

Rhode Island

Helping Students Thrive: Moving from State Law to Local Action

Public Health Problem

In Rhode Island (RI), from 2001 to 2005, the percentage of overweight high school students increased from 9% to 13%. In 2005, among the state's high school students,

- 68% did not meet currently recommended levels of physical activity.
- 75% reported eating less than five servings of fruits and vegetables daily.
- 80% did not attend physical education class daily.

That same year, RI passed legislation requiring all 36 school districts to establish a school health and wellness subcommittee to develop policies, strategies, and implementation plans to meet the requirements of the federal Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004. In addition, the law required that all district strategic plans include strategies to decrease obesity and improve the health and wellness of students and employees through nutrition, physical activity, health education, and physical education.

Program Example

Rhode Island's **thrive** program — supported in part through CDC funding for the RI Department of Education's Coordinated School Health Program and in partnership with the RI Department of Health — has helped school districts implement the new law and establish district-level health and wellness subcommittees. The **thrive** program has developed a toolkit containing guidance, model policies, data, and other resources to help schools meet the requirements of the mandate; and has recruited parents, registered dietitians, and other health professionals to work on health and wellness subcommittees and provide their special expertise. Local successes include

- Cranston Public Schools' Farm to Schools program, which features a partnership with a local orchard owner, a community farmer, and parent volunteers, who periodically supplement the fresh fruits and vegetables provided as part of the district's lunch options.
- Westerly Middle School, which now requires that either water, or drinks containing at least 50% fruit juice, to be sold in school vending machines — a policy developed by the District Health and Wellness Subcommittee.

Implications and Impact

Building on the increased awareness about school health and wellness issues, the state legislators passed additional laws in 2006 and 2007 requiring all schools — elementary through high school — to offer only healthier beverages and healthier snacks. The motto of Rhode Island's Coordinated School Health Program is "Strong minds, Strong bodies, and Strong schools." Having state legislation that supports school health and wellness activities not only helps combat the epidemic of obesity, but also adds strategic institutional muscle to support and enhance long-term, sustainable efforts to build stronger minds, stronger bodies, and stronger schools.