



RHODE ISLAND HEALTHY SCHOOLS COALITION

Cultivating Effective School Wellness Committees

by Wendy Fachon

In 2005, the Rhode Island General Assembly passed a law requiring all state school districts to establish a wellness committee to address the rise of childhood obesity and enhance health and learning outcomes through school-based policies and practices. Each district wellness committee welcomes parents, students, administrators, nurses, teachers, food service and community businesses and partners to participate in the committee meetings, where everyone has an opportunity to be heard and to participate in decisions to improve the overall health of the school community.

Rhode Island Healthy Schools Coalition (RIHSC) has been a strong community partner providing support for all district wellness committee activity. As the only statewide organization working at the intersection of health and education, RIHSC has built relationships with national and local partners, as well as state and federal agencies, to bring a collaborative approach

to prioritizing a healthy whole child vision in all Rhode Island schools.

The Coalition has created a strong network of district wellness committees and community partners and acts as a connector and convener for the school wellness community. In addition to providing technical assistance for policy development, RIHSC's dedicated staff attend wellness meetings and share national and local best practices, resources, workshops, innovative programs and funding opportunities to help school



stakeholders achieve their wellness goals.

One of RIHSC's most celebrated programs, Recess Rocks in RI, is a free training program for school staff, delivered by Playworks and funded by Blue Cross & Blue Shield of RI. This program gives schools the tools and strategies to ensure a safe, meaningful and healthy recess experience for every child. Eighty Rhode Island elementary schools have joined the initiative, to date, and more schools will have an opportunity to participate in the upcoming school year.

Another initiative, the Local Food Ambassador (LFA) program, is a collaboration with Farm Fresh RI, funded through the Rhode Island Department of Education's Child Nutrition Program. This program provides training to volunteers that conduct cafeteria taste tests for the purpose of creating awareness and greater consumption of locally grown produce in school cafeterias. Schools interested in making healthy changes can add the popular food items to the regular menu with fair certainty the new items will help reduce excess food waste. On-the-job training sessions happen during school lunch periods to teach community volunteers how to work with the district food service to organize and execute a taste test. Cafeteria taste tests are a great way to introduce new healthy foods in a fun, exciting and pressure-free environment.

RIHSC can provide a wide range of resources, including planning tools for fundraisers centered around fun and healthy physical activity, to replace cookie dough and candy sales. And, if schools are interested in starting vegetable gardens that can integrate core curriculum with nutrition education, RIHSC can connect them to the state's school garden experts. "When wellness committees dream up exciting new ideas, RIHSC is eager to help identify the best resources," says Co-Director Karin Wetherill.

On October 10, RIHSC will be hosting its annual Breakfast for School Wellness Leaders at the Crowne Plaza, in Warwick. This year's theme is Student Voice and Leadership, and several successful school wellness initiatives started by students will be featured. The keynote speaker will be

Lori Fresina, executive director of Voices for Healthy Kids, a joint initiative of the American Heart Association and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Through state and local policy change campaigns, strategic partnerships and science-based policy interventions, Voices for Healthy Kids is committed to increasing health equity, improving access to healthy foods and physical activity, and improving the places where families live, learn, work and play.

The Coalition's annual breakfast event is a valuable learning and networking opportunity for people interested in supporting healthier school environments and getting involved in their local wellness committee. Wetherill shared that community members are welcome to attend and can register individually via the RIHSC website or see if their school district has reserved a full table that they can join by contacting the school district administrative office.

Learn more at rihsc.org.

*Wendy Fachon is a writer, an educator with The Empowerment Factory and host of the Story Walking Radio Hour on DreamVisions7Radio.com. Learn more at StoryWalking.com. **See ad on page 29.***

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