

Engaging **PARENTS** In School Wellness: *What Parents Had to Say*



Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services



Learn • Act • Transform





Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services

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Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services
Bureau of Community Health and Wellness • Team Nutrition

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Missouri Team Nutrition

Missouri Team Nutrition (TN) is a program of the Department of Health and Senior Services (DHSS) in partnership with the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Food and Nutrition Services. Funded by the United States Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service to support Child Nutrition Programs, its focus is training and technical assistance for school foodservice, nutrition education for children and their caregivers, and school and community support for healthy eating and physical activity.

Missouri TN works with state and local physical activity and nutrition leaders, and key school and community organizations to conduct programs throughout the state. TN implements state and local interventions that increase opportunities for Missouri's children to eat healthfully and be physically active.



Acknowledgements

Missouri TN wishes to thank the following schools and their administration for allowing DHSS the use of their facility to visit with the parents and caregivers of their students.

Southeast Elementary

Park Hill School District

Ms. Diane L. Simpson, Principal
Ronda McCullick, Director of Food Service Operations
Maryam Hadjian, Cafeteria Manager
5704 North Northwood Road
Kansas City, MO 64151-2676

Truman Elementary

Springfield R-XII School District

Dr. Joellyn M. Travis, Principal
Angela Bounds, School Counselor
Dana Nippes, Nutrition Educator
3850 North Farm Road 159
Springfield, MO 65803-9285

Ellington Elementary

Southern Reynolds Co. R-II School District

Mrs. Carolyn Bouma, Principal
Tonya Sharp, School Nurse
Pamela Aiello, Reynolds County Health Department
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Ellington, MO 63638-9570

Ford Elementary School

St. Louis City Public Schools

Ms. Rachel Clark, Principal
Althea Albert-Santiago, Director of Food Services
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2516 South 9th Street
St. Louis, MO 63104

Gratz Brown Elementary

Moberly School District

Ms. Della Bell, Former Principal
1320 Gratz Brown Road
Moberly, MO 65270-3813

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Introduction

In the spring of 2014, Missouri TN partnered with six public elementary schools located in five different regions of the state to conduct focus groups with parents and caregivers. **The purpose of the group discussions was to better understand how to support parents and adult caregivers in becoming engaged participants in their children's school wellness efforts.**

The intentions were to identify motivators and barriers to participation and determine the best methods of communication between schools and parents to facilitate engagement. The benefits of effective family engagement are supported by research and are summarized in the 2011 National School Boards Association publication titled *Families as Partners: Fostering Family Engagement for Healthy and Successful Students*. Family involvement in children's lives has been shown to reduce children's health risk behaviors, improve their attitudes toward school and learning, and improve academic achievement.

The focus group also offered an opportunity to ask parents about their preferences for a unique marketing campaign and related materials promoting school wellness.

Of the schools participating, 45-99 percent of the student population qualify for free/reduced priced meals. School administration were asked to assist with recruiting parents that were both actively engaged in school

activities as well as those that were not. A total of 50 out of 60 parents or adult caregivers participated with 7 to 10 parents in attendance per group. Two trained facilitators led the discussion groups and asked nine (9) questions. The script and corresponding focus group templates make up the appendix. Responses were transcribed. Gift cards were distributed to adults at the conclusion of the focus groups in exchange for their participation.

The project's purpose could best be summarized as follows:

- To increase parental awareness of and support for school wellness requirements and expected changes to their children's school environment;
- To identify the best methods for engaging parents in activities that relate to healthy eating and active living; and
- To understand the best way to convey school wellness related messages to parents and identify messages that resonate with the target audience.

The information gathered through the focus groups is summarized in this report. Direct quotes from participants are also included in italics.

Motivators to Parent Engagement

Missouri TN wanted to assess intrinsic motivators that influence a parent's involvement in their child's time in school. **Parents were asked why it is important to be involved in their child's school.** The responses included positive role modeling for their children, better behaving children and improved problem solving skills.

Most kids do better when parents are involved. I know the opposite situations and kids don't do well.

Because I want my kids to know I am there to support them in whatever it is – showing my face will rub off on them in a positive way.

In spite of grade issues, for my son, my involvement has helped as his grades have improved. I stay involved in their activities and makes them feel good to put the effort.

Parents were then asked for specific ways in which they have been actively involved in their child's school. Parents listed a variety of examples that varied in degrees of time and effort. Parents' engagement in their children's school included dropping off and picking up the child from school; staying on top of their children's grades; reading the school or classroom newsletters; attending after-school events; acting as a chaperone on field trips; volunteering as a teacher's aide and participating in booster clubs.

In all of the focus groups parents discussed ways they connected with the classroom teacher. Parents connected with their child's teacher by reading the teacher's webpage, notices or postcards, routinely asking about how their child was doing and attending parent/teacher conferences. But surprisingly, more personal contacts were also mentioned.

Getting to know the teachers, children's friends, principals . . . you need to know who is involved with my child's education.

I share feedback between my son's doctors and teacher.

We get to know teacher's cell phone numbers.

We have teachers over for supper.

Barriers to Parent Engagement

Parents experience many challenges when engaging in school wellness efforts. Barriers can come up for anyone at anytime and vary for different families. **Parents were asked the reasons why parents do not get involved in their child's school.** Competing priorities such as continuing education or multiple social events were mentioned as factors. Parents also felt overwhelmed with all the different events in children's lives on top of their own. Setting priorities meant something had to give.

Some parents are studying for a degree themselves.

So many things going on in our families. I have three kids and I am spread thin.

Its about setting priorities – finding family time and finding balance.

Lack of resources such as time, finances or transportation also play a role.

Time. . .lack of it if the parent has multiple jobs.

Transportation – a lack of it or it's inadequate.

No phone or hard to reach.

Parents relayed that it's not always a priority for some adults. Some parents don't always feel that engagement in their child's life is important or it's not the way they were brought up.

Frankly speaking, some parents are lazy or just don't care.

Its not part of their up-bringing. . .not a part of their parenting.

Some parents don't think education is that important.

Life's circumstances, that which can't be helped such as divorce or separation, being a single parent household, or other infrastructure challenges such as having children with behavior or medical issues are significant barriers to parent engagement.

Single parents don't have time.

My child has a behavior issue and it is a lot of my time. It's a time management thing for me. I feel like I am involved – although not in a great way.



Barriers cont.

Another barrier parents reported was feeling unwelcome when joining a new group such as parent teacher associations. They might experience anxiety or intimidation when joining an unfamiliar yet established group that is already comfortable with one another.

Some are scared – they are intimidated or feel left behind.

Feeling intimidated . . . PTA moms have their own group. . . (I feel) like the new kid on the block.

Some parents are shy.

Parents were asked about the best ways to get more parents involved. Parents' responses were universal emphasizing that schools can make the connection with families by way of sincere and friendly communication from staff to parents as well as parents reaching out to other parents. Outreach should be provided through a variety of channels and multiple times throughout the year.

Make them feel like they are included in their (student's) education.

Catch them at the door.

(Parents) just making appearances and being grateful should be accepted.

Phone messages . . . making a direct contact.

Parents encouraging each other; parents reaching out to others may be a good way.

Be patient with parents. I have four kids. It takes more than one notice. I may be at 2nd or 3rd or 4th event. . . trying to get in the groove of it.

Affordable events that are kid-friendly.

Offer child care.

Family friendly events – involve hands-on activities with their child; it's a positive interaction.

Lots of variety . . . include niche groups like father-daughter events.

Schools can make the connection with families by way of sincere and friendly communication from staff to parents as well as parents reaching out to other parents.

Healthy Food Choices and Physically Active Homes

Parents were asked about their thoughts related to health and wellness and how that translated into routines and practices they put in place in their homes. This was to help test the well researched concept that a child's healthy habits start at home. Although responses varied, some of the parents' most notable responses showcased their resourcefulness and the role modeling taking place in their homes. The responses were separated into two categories: healthy food choices and physical activity at home.

Healthy Food Choices at Home

Parents are making conscious efforts to offer healthy food choices at home particularly sitting at the table for dinner, offering vegetables and fruits routinely, limiting soda and prioritizing drinking water when at home.

We eat at the table together.

Making vegetables available for dinner, make foods look fun and desirable to eat.

Make meals at home and avoid fast food.

From the beginning vegetables and fruits are normal in my home.

Reinventing our meals to healthier recipes.

Seeing that I just started a diet, I try to eat healthy...no fried foods.

We don't buy soda nor Kool-Aid in my house. We drink water and milk. We buy fruit.

Sodas only on the weekends.

Physically Active Homes

Parents admit that encouraging physical activity often takes a back seat to meeting other demands such as preparing meals, attending to homework and getting ready for the next day. Parents also mentioned the inability to monitor kids' safety during outside play or the lack of yard for outside play. In spite of it, families shared their efforts to encourage physical activity.

No electronics until chores are done and homework is done.

We have pet responsibilities. . .we walk the dog(s).

I get my kids to go outside and play. . .get that football or basketball and make it a routine.

Although a unique response, the following statement shows the resourcefulness of one family:

Our garage is converted into an activity room that we use to allow our children to have an adventure.

Nutrition and Physically Active Schools

During the school year, the majority of a child's day is arguably spent at school. Their presence offers a captive audience, which provides an opportunity to establish or at least model healthy behaviors. **Parents were asked to share examples of good eating habits and physical activity their children learned at school.** Salad bars in schools, food tastings and healthier milk options were mentioned. Physical education games and afterschool programs are well received particularly if lessons learned can be applied at home.

Physical education games and afterschool programs are well received particularly if lessons learned can be applied at home.

Drinking reduced-fat milk from school lunch.

Fruit and vegetable taste tests.

Salad bar is being offered. My kids are being introduced to it. . . they may not like it yet but it is available to them.

After school program teaches my daughter how to make some foods healthier or try new recipes.

After school running club.

Girls on the Run.

Read, Write and Run.

Different games from physical education that can be done at home in the drive-way; . . . like calisthenics – how to and having friendly challenges.



Communication Methods

Schools engage parents by making a personal connection and specifically having a productive teacher-to-parent connection. Communicating effectively can be time consuming as parents voiced variety and repetition are key factors due to many competing variables for their attention. Listed are forms of effective communication that schools are using to reach parents.

Word of mouth

Teacher webpages and school website

Teacher postcards

Announcements during after-school events

School's Facebook/social media

Parent/teacher conferences

Hot-line numbers

School newsletters

Phone calls/messages

Mass emails

Parent-to-parent communication



Your School Week

A brighter future begins here.



MONDAY	Rainbow Days
TUESDAY	School Play
WEDNESDAY	Physical Activity Challenge
THURSDAY	Grandparent's Breakfast
FRIDAY	Parent/Teacher Conferences



www.yourschool.com

School Wellness Campaign

Parents were asked to vote on a unique campaign and related materials promoting school wellness.

Participants were presented with three campaign titles and asked to select the one that resonated with them. In addition, they were asked to view a variety of parent-outreach materials and respond to what makes eye-catching and readable materials. Handouts related to parent involvement in school wellness, healthy snacks and healthy role modeling for nutrition and physical activity were presented.

Campaign Titles

1. Healthy Kids = Better Learning
2. The School Day Just Got Healthier
3. **Healthy Schools. Healthy Kids. Healthy Future.**

A majority of parents selected **Healthy Schools. Healthy Kids. Healthy Future.** The campaign title identified three notable factors in school wellness and described the interrelationship with each other in an interdependent way.

Recommendations for Handouts

Content:

- Good content with larger text
- Recipes when appropriate and/or examples of healthy foods
- Positive and personable messages
- Pictures representative of the school community and children/families being active
- Material that teaches about a family topic with related illustrations
- Focused on parents as it relates to their kids

Visual:

- Text boxes to separate and emphasize material
- Bold points to emphasize content
- Bullets/list to keep material simple and to the point
- Simple language; easy to read
- All on one page
- Visually appealing



Conclusions on Facilitating Parent Engagement in School Wellness

Parents and guardians who stay involved in their children's lives help to improve their children's attitudes toward school and support school policies on wellness.

Parents throughout the state spoke about care and concern for their children as a motivator for school wellness. Parents want what's best for their children and are generally willing to support their child in any way possible. As a result of the focus groups, the following conclusions can be offered to schools to clarify and ultimately give validity to a continued and productive engagement with parents and guardians.

- Parents are most receptive when the school offers a friendly and welcoming atmosphere.
- Parents may not always have time to participate in school events, but they are still concerned about their children's education and well-being.
- Making a connection with the classroom teacher is at the core of parent engagement in schools.
- Barriers to engagement such as lack of resources and time; competing priorities and life circumstances do present themselves but are not factors to disengagement.
- Schools are empowered to offer a variety of and multiple family opportunities and events throughout the year and throughout the day.
- School events that are family friendly, interactive or offer child care whenever possible help guarantee parent participation during after school events.
- Offering events or opportunities for niche groups like grandparents and dads help to engage these groups.
- Designating parents to offer outreach and help create a welcoming venue for new parents is key particularly if the school's parent organization has strong and established roots.
- Schools are making lasting impressions in their students' lives as well as their homes with established wellness policies and routines. Investing in salad bars, implementing healthier food choices such as reduced-fat milk and offering tastings are well received. After-school programs that incorporate active games, healthy snacks and recipes are also making impressions with families.

Appendix: Team Nutrition Parent Focus Groups



Project Purpose

The purpose of this project is three-fold:

1. To increase parental awareness of and support for school wellness requirements and expected changes to their children's school environment;
2. To identify the best methods for engaging parents in activities that relate to healthy eating and active living; and
3. To understand the best way to convey school wellness related messages to parents and identify messages that resonate with the target audience.

Target Audience

Participants will be parents of elementary school-aged children from low-income communities throughout Missouri. Recruitment will take place within school districts currently participating in Department supported projects. Efforts will be made to include parents that are actively engaged in school activities and those that are not.

Key Questions

1. Why do parents participate in health-related activities in their child's school?
2. What are the barriers that affect parents' participation in decision-making processes in their child's school?
3. What are successful strategies to get parents involved in school and/or community decision-making processes?
4. What are the effective methods to communicate with parents?
5. What do parents know about their school districts' Local Wellness Policies?
6. In what types of wellness policy activities are parents willing to get involved?

Parent Focus Group Script

Name: _____ Date: _____
Region: _____
Facilitator: _____
Note Taker: _____

Introduction

Hi and good (morning, afternoon, evening). (Facilitators will lead introductions and allow plenty of time for all to introduce themselves).

My name is _____. My note taker is _____.
We are with the Department of Health and Senior Services, Team Nutrition Program. Thank you for taking the time to be a part of our/this discussion group. We really appreciate that you are taking time from your busy schedule to be here today.

Purpose

We are hosting discussion groups with over 60 parents across the state to better understand how to support parents in increasing healthy foods and beverages, physical activity and physical education in their children's schools.

Procedure

These groups are typically held to encourage discussion about a particular topic and provide opportunities to learn more about a topic or issue than we could in a survey. We will be asking you a number of questions. These questions will ask for your thoughts and opinions. We would like to hear what you think and feel about these topics, whether it is positive or negative. There are no right or wrong answers, and your honest opinions are appreciated.

We will be using first names only today. We will report only pooled responses from all the discussion groups, and will not link statements with specific names or schools. Your name will not appear anywhere in the report. **Nothing that you say will affect your child or their school.** This discussion is confidential and the information you share will be placed in a locked cabinet only to be accessed by the principal investigator.

The information from these groups will be used to generate educational and support materials and help convey school wellness related messages. After we conduct several of these focus groups, a summary report will be written for the Department of Health and Senior Services. The final report will be made public to partnering schools, any public entity and partnering organizations as requested. (Alma speaks here about overall goal for this project).

The group session should last no more than 1 ½ hours.

Review Ground Rules

We have some basic rules that give us all a chance to participate equally and fairly. (A flip chart with highlighted/summarized bullets will be used).

- There are no right and wrong answers. We are here to find out about your experiences so feel free to tell us your thoughts, whether they are positive or negative.
- It is OK to disagree with one another. We want to hear everyone's point of view. However, if you disagree, please do so respectfully.
- We would like everyone to participate. You do not have to answer every question but please know that everyone's experiences and thoughts are important.
- We have a lot that we want to talk about today. So, do not be surprised if at some point we interrupt or cut the discussion short and move to another topic. But, if there is something you wish to add, let me know and you can quickly share your thoughts before we change subjects.
- Do not worry about offending us. We really want to learn from you and find out what you think about the issues we talk about today. Please tell us your honest opinions.
- Phone-free time zone. We appreciate your time and value your input. So that we can make the most of our time together, we wish to establish it a phone-free time zone.

The group will last no more than 1 ½ hours. We will not be taking a formal break, but if you need to leave for a restroom break, please do so. If there is anything unclear, please let us know.

Now, we will ask you a few questions about what parents feel about nutrition and physical activity efforts in schools.

Before we begin, please allow me to give you some brief information about School Wellness Policies.

Any school district in the national school lunch program is required to have a student wellness policy. School districts must set goals for nutrition education, physical activity, food services and other school-based activities that promote student wellness. Also, districts have to involve a group of people in making policy and have a plan to see if the policy is working.

Barriers to engagement/(Motivators to engagement):

1. Why is it important for parents/guardians to be involved in their child's school?
2. Please describe ways in which you or other parents that you know have been actively involved in your child's school.
3. Please tell me in what ways does your child's school try to get parents involved?
4. What do you think are reasons why parents **DO NOT** get involved in their child's school?
5. What would you say are the best ways to get more parents involved?

Motivators to Change into Healthier Lifestyles (or Stay Healthy)

6. What ideas has your child brought home from school about good eating and physical activity habits?
 - a. What are the challenges to putting these ideas in place? What would help to put these ideas or practices in place?
7. What rules or routines do you practice at home relating to good eating or physical activity habits that you wouldn't mind sharing?
Probes: Are there certain types of foods or beverages that you include in every family meal? Do you eat meals together as a family? Do you put any limitations on when your children are allowed to watch television?

Methods of Communication

8. What are the ways your child's school communicates with you and your family?
 - a. What other ways would you like to receive school information?
9. Where do you get information about keeping your family healthy?
Probe: What about health information from school?

2nd Part of Focus Group: Material review - samples will be provided from a variety of resources, printed in their original format/color. What resonates with them? Why?

Wrap-up (Alma)

1. Thank the participants
2. Give them an opportunity and avenue for further input
3. Explain how the data will be used
4. Distribute gift cards

Informed Consent for Participation in Focus Group Discussion
School Wellness Campaign

We ask that you read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to be part of this activity.

I am being asked to be part of a discussion about improving the nutrition and physical activity environment of schools.

Purpose of the Study

I understand that the purpose of this study is to find out about the experiences of parents/guardians in participating in health-related activities in schools to support or help improve the nutrition and physical activity environment. The information gathered will help create materials, handouts, web information for parents/guardians to support school wellness.

Description of Procedures

If I agree to take part, I will take part in a discussion group with other parents/guardians. This process will last about 90 minutes. The discussion will be tape recorded and notes will be taken about what is said during the discussion.

Payments

I understand that I will receive a \$30 gift card for participating in this focus group.

Voluntary Participation

I am voluntarily participating in this discussion. I know I may feel uncomfortable talking about some things about my child(ren)'s school but I know I don't have to say anything I don't want to. I also understand that if I feel too uncomfortable to continue participating, I am free to leave the group at any time, without penalty or loss of the stipend.

Confidentiality

I understand that anything I say in this discussion, or any information I provide, will be kept confidential. My name will not be shared with any person, agency or organization not connected with this project. Only first names will be used in the group discussion. Because this focus group is confidential, I agree to keep private anything anyone else says here today. All records will be kept in a locked file and will be destroyed at the end of the project.

While there is always a risk of some people outside of the group hearing what is said in the discussion, I know that the project staff will do everything possible to keep all of the information I provide completely confidential.

Contacts and Questions

For more information concerning this project I may contact Alma Hopkins at 573-751-2342.

Statement of Consent

I have read (or have had read to me) this form. I have had an opportunity to ask questions and have had my questions answered. I understand that I will receive a copy of this consent form (should I request one). I give my consent to participate in this focus group.

Print Name

Signature

Date

School Wellness Campaign Project
ASSURANCE OF CONFIDENTIALITY

I, _____, am associated with the Department of Health and Senior Services and the School Wellness Campaign: Enhancing Parent Engagement. I promise to keep the names and any identifying information about the participants in this discussion completely confidential. All papers containing names or other identifying information will be kept under lock and key and will not be shared with any persons, agencies or organizations not associated with this project. Any reporting of the findings of this discussion will be done without names, and no information will be included which would reveal the identity of the participants without the written permission of the participant.

Print Name and Signature

