWELL school. By completing the six steps of Game On, pilot schools were well positioned to achieve LearnWELL recognition.

## Game On as a Three-Year Model for Success

As schools face many pressures and competing educational and budgetary priorities, approaching health and wellness using Game On as a three-year model enables schools to incorporate these activities gradually and for optimum effectiveness. Through *Chicago: Putting Policy into Practice*, schools focused on wellness infrastructure in Year One, parent and community engagement in Year Two and sustaining school wellness initiatives in Year Three.

### Year One: School Wellness Infrastructure.

AFHK worked with each school to build wellness teams (**Step 1**) and trained schools on the importance of a healthy school environment, LearnWELL requirements, Game On and health and wellness resources available through AFHK and CPS. AFHK helped schools assess their current health environment (**Step 2**) to understand areas of strength and opportunity. Schools then created action plans (**Step 3**) to build upon their strengths and address areas of non-alignment with LearnWELL. Finally,

schools implemented their action plans, including implementing two Game On Eat Better activities and two Move More activities (**Step 4**) such as healthy food taste tests, classroom physical activity breaks, nutrition education and before/after-school physical activity programs. AFHK provided ongoing technical assistance throughout the school year to make sure schools had the resources needed to host their Eat Better and Move More activities.

### Year Two: Parent and Community Engagement.

Parents play a crucial role in supporting the health of children at home and at school. Engaging parents in school activities supports them in advocating for their children and shaping a healthy school environment.<sup>8</sup> Schools incorporated parents and the greater community in school wellness initiatives (**Step 5**) as well as continued to build upon Year One successes.

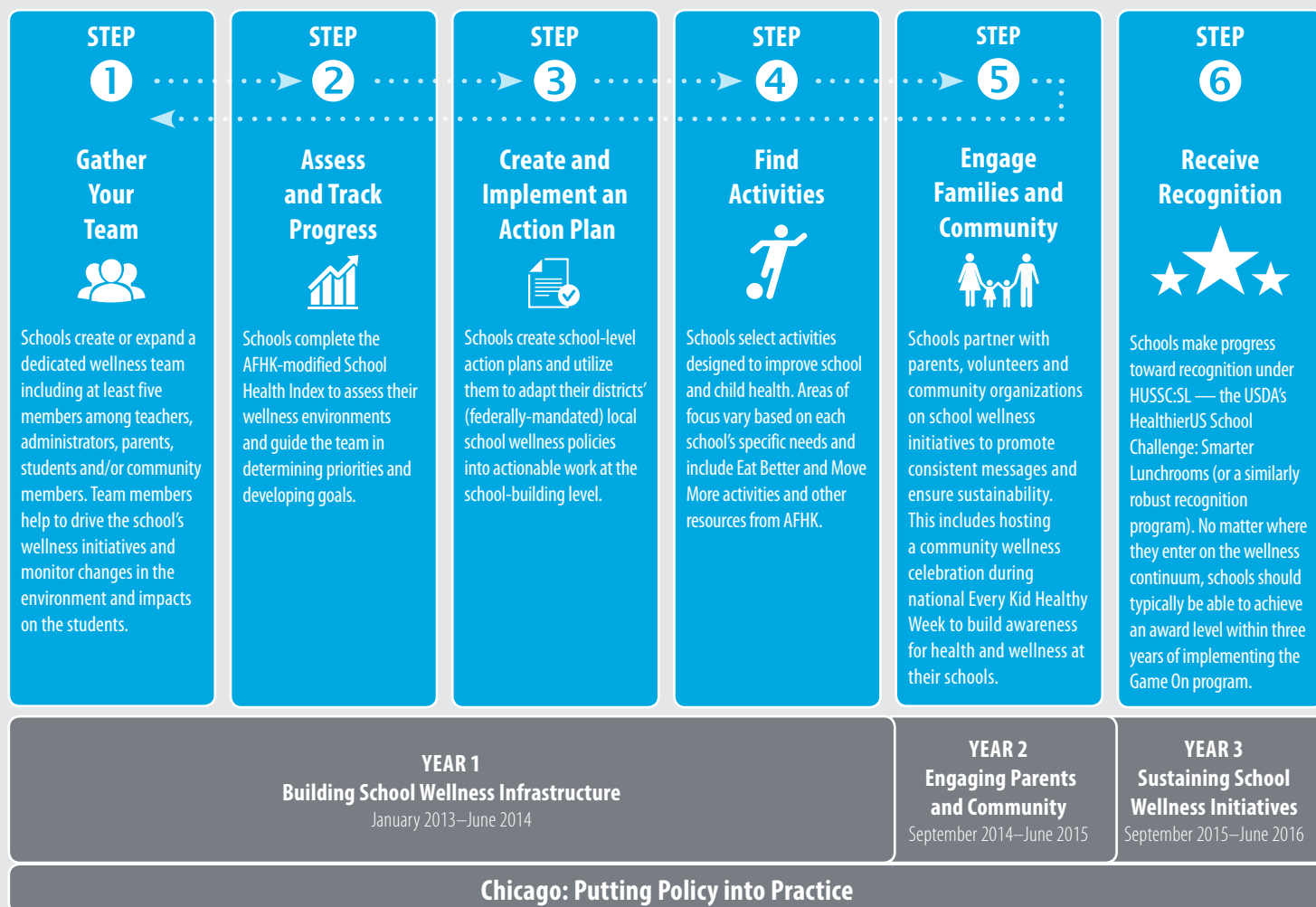
AFHK supported schools in identifying existing parent engagement strategies where health and wellness could be added, as well as new opportunities where parents could get involved, including:

- » inviting parents to join the school wellness team
- » presenting on health and wellness at Local School Council meetings
- » sharing health and wellness information via school newsletters, websites and at parent meetings
- » working with parents to provide healthy and non-food options for school celebrations; and
- » hosting school wellness events for students and their families.

In addition to engaging parents, AFHK worked closely with schools to identify community partners that could support health and wellness needs.

# GAME ON ACTION FOR HEALTHY KIDS

## Three-Year Model for Success



During the 2013–2014 and 2014–2015 school years, schools did not receive funding for participating in Chicago: Putting Policy into Practice. Rather, AFHK developed wellness kits that schools selected to support activities outlined in their action plans. These kits included equipment, materials and gift certificates to use for physical activity equipment and taste testing. During 2015–2016, schools not only received a wellness kit, but they also had the opportunity to apply for grant funding to support particular components of their action plan.

“Students have an opportunity to practice the skills they learn in PE with their classmates during outdoor recess.”

Luis Arroyo, PE Teacher  
Wellness Champion  
Yates Elementary School Program

Community engagement strategies included:

- » hosting inclusive events, e.g. health fairs and health screenings
- » inviting community organizations already working at the school to join the wellness team
- » inviting community organizations to present at parent meetings and school health fairs; and
- » developing partnerships with new organizations to institute health and wellness programming.

Finally, AFHK supported schools as they integrated other health services into their programming, such as the CPS Dental Health Program and Vision Exam Program, two vital and free preventative programs offered throughout the district. Identifying dental and vision issues early on in children can ultimately improve attendance rates and academic outcomes.<sup>9</sup> AFHK provided wellness teams with training on these programs and associated policies and materials such as consent forms and parent letters for wellness teams to share with school staff and parents. Though not part of Game On or LearnWELL, the increased focus on health issues set up schools for success

with Healthy CPS, CPS’ new comprehensive health and wellness initiative introduced during the following school year.

### Year Three: Sustainable School Wellness Initiatives.

Schools continued to work through **Steps 1–5** and support student participation in the Dental Health Program and Vision Exam Program, with regular support from AFHK. Schools reported that more teachers were using non-food rewards and healthier celebrations, and fewer students were being held out of recess. Implementation of the wellness policies was more consistently implemented in Year Three as compared to previous years. Additionally, schools worked toward full alignment with LearnWELL (**Step 6**) to celebrate their efforts and foster the sustainability of school wellness initiatives.

Sustainability efforts also included establishing the school wellness team as a mandatory school committee and developing action plans for the 2016–2017 school year. AFHK also worked closely with the CPS OSHW to create a guide to support schools in integrating health and wellness priorities into school improvement plans.

## A Whole New Approach to School Health

Chicago’s **Drummond Montessori School** prides itself on its diversity. Each school year starts with an outdoor picnic where families bring dishes to share that represent their culture, traveling around the world from table to table. Parent and school wellness champion

Julie Fisher thought the food-focused event was the perfect opportunity to teach both kids and adults some lessons about healthy eating. In addition to encouraging families to bring only healthy dishes, she organized a whole-grain taste test at one of the sampling booths. Families sampled whole wheat pasta, quinoa, brown rice and whole wheat tortillas accompanied by salsa, jam and peanut butter. The healthy foods taste test was the beginning of many healthy activities that became staples at Drummond.



SUCCESS STORY





## SPOTLIGHT ON Funston Elementary School

Prior to participating in *Chicago: Putting Policy into Practice*, Funston Elementary School had some success implementing school wellness initiatives. However, there was much room for improvement. Students received only 60 minutes of physical education per week (compared to the best practice of 150 minutes per week), there was no policy in place to monitor healthy celebrations, fundraising and non-food rewards, and there was little to no infrastructure to support school wellness practices.

Funston convened a wellness team led by the PE teacher and included the assistant principal, school nurse and several classroom teachers that represented a variety of grade levels as well as the school's special education and bilingual programs.

### Year One

Activities included a health and wellness fair, healthy snack taste tests and integration of more nutrition education into the classroom. At the end of the first year, the team was ready to submit an application for the HUSSC:SL Silver Award.

### Year Two

The team reconvened to build upon its progress but faced some challenges with team staff turnover. After recruiting new members, the team reassessed its school health environment and took key steps to improve consistency and policy alignment:

- » added a health education teacher
- » implemented additional physical activity opportunities (e.g. faculty-student sport games)
- » messaged parents more frequently about healthy school celebrations and invited them to join the team; and
- » reduced the frequency of unhealthy celebrations and food-based rewards.

### Year Three

To expand its efforts and engage parents and community members, Funston implemented additional activities:

- » purchased equipment for classroom physical activity and active indoor recess
- » distributed health and wellness information to parents at school events, such as Report Card Pick-up
- » held healthy eating workshops and cooking demonstrations for parents; and
- » expanded the annual health fair to include 10 community partners, and more than half of school families attended.

The strong relationships developed with parents and community partners ultimately increased the capacity of the Funston wellness team to do more to support student health. Thanks to the team's leadership efforts, the school improved in 16 of 20 LearnWELL indicators and was aligned with all district wellness policies by the end of Year Three, making the school eligible to become recognized as a Healthy CPS school.



# Results

After the three-year program, AFHK evaluated schools' progress against three key types of measures: those which directly impacted the school environment; those which indirectly impacted school and student health; and those which indirectly impacted non-health areas. Results are based on 19 of the 20 schools that completed the program.

## Impacts on the School Environment

### School Wellness Teams

Both CPS and AFHK recommend that school wellness teams be made up of school, parent and community representatives. CPS and AFHK recommend at least one parent member, and AFHK recommends school wellness teams be made up of at least five members to prevent the loss of momentum and information as members turnover and ensure sufficient capacity to implement initiatives.

 During *Chicago: Putting Policy into Practice*, schools with active wellness teams increased from 16% to 100%.

Schools with diverse wellness teams representing different stakeholder groups were more successful due to increased capacity (more members meant teams could host more events and initiatives); the ability to easily communicate across stakeholder groups; and the pooling of resources and volunteers.

### Recognition as a Health-Promoting School

At the end of the first year, 95% of schools were actively implementing the minimum amount of nutrition and physical activity programming required to submit an application to the USDA's HUSSC recognition program as a stepping stone to becoming recognized as a LearnWELL school. Thirty percent of schools made the necessary changes during the first year (e.g. wellness teams that met quarterly, classroom physical activity, healthy celebrations/non-food rewards, strong wellness champions and administrative support) to become LearnWELL schools.

 By the end of the third year, 74% of schools met the requirements to become recognized as LearnWELL, compared to the district average of 21%.

By the end of the program, 74% received HUSSC:SL recognition — 47% Bronze, 11% Silver and 16% Gold.

Using Game On to assist schools with LearnWELL alignment provided a framework to implement the various school health policies. Combined with technical assistance from AFHK, this helped schools further improve school-level policy implementation, added a level of accountability and gave schools the dedicated attention needed to make positive changes.

## Indirect Impacts on School and Student Health

The inclusion of parents and community representatives on school wellness teams not only allowed for their input on school wellness initiatives and involvement in policy implementation, but also fostered additional parent involvement, as it ensured that such events were created by and for parents.





## Parent Engagement

When parents are engaged in school activities, their children get better grades, choose healthier behaviors and have better social skills.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, school health activities have been shown to be more successful when parents are involved.<sup>10</sup> During *Chicago: Putting Policy into Practice*, schools invited parents to join the wellness team and hosted workshops, presentations, family fitness nights and other events to engage parents in school and student health. As parents became involved, they were able to recruit other parents in these efforts.

 Wellness teams with a parent member increased from 32% to 89%.

## Community Engagement

By the end of the program, school wellness teams with a community member increased from 26% to 58%. Schools varied widely in their openness to having community organizations support wellness work. Factors affecting schools' openness to community partners included previous experience in working with community partners, familiarity with local community organizations, and the engagement and capacity level of school wellness team members.

**AFHK worked with the National Museum of Mexican Art to increase participation in community-wide Día del Niño activities. Because this museum is well-known and respected in the community, seven schools were immediately excited and encouraged students and families to attend their activities. Schools participated in such activities as a community health fair and walk.**

## Health Impact — Student Knowledge and Behaviors

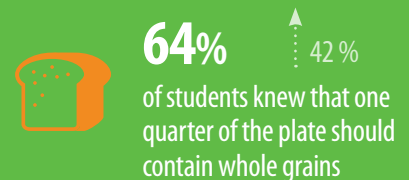
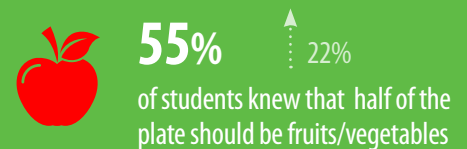
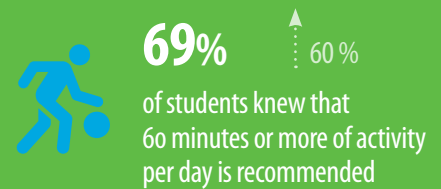
To measure the impact on student knowledge and behaviors, a representative sample of schools was randomly selected year over year to administer anonymous pre- and post-implementation surveys to students (4th through 8th grade). Surveys were completed in October and May of each year of the pilot program. Several measures showed an improvement in both knowledge and behaviors. (See graphic)

### Health Services

Though not a part of Game On, supporting the CPS vision and dental health initiatives served as an opportunity to determine the success of a more integrated, comprehensive approach to school health and wellness. As a result, schools were able to increase participation in the dental (500%) and vision (25%) programs. This success can be attributed to the following factors:

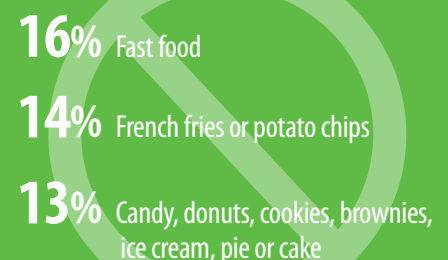
- » Having an established school wellness team dedicate time and resources to increasing participation in district health programs (versus only one individual at the school-building level).
- » Using low-cost awareness-building strategies such as announcements during staff meetings and classroom announcements about upcoming dental and vision exam days to encourage participation in programs.
- » Having a trusted partner like AFHK to help coordinate communication with dental and vision providers and support schools in improving organizational strategies for tracking consent and compliance, such as using classroom rosters to track consent form submissions.

## Student Knowledge



## Student Behaviors

Increase in students who **DID NOT** eat the following foods on the previous day



### Cooking Up Wellness with the Community

Salazar Bilingual Academy engaged its community by participating in the Wrigley Company's Cooking for Life workshop. Ten volunteers worked with 62 3rd and 5th grade students to teach the kids valuable cooking skills and educate them on nutrition at the same time. The school's wellness efforts also included increasing physical education time; hosting healthy eating and physical activity events themed around Día del Niño in April and a field day in June; training staff on wellness policies; and engaging parents through educational opportunities and health presentations. Salazar's work with the community contributed to the school becoming recognized as a health-promoting school, earning the CPS LearnWELL designation at the end of the 2014–2015 school year.

## Indirect Impacts of a Healthier School Environment

### Academic Impact

Although a direct correlation between program implementation and academic achievement cannot be drawn, there was a marked improvement in academic data during the years of the project. Participating schools experienced academic growth throughout the program as measured by the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) Reading and Math National Growth Percentile scores.



Overall, participating schools improved from the 68th to the 78th percentile in reading (compared to district growth to the 72nd percentile) and from the 49th to 56th percentile in math (which mirrored the district's percentage growth).

The Percentage of Students Making National Average Growth also increased, from 60% to 63% for NWEA Reading (above 61% for the district) and 52% to 54% for NWEA Math (1% greater increase compared to district).

### Attendance and Student Conduct

According to the U.S. Department of Education's Safe and Supportive Schools Model, wellness is a key component of a school's climate. A health-promoting school environment can support a positive school climate, and schools with positive climates tend to have fewer student discipline problems.<sup>11</sup>

Many factors contribute to school climate and student behavior. Results in this area for participating schools were mixed. While schools continued to experience misconducts, they also experienced a 21% decrease in suspension rates over the course of the program.

During the three-year project, schools made significant strides in each of these areas, laying the foundation for continued improvements in student behavior in the future.

Results of Chicago: Putting Policy into Practice	Pre	Post
Schools with wellness teams	16%	100%
Schools with a parent on wellness team	32%	89%
Schools with a community representative on wellness team	26%	58%
Schools meeting LearnWELL requirements	N/A	74%
NWEA Reading National Growth Percentile*	68th	78th
NWEA Math National Growth Percentile*	49th	56th

\*National Growth Percentile is the average growth of the school compared to national average growth for schools with the same average pretest score. The school is assigned a percentile representing where it would fall on the national distribution. The national average is the 50th percentile. Pre-program data is for 2013–2014 school year, the earliest year that NWEA data is available for these schools.

# Conclusion

Schools began *Chicago: Putting Policy into Practice* with varying experiences in school wellness. However, the pilot program demonstrated that using Game On as a three-year model is an effective approach for school-level policy implementation, helping schools build strong wellness programs and ultimately become recognized as health promoting.

Completing specific steps of Game On and revisiting them during each year of a three-year model allowed schools to focus early efforts on building a school wellness team, understanding policy requirements and engaging staff, especially amid staff turnover, administrative changes and the flow of new students and parents.

These aspects were critical before embarking on family and community engagement, a potentially daunting task without an existing school wellness infrastructure in place. Once the infrastructure for programming and parent and community engagement was in place, it was much more likely for schools to increase the capacity for school wellness initiatives, address broader school-community health issues and ensure sustainability, and that a school would achieve all policy requirements and become recognized as LearnWELL and later Healthy CPS.

The combination of CPS' strong wellness policies, the LearnWELL campaign and AFHK's Game On program and technical assistance proved to be a powerful trifecta to guide schools in building a strong school wellness infrastructure, engaging parents and the community, and, ultimately, in facilitating local and national recognition for school health and wellness efforts. Schools were also incentivized not only by the recognition program but by linking the LearnWELL recognition to public information like CPS school progress report cards.

Having a strong district wellness infrastructure in place and collaborative partners was a key to success in *Chicago: Putting Policy into Practice*. Districts should engage partners to support school-level policy implementation and bring capacity and resources to schools that make positive changes to their school health environments. However, even without a multi-level partnership such as that in *Chicago: Putting Policy into Practice*, districts nationwide can apply this approach and key learnings in order to help their schools align with their district wellness policies.



## Key Learnings

- » Utilize Game On as an effective three-year model for school-level policy implementation.
- » Enlist a diverse school wellness team as key to successful, sustainable initiatives.
- » Meet parents where they are when starting school wellness initiatives by adding health and wellness components to existing family engagement events.
- » Engage community partners who are critical for increasing the capacity of school wellness initiatives.
- » Help schools overcome barriers to engagement, which can be challenging for new wellness teams or schools with few existing community partners.



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