Identifying school wellness priorities

The first step in implementing your local school wellness policy is to identify and prioritize the key elements and start with those first. If you used the School Health Index Assessment or the Healthy Schools Builder, you have already figured some of your school health priorities based on the assessment outcome. However, the list generated by these assessments may seem overwhelming. Or, perhaps there are additional priorities that were not addressed by these assessments. For example, many schools feel the need to implement additional social services and behavioral health support—not any of which is really addressed in those assessments. When deciding how to implement the local school wellness policy, you may want to consider the following questions:

**IS THIS REQUIRED AREA BY LAW?**
Are any of these required by law?
What are the proposed deadlines for implementing programs or policy elements?

**HOW GREAT IS THE NEED?**
What programs address the needs based on data and other findings?

**HOW MUCH HAS BEEN DONE SO FAR?**
Can you expand on an existing program?

**HOW MUCH CHANGE WILL THIS MAKE IN STUDENT HEALTH?**
Are there programs or policy elements that, if implemented, could provide immediate relief to current problems or deficiencies at the school?

**HOW EASY IS IT?**
What programs or policy elements will be quick and/or easy to implement?
Are there programs or policy elements that will require more planning and collaboration than others?
Are there any program or policy elements that could be implemented at low or no cost?

**HOW READY ARE YOU?**
Is there available funding, staffing and support for these programs?
How motivated is the wellness committee to implement these programs? Does it address the priorities of most of the members?
Are there program or policy elements that will require additional outside funding, either through grants, fundraising or private donations?

After reviewing coordinated school health possibilities with these criteria, the wellness committee should decide upon a realistic number of new programs or policy elements to implement in the first year. The capacity of every district and school are different, and different school health improvements will require varying levels of resources and leadership. Therefore, you may chose just one or two priorities for action or you may work toward five or six, if they are easy to implement and staff is willing and able to get things done. Make sure to keep a record of the ‘non-priority’ items as well; your school can revisit these once progress is made.
Planning for action

Now that you have identified the priorities for implementing school health improvements, the next step is to make a clear and comprehensive plan of action for each new program or policy element. These action plans should identify the objective of each new program and the steps required to implement them. The plan must also include all necessary implementation information (e.g., who is responsible, timeline). Some schools may have a required format for action plan or school improvement plans—if so, use those templates school health planning too. For those that don’t, the action planning worksheet samples provided can give your school wellness committee an example of a planning format.

There is no “best” layout for an implementation/action plan. Depending on the nature and needs of different districts and schools, the way in which action plans are laid out will differ. The primary purpose of the action plan is to be a useful tool for guiding school staff in implementing agreed upon school health and wellness programs, policies and support activities. Having a clear and comprehensive action plan helps ensure the effectiveness and efficiency of a school’s school health improvement efforts.

A clear approach allows for:

- a plan that is easier to follow;
- better understanding of each person’s role and responsibility; and
- consideration of and accounting for potential problems.

A comprehensive approach allows for:

- better use of materials and equipment;
- more resources available for materials and services;
- improved scheduling;
- greater flexibility in staffing;
- better coordination of family and community involvement; and
- shared decision-making and team building.