PARENTS IN ACTION!

A guide to engaging parents in local school wellness policy
California Project LEAN (Leaders Encouraging Activity and Nutrition) (CPL), a joint program of the California Department of Public Health and the Public Health Institute, focuses on youth and parent empowerment, policy and environmental change strategies, and community-based solutions. CPL’s mission is to increase healthy eating and physical activity to reduce the prevalence of obesity and chronic diseases such as heart disease, cancer, stroke, osteoporosis, and diabetes.

CPL works with state and local physical activity and nutrition leaders, and key school and community organizations, to conduct programs in communities throughout California. Through an infrastructure of regional coordinators, CPL implements local interventions that increase opportunities for Californians to eat healthfully and be physically active.

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The landscape of the school food, beverage, and physical activity environment has improved over the past few years and is set for even more positive change. In response to rising rates of overweight and inactivity in America’s youth, federal legislation was passed that required school districts to develop a local school wellness policy (LSWP) by the beginning of the 2006-2007 school year. The LSWP required school districts to set goals for nutrition education, physical activity, all foods and beverages available on campus, and school-based activities designed to promote student wellness. The federal mandate also required school districts to establish a plan for measuring implementation. Additionally, it required schools to involve the community and, specifically, parents in the development of the policy.

The success of the LSWP can be shaped by parents, through their involvement in the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the policy. Parents have the potential to play a critical role in the quality of the policy and extent to which it is implemented. Parent involvement in LSWP implementation provides an important opportunity for parents to promote both the academic achievement and health and wellness of their own children as well as the entire student body.

California Project LEAN (CPL) conducted a literature review and key informant interviews with parents and stakeholders working with parents to determine why parents participate in school activities; what would get parents involved; obstacles to participation; gaps in parent knowledge about LSWP; ways parents are interested in becoming involved; and the best vehicles for communicating with parents. This formative research guided the development of this toolkit.*

This toolkit aims to support parent efforts to improve the school environment and increase healthy food and physical activity opportunities through the LSWP.

Who should use this toolkit?

- School stakeholders who want to work with parents to implement/improve LSWPs.
- Parents who want to advocate for strong LSWPs.

Purpose of the toolkit:

1) To provide tools and resources that help school stakeholders engage parents in LSWP implementation.

2) To educate and engage English- and Spanish-speaking parents about LSWP requirements and expected changes to the nutrition and physical activity environment in their child’s school.

3) To give parents the tools to be proactive and advocate when LSWP changes are not occurring.

4) To expand parent awareness of advocacy opportunities in their communities.

*For a copy of the formative research report, please go to www.CaliforniaProjectLEAN.org
Benefits of Engaging Parents

Across the nation, schools are challenged to improve the academic success of their students. We know that healthy, fit students are more successful students. It has been well-established that well-nourished children:

- Perform better in school and have increased concentration, improved mathematics, reading and writing test scores and less disruptive behavior.¹

- Have better attendance.²

There are also numerous benefits to parent involvement in schools. Schools with involved parents become better schools. Students with involved parents, no matter what their income or background, are more likely to:

- Earn higher grades and test scores, and enroll in more advanced programs.³

- Be promoted to the next grade level, pass their classes, and earn credits.³

- Attend school regularly.³

Have better social skills, show improved behavior, and adapt well to school.³

Graduate and go on to advanced education.³

What is Parent Involvement/Engagement?

Parent involvement/engagement in schools can range from that of volunteer, fundraiser, and/or participant in parent groups to advocate for the improvement of school services.

For the purposes of this toolkit, CPL has defined parent engagement in schools as parents being involved in school activities which results in parents having an increased knowledge of what impacts students; seeing and being involved in positive school changes; feeling that their opinions and perspectives are valued; and parents becoming empowered.

²National Association for Sport and Physical Education; Council of physical education for children. (2001). Physical education is critical to a complete education.