

By *Vonda Fekete*

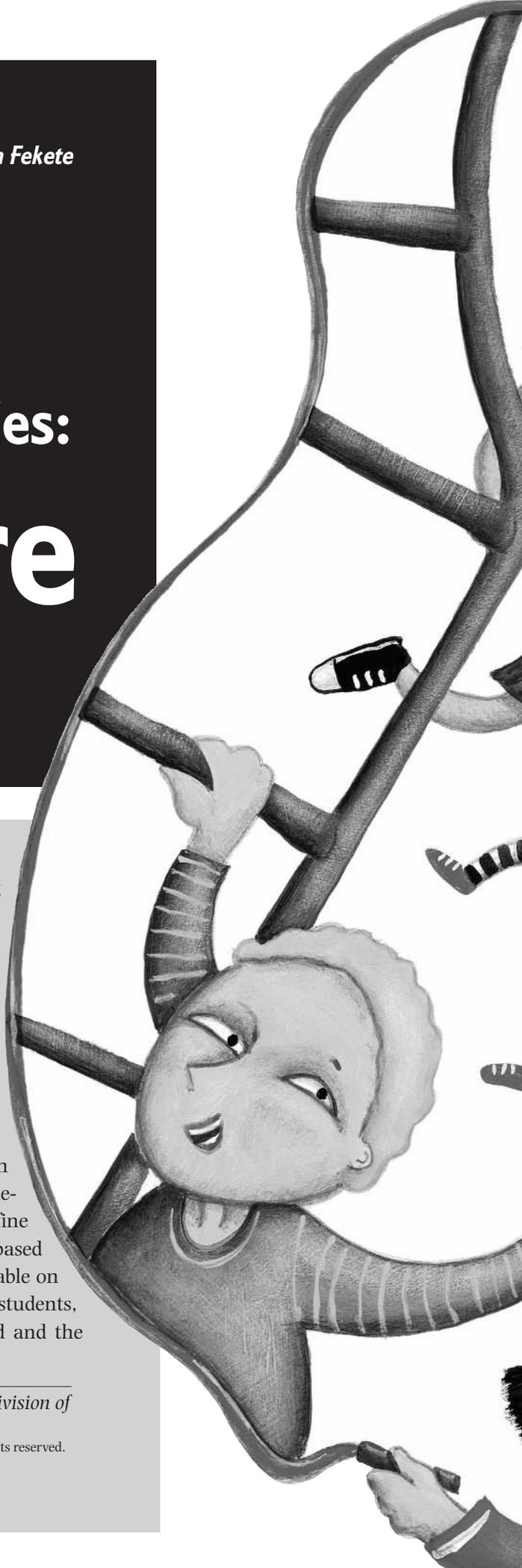
Local wellness policies: They're the law!

School officials frequently are asked to explain what they are doing in response to the childhood obesity issue or why they are not doing more to prevent it. Schools are not the cause of childhood obesity and its manifestations, such as Type II diabetes, heart disease and high blood pressure, which now are being diagnosed in children. The complexity of the childhood obesity issue requires a collaborative approach, however, and schools are an intricate part of addressing it.

Many school officials are keenly aware of the new federal law that calls upon schools to assist in addressing student health and childhood obesity. Public Law 108-265 requires all local education agencies sponsoring the National School Lunch Program to implement a local wellness policy by July 1, 2006. The policy must define goals for nutrition education, physical activity and other school-based activities, as well as provide nutrition guidelines for all foods available on the school grounds during the school day. At a minimum, parents, students, school administrators, and representatives from the school board and the

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school food authority are required to participate in the development of the policy. The focus of the policy must be to improve student health and decrease childhood obesity. LEAs also are responsible for measuring the implementation of the policy and assigning at least one person to be responsible for ensuring compliance with the policy.

Development of the wellness policy can be dismissed erroneously as a “school food service issue.” The law assigns responsibility to the LEA, not the school food service director! This is an excellent opportunity for the required individuals, as well as other experts in the LEA (health education, physical education, and family and consumer science teachers, school nurses, dietitians, pediatricians, community organizations, etc.) to participate jointly in crafting a policy that can affect the long-term health of students.

Without the support of school administrators, a policy is unlikely to succeed and the students will not benefit. The local wellness policy requirement may seem like another obstacle that prevents schools from focusing on “educating the child.” Yet, the potential to have a positive impact on academic performance and improve student behavior exists as a significant outcome.

Studies indicate that improved physical activity and nutritional intake can improve academic performance. Mathematics, reading and writing skills have shown improvement when students are physically active. Student attendance and negative classroom attitudes and behaviors – such as bullying, arguing and fighting – also improve when students are provided opportunities to be physically active. In addition, healthful eating habits contribute positively to academic success, improved student attendance, attentiveness, concentration, overall behavior and decreased tardiness. (*The Learning Connection, Action for Healthy Kids, 2005*)

Nutrition and physical activity may not be recognized as a priority for schools as they

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struggle to maintain academic success. These may be the first areas to be compromised when the going gets tough, despite the evidence advising that compromising nutrition and physical activity is a hindrance to the learning environment.

Many schools nationwide have implemented changes that promote student health, and they have been able to succeed without a loss in revenue. Since making these changes, these schools report they would not have it any other way because of the differences witnessed by administrators, teachers, parents and students. Generally, these schools also will

report that the key to success is commitment from school officials and administrators, as well as buy-in from the school community, including students, parents, teachers and staff professionals. Some success stories include the following:

- Old Orchard Beach SD, Maine, changed to healthier selections in their a la carte lines and vending machines. They found there was no loss of revenue in the high school, and the middle school revenue increased.

- McComb SD, Mississippi, made many changes to the school environment to promote student health. The superintendent spearheaded

theses changes and reported many positive outcomes, including improved attendance and increased revenue.

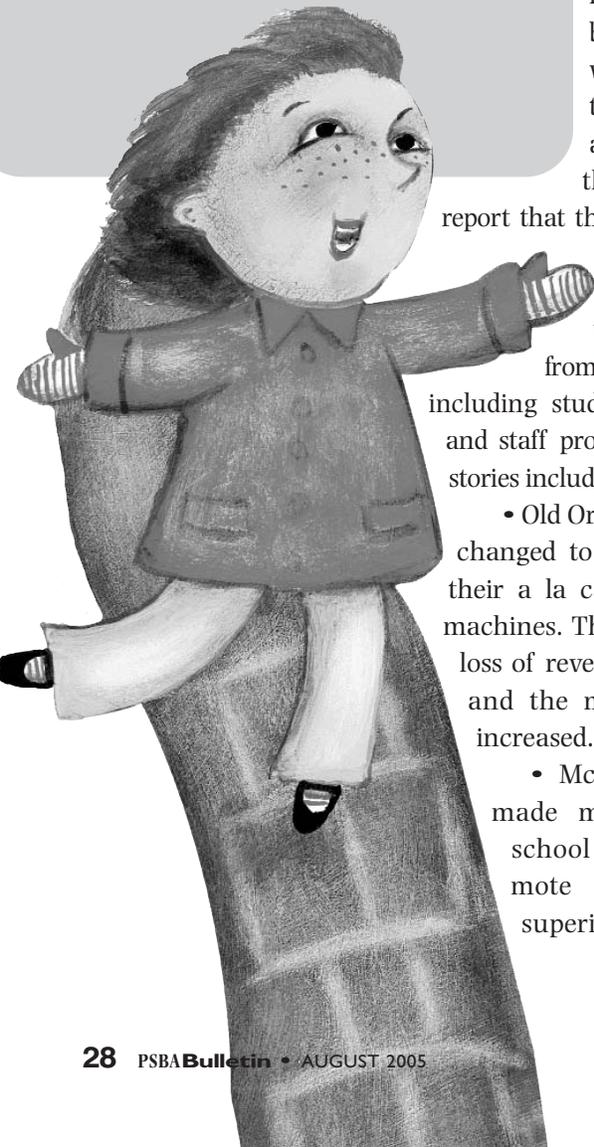
- In Arizona, eight schools piloted a nutrition policy. After changing foods in vending machines, a la carte lines and school stores to healthier eating options, none of the pilot schools reported a negative financial impact.

The following resources have been developed by, or are available through, the Pennsylvania Department of Education:

- *Nutrition Standards for Competitive Foods in Pennsylvania Schools* was distributed to all school board presidents, superintendents, business managers and food service directors under a cover letter from the secretary of education. This is a resource to assist schools in developing nutrition guidelines required by federal law. The nutrition standards identify the most common locations where foods are available on the school grounds. These also are the areas that the Division of Food and Nutrition, Pennsylvania Department of Education, will focus on as we review each LEA's wellness policy after the effective date of implementation. This resource is available at www.pde.state.pa.us/food_nutrition.

- *Examples of Policy Language* provides a bulleted list of goals for nutrition education, physical activity and other school-based activities. This resource clearly defines current requirements for nutrition and physical education as identified in the Pennsylvania School Code, and it provides suggestions of policy goals for nutrition education, physical activity and other school-based activities to align with and build upon the current requirements. This resource is available at www.pde.state.pa.us/food_nutrition.

- *Accountability Block Grant* funding for Pennsylvania school districts offers opportunities for schools to focus on issues of healthy lifestyles in the social and health category. These monies are available to all districts in the commonwealth, and they must demonstrate



evidence-based effectiveness in supporting student academic achievement. Information is available at www.pde.state.pa.us/abg.

In addition, schools focusing on issues of wellness also have the opportunity to potentially integrate funding and resources from programs such as Safe and Drug Free Schools, the Student Assistance Program and 21st Century Community Learning Center after-school programs.

The Pennsylvania Department of Education, Division of Food and Nutrition, has been providing training sessions on the local wellness policy requirements to a variety of audiences. Public and private school food service directors were trained in June.

The Division of Food and Nutrition is available to provide regional or statewide trainings for professional education associations as well.

For more information on the local wellness policy requirements or available resources, contact **Vonda Fekete**, Division of Food and Nutrition, Pennsylvania Department of Education, at (800) 331-0129, ext. 33538, or by e-mail at vfekete@state.pa.us. 

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