Acknowledgment

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This report was prepared by arcadia
research & evaluation
Background
Similar to districts across the nation, in June 2016, Stillwater Area School District adopted a local wellness policy (S.R. 1.2.25) that describes the purpose and goals for physical education and activity, health and nutrition education, school-based activities, nutrition promotion and nutrition guidelines. In addition, the policy requires the district engage in yearly evaluation and professional development and professional training activities.

Study Purpose
The district monitors implementation of the policy through an annual assessment process. In 2019, the district elected to take a deeper dive to examine staff, student and parental awareness and perceptions of food-related policies that anecdotally have been challenging to implement. A schoolwide survey and a series of focus groups with key stakeholders were conducted by an outside consultant in partnership with Washington County Public Health & Environment.

Methodology
To better understand the complex issues surrounding implementation of the wellness policy, this study employed a mixed-method design that included an online survey and focus groups with a cross-section of district stakeholders including administrators, teachers, parents and high school students. 419 staff responded to an online survey yielding a response rate of 38%. District staff helped recruit 10 administrators, six parents, eight teachers and 11 high school students to participate in focus groups. Two evaluators from an external consulting firm facilitated the focus groups. Focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Each evaluator independently reviewed focus group transcripts and identified themes responsive to the study aims. Themes from each evaluator were compared and reconciled. Similarly, survey data was coded and analyzed independently by each evaluator and compared for consistency in interpretation.

Limitations
The study reached out to over 400 staff through an online survey that asked for their perspectives and opinions about the district's wellness policy and current practices related to foods in the classroom. While staff were given reminders to complete the survey, 62% of staff did not participate. As such, the feedback described in this report may not be representative of the full range of perspectives within the district.

Study Aims
The study aimed to better understand the following:

1. What is the level of awareness, knowledge and support for the policy among staff, administrators and parents?
2. What are current levels of implementation of food-related policy components among staff and teachers in the district?
3. What, if any, supports related to implementing food-related policy components were identified by staff, administrators, parents and students?

A discussion of each study aim follows.
Aim 1: What is the level of awareness, knowledge and support for the policy among staff, administrators and parents?

Key Finding: Overall, there is general awareness of the policy among teachers, parents and administrators, however, depth of knowledge about the policy content varied across groups. Support for various policy components varied greatly with food in classrooms receiving the lowest level of staff support. Participants expressed frustration with interpreting the policy as currently written.

Familiarity and knowledge of the wellness policy
Familiarity with the policy and depth of knowledge about what the policy contained varied across participants. The survey of school staff showed that while 75% of all staff who responded to the survey were familiar with the wellness policy, staff awareness varied by school level. 87% of elementary school staff reported familiarity, compared to 74% of middle school staff and 55% of high school staff.

Overall support for the wellness policy
When asked about the importance of the district addressing student wellness through its current wellness policy, all focus group participants felt the wellness policy reflected the district’s core mission to educate students. Participants reported the district needs an approach for promoting wellness among students. One student commented, “…since we spend so much of our time [at school]… this is like a space for us to be able to learn about [wellness].” As educators, many of the administrators echoed this sentiment by acknowledging students spend most of their time in schools, making it important the district has a mechanism for creating a health-promoting environment for students. Some parents highlighted the even playing field the policy promotes across teachers and other parents. One parent said, “If you have a nice, outlined policy… I think it’s easy to defer to the policy. Like, ‘We have no treats, we’re not giving out candy’… I think that it’s having something set in stone, that you can make decisions off of. It seems helpful.” Another parent supported the policy because it affirmed some parents’ healthy eating efforts and appreciated the absence of contradictory messages coming from school.

Staff support of food-related wellness policy components
In the survey, staff were asked to describe their level of support for specific components of the wellness policy. As shown in Chart 1, staff agreement with the district wellness policy varies greatly by topic.

Topics with strong and moderate support: drinking water access, non-food alternatives for fundraising efforts, elimination of food as a reward for performance or behavior

Providing students access to drinking water receiving near universal support from staff (99%). Nearly 70% of staff support the use of non-food alternatives for fundraising, and 65% of staff support the elimination of food as a reward for academic performance or behavior. However, focus participants described a more nuanced view of food as a reward for performance or behavior.

“…we can’t control outside influences that happen in their homes, but we can certainly look at what we’re doing and providing kids. If we can be somebody in their lives that helps them kind of shape that overall wellness, I think that’s important as we know that more and more children are obese and we want them to be healthy. There’s no reason for kids to be obese.”
– School Administrator Participant

“…the idea of straight up reward or punishment on the spot seems very harsh. Like, don’t use food or candy for that. But in general…I think if it’s planned by teachers...if they’re working towards something and at the end they decide to celebrate with some goldfish crackers and something that’s not sugary and it’s planned by the teachers – it’s not just parents sending stuff in, then maybe.”
– Parent Participant
where several staff were passionate about including food in classroom celebrations and using food as a group reward. Participants agreed food should rarely, if ever, be used as a reward for individual behavior or achievement. A few administrators described limited instances where food was used as a motivator with high-needs students. One parent talked about how food is an affordable tool teachers use to build rapport with students. Another parent felt the type of food (healthy vs. unhealthy) being used mattered.

I do remember when we were in middle school, … we did a project and then we brought in food and it helped us learn about cultures, and if this is taken away…because I mean, when you have food, you know that’s the culture and it makes you more interested in it. Taking it away kind of takes away students’ interest and like, wanting to learn about it.
– Student Participant

Chart 1: Staff support of wellness policy components

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy Component</th>
<th>Support Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Providing students access to drinking water throughout the school day (n=356)</td>
<td>99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The use of non-food alternative for fundraising efforts (n=353)</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The elimination of food as a reward for academic performance or behavior (n=355)</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discourage parents from sending food or beverages for classroom celebrations (n=355)</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The removal of foods and beverages from classroom celebrations (n=355)</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Topics with less support and significant opposition: Removal of food and beverages from classroom celebrations and discouraging parents from sending food for classroom celebrations

Of all the policy components, removal of foods and beverages from classroom celebrations garnered the least amount of staff support with only 36% of staff supporting this policy. Among teachers that disagree with the policy, about half would like to provide healthy foods to their students during celebrations while the other half feel they should be allowed to provide unhealthy foods in their classrooms for occasional celebrations at their discretion. Only some of the teachers that disagree with the no food policy abide by it, while others completely ignore it and students notice this discrepancy. Many teachers expressed frustration with having another mandate added to their responsibilities while observing students access some cafeteria foods (e.g., breakfast in elementary schools, a-la-carte items in high school) that violate policy guidelines.

In focus group discussions, participants in all the groups expressed support for the no-birthday policy as it helped parents unable to provide treats and reduced consumption of sugary treats on a more frequent basis. However, the elimination of food celebrations tied to curriculum or teaching efforts was opposed by most students, teachers and some parents. Focus group participants wanted to see an exception for celebrations a few times a year. Some teachers and administrators described food as a cultural norm for celebrating, as well as a community-building tool that has been eliminated with the policy.

Difficulty interpreting the policy

Several focus group participants described frustration with interpreting the policy language around the elimination of food in the classroom. One administrator said, “We’ve struggled to interpret celebrations at our …
school...for instance, [you] want to sit down and have breakfast together...Is that a celebration or not?...If at the end of the school year you want to have lunch with your fifth hour class, is that a problem? Is that not a problem? How do you interpret that?” Another administrator wondered whether food could be used as a teaching tool by describing a scenario where a math teacher used a takeout order as a way for the class to calculate the tip and equal portions of food for each student. In that scenario the administrator said “[The food was]...part of the academics. Is that okay or not okay? Those are the questions we come up with – not as much the celebration piece.” Additional examples of scenarios that posed interpretation difficulties include sharing a meal with students, providing midday snacks to hungry students, using healthy foods (vs. unhealthy foods) to celebrate and a desire to teach moderation, rather total elimination.

**Aim 2: What are current levels of implementation of food-related policy components among staff and teachers in the district?**

**Key Finding:** While the majority of staff that responded to the staff survey are implementing the food-related components of the wellness policy, a sizable minority do not intend to implement the wellness policy.

Staff were asked to rate their current implementation practice of six specific food-related policy components. At least 75% of staff are implementing all elements of the district’s wellness policy. However, one in six staff do not currently follow and do not plan to follow the district’s policy related to classroom celebrations and rewards. Staff that adhere to the policy shared considerable frustration that they are seen as the “mean” or “bad” teacher for not allowing food for celebrations or as a reward.

**Staff adherence to food-related policy components**

**Chart 2: Staff adherence to food-related district policy components**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy Component</th>
<th>Do this now</th>
<th>Want to start doing this</th>
<th>Do not plan to do this</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I allow students access to drinking water throughout the school day (n=330)</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When rewarding students for behavior, I ONLY use non-food rewards (n=303)</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When rewarding students for academic performance, I ONLY use non-food rewards (n=287)</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I check food brought in by students for those that may cause allergic reactions (n=221)</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I encourage non-food alternatives for fundraising efforts (n=353)</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I do NOT use food or beverages as part of classroom celebrations (n=266)</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Responses reflected in this chart only include individuals that indicated the policy applied to their job or role. Individuals that indicated the policy does not apply to their job or role were not included in this chart.*
**Teacher adherence to food-related policy components**

### Table 1: Proportion of Teachers by School Level that Adhere to Food-Related Policy Components

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy Component</th>
<th>ECFE*</th>
<th>Elementary</th>
<th>Middle School</th>
<th>High School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I reward students for academic performance only with non-food rewards (n=237)</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I reward students for behavior only with non-food rewards (n=239)</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I allow students access to drinking water throughout the school day (n=244)</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>99%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I do not use food or beverages as part of classroom celebrations (n=234)</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I encourage non-food alternatives for fundraising efforts (n=115)</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I check food brought in by students for those that may cause allergic reactions (n=177)</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Only teacher responses are reflected. Responses that indicated the policy did not apply to their job/role were eliminated from this table.

* There was a total of nine responses from ECFE teachers.

### Aim 3: What, if any, supports related to implementing food-related policy components were identified by staff, administrators, parents and students?

**Key Findings:** Supports related to increasing acceptance of the policy among families and staff, as well as having ready-made supports for implementing the policy were the most desired supports by staff.

Staff were asked about supports they desired to help them continue or deepen implementation of the food-related policy components. The most popular supports selected by staff were those related to increasing acceptance of the policy among families and staff and having access to ready-made supports.

### Chart 3: Resources and supports selected by staff to advance food-related policy implementation

- Ready-made supports (n=332): 50%
- Family acceptance (n=329): 50%
- Staff acceptance (n=325): 46%
- Increased student acceptance (n=325): 43%
- Increased staff awareness (n=329): 42%
- Schoolwide challenges (n=330): 41%
- Funding (n=327): 37%
- Policies/guidelines (n=326): 30%
- Enforcement (n=326): 26%
- Increased leadership support (n=330): 24%
- Parent advocate (n=331): 24%
- Individualized coaching (n=332): 10%
**Additional supports identified by study participants**

In focus groups, three themes emerged related to supports: (1) addressing visible inconsistencies of how the policy is adhered to (2) desire for additional guidance on how to interpret the policy particularly around food in classrooms and (3) local control on how policies are implemented.

**Addressing visible inconsistencies**

With regard to addressing visible inconsistencies, a topic raised by a few participants were high-sugar breakfast items. One administrator said “I get pushback on the breakfast program. So every Thursday, it’s cinnamon rolls with the frosting on top, and it’s a super popular day for kids to come and get breakfast, but… how is that really supporting the wellness policy?” Another breakfast item mentioned by the administrator were muffins. Overall, however, administrators felt food offerings in the cafeteria were mostly healthy.

**Interpreting the policy**

Several parents and administrators commented on the broad language contain in the policy and felt more guidance on how to interpret it should be provided. After reading the policy, some parents describe the policy as an ‘all or nothing’ stance that did not teach children how to eat in moderation. One parent said, “I focus on words…[the policy] says ‘promote.’…so provide opportuni[ties] to learn about it, etc. But it also doesn’t mean… it’s strict adherence to only…you know what I mean? It’s not that all cupcakes are bad in the world, so I think that word does provide that and with some flexibility, which I like.” A teacher explained “I think that’s a frustration on principals… they don’t know how to interpret this from what the district mandate is, so they just say ‘No snacks in your classroom.’ Because if some of them do adjust it, and then word gets out that this principal does this. I mean, that’s how it works.”

An administrator said, “I think…the all-or-nothing is where a lot of the teachers are for being challenged.” A teacher described a scenario where a student was told they could have lunch with their teacher for accomplishing a goal. The teacher wondered whether this was a reward and therefore not allowed. The teacher said the policy was “It’s almost too ambiguous. It needs to be fleshed out a little bit more.” Administrators and some parents in focus groups felt additional guidance would help clarify the boundaries around food in classrooms – including using food to teach, occasionally reward or celebrate achievements with students – would help teachers and administrators be more consistent with the policy, as well as give them leeway to support worthwhile activities that involve food.

**Local control**

A couple parent and administrator focus group participants discussed the need for allowing local control of how the policy was implemented at the school level. One parent said, “I’d say if the principal had some leeway to make an exception. Again, I’m not sure what those exceptions would be, but that way it’s within the school because kids talk to other kids in school, but school to school, maybe not so much. If the principal was to say, ‘Hey, you know what? It’s the end of the quarter.’ So and so’s dad wants to treat, let them do it. To allow for flexibility.” One teacher said, “That’s where, as professionals, where we should be able to use our discretion for some of those little things.”

**Conclusion**

Across the nation, research has shown implementation of local wellness policies has been uneven and full of challenges. In particular, research has shown implementation and adherence to food-related policies, such as those related to classroom celebrations, has been even more challenging for educators (Fernandes et al., 2019, Turner, L. et al., 2012).

This study suggests staff awareness of the policy is high (75% of staff report awareness of the policy), which is a necessary and positive first step towards reducing the gap between policy and practice in classrooms. While staff support the policy overall, there is less enthusiasm for the food-related components of the policy. Specifically, the removal of foods and beverages from classroom celebrations was only supported by 36% of staff respondents. This is consistent with research that has noted the unique challenge and controversy surrounding classroom celebrations (Turner, et al., 2012).
**Recommendations**

Study participants provided recommendations for improving acceptance and implementation of the wellness policy, including addressing visible inconsistencies, providing additional guidance on how to interpret the policy, and considering allowing local decision-making on implementing the policy. Additional recommendations for the continued implementation of the wellness policy include:

- Allowing for classroom celebrations that serve healthy snacks from an approved list ([The Alliance for a Healthier Generation Model Policy](https://www.healthiergeneration.org/))
- Limiting classroom celebrations to a certain number per month or semester or year (Turner et al., 2012)
- Revising the wellness policy to include language that addresses culture and identifies ways for families to share their traditions and cultural foods (Fernandes, Schwartz, Ickovics, & Basch, 2019)
- Continued communication efforts to help stakeholders understand the ‘why’ for food-related wellness policy components
- Revising or clarifying existing policy language related to using food for teaching purposes
- Continued engagement of teachers and students on developing strategies for ongoing implementation of the wellness policy

**References**
