

**Testimony of the Wellness, Equity, and Learning Legislation (WELL) Campaign
Presented to the New York State Senate Committee on Finance and the
New York State Assembly Committee on Ways and Means
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Dear Chairperson Krueger and Chairperson Weinstein, and members of the Senate
Finance and Assembly Ways and Means Committees,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on the proposed 2020-21 New York State Executive Budget. I am writing on behalf of the WELL Campaign and our dozens of statewide partners to present our budget recommendations. The WELL Campaign is an advocacy effort to support health and well-being for ALL New York State students so they can learn and thrive.

Our children are in crisis. At a time when federal policies to support children's health are being rolled back, taking action has never been more important. One in 5 students faces a serious mental illness in a given year, while 1 in 6 New York children struggles with hunger, and almost 1 in 3 is overweight or obese. School districts need adequate tools and resources to address the health of ALL students.

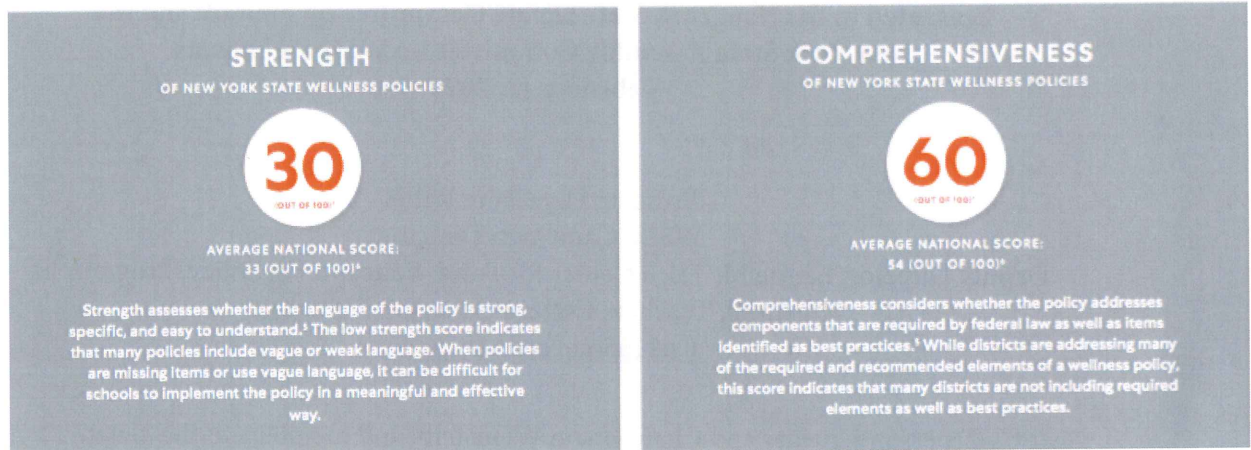
As parents and educators know—and the science shows—healthy, active children are better equipped to learn and thrive.¹ That's where school district wellness policies come in. These policies set standards and best practices to create healthy school environments where children can eat well and be physically active.² At their best, wellness policies help schools connect the dots between students' physical, mental, and emotional health and well-being.

¹ Basch, C. E. (2011). Healthier students are better learners: a missing link in school reforms to close the achievement gap. *The Journal of School Health*, 81(10), 593–598. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1746-1561.2011.00632.x>

² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2014). *Putting Local School Wellness Policies into Action: Stories from School Districts and Schools*. Retrieved April 2, 2019, from <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/npao/pdf/SchoolWellnessInAction.pdf>

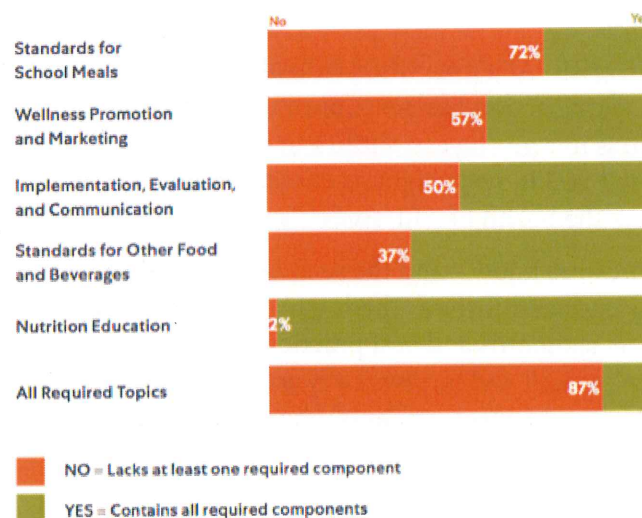
School districts need more support for school wellness. Since 2006, all districts participating in the federal school meals program are required to establish and implement wellness policies.³ The majority of school districts in New York have a wellness policy⁴. Yet according to new research from the Laurie M. Tisch Center for Food, Education & Policy, Program in Nutrition, Teachers College Columbia University, examining a representative sample of New York school wellness policies, most of these policies lack both strength and comprehensiveness.

Wellness Policies Could be Stronger and More Comprehensive.



Furthermore, nearly 90% of districts are missing at least one federally required component (See Attachment A).⁵

Most Policies Lack At Least One Federally Required Component



³ Child Nutrition and Women, Infants, and Children Reauthorization Act of 2004, Public Law 108clos. (2004). Retrieved from <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-108publ265/pdf/PLAW-108publ265.pdf>

⁴ Conversation with New York State Education Department. (2019, April 18).

⁵ Raaen L. (2019). The State of New York School District Wellness Policies: Research Brief One: How Do Our Policies Measure Up? Laurie M. Tisch Center for Food, Education & Policy, Program in Nutrition at Teachers College, Columbia University.

Evidence shows that state-level wellness policy laws lead to more comprehensive, better-implemented wellness policies.⁶ Twenty-four states have these laws; New York does not. Moreover, New York ranks near the bottom in overall policies that comprehensively address healthy schools.⁷

We urge the legislature to support our students' physical, mental, and emotional health by creating a New York model school wellness policy and investing \$1.2 million in a pilot grant program to improve and implement wellness policies, particularly in high-needs school districts.

It is clear that this budget is going to be difficult, but that does not mean that we can fail to give our school districts the resources they need. The executive budget does not include the creation of a state model wellness policy or funding for implementation. Our children deserve more.

A New York State model wellness policy will make our state a leader—becoming the first in the country to codify a comprehensive model wellness policy that gives districts a roadmap for students' physical, mental, and emotional well-being. This model policy would NOT create a new mandate. Instead, it provides a voluntary framework that gives districts a shared resource for policy improvement instead of asking them to reinvent the wheel.

Investing \$1.2 million in funding and technical assistance to support school districts—particularly high-needs districts—will allow districts to improve upon and implement their wellness policies. Of this appropriation, \$200,000 will go towards funding for the Department of Education to fill an urgently needed health and wellness position and provide wellness policy technical assistance to any districts that need help. \$1 million will fund a pilot grant program providing funding targeted to New York's high-needs school districts, to bring strong, comprehensive wellness policies to life for our state's most vulnerable children.

These solutions will make New York a leader in comprehensive school wellness. With the right state-level resources for school districts, including Foundation Aid funding, we can ensure ALL of New York's children can learn and thrive.

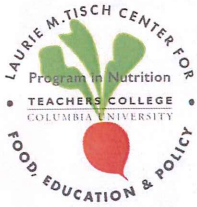
Thank you very much for the opportunity to submit this testimony.

⁶ Piekarz-Porter, E., Leider, J., Schermbeck, R., & Chriqui, J. F. (2017, November). State Wellness Policy Requirements as a Framework for Local Wellness Policies. Poster presented at the annual meeting of the American Public Health Association. Atlanta, GA.

⁷ Chriqui J, et al. (2019). Using State Policy to Create Healthy Schools: Coverage of the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child Framework in State Statutes and Regulations, School Year 2017-2018. Child Trends. Retrieved March 14, 2019 https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/WSCCStatePolicyReportSY2017-18_ChildTrends_January2019.pdf

The State of New York School District Wellness Policies

RESEARCH BRIEF ONE: HOW DO OUR POLICIES MEASURE UP?



We examined wellness policies in a representative sample of New York school districts to determine whether the potential for these policies to support the health, well-being, and academic success of all New York students is being fully capitalized on.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Wellness Policies Could be Stronger and More Comprehensive.

The average strength score was 30 and the average comprehensiveness score was 60 (out of 100).

Most Policies Lack At Least One Federally Required Component.

87% of district wellness policies do not include all required components.

WELLNESS POLICY 101

Wellness policies are written documents that guide school districts' efforts to create school environments that support health, well-being, and students' ability to learn.¹ These policies promote a healthy school environment and healthier children and get the whole school community involved - school administrators, teachers, staff, parents, and students. Healthier students are better learners, perform better in school, concentrate for longer periods of time, and have lower rates of absenteeism.^{1,2} Since 2006, all school districts participating in the National School Lunch or Breakfast Program are federally required to establish and implement wellness policies.³ The majority of school districts in New York have a wellness policy.⁴

FINDING NO. 1:

Wellness Policies Could be Stronger and More Comprehensive.

METHODS

We evaluated wellness policies using WellSAT 3.0 which measures strength and comprehensiveness across six categories, comprising 67 components (0 to 100 scale).⁶ To generate a representative sample, we used data from the Common Core of Data and the American Community Survey.^{7,8} New York has 732 diverse school districts. Districts were sorted into six groups that were similar based on four criteria: percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch; percentage of students who are English Language learners; percentage of students who identify as black, Hispanic, Asian or white; and the districts' urbanicity. The Generalizer tool determined how many districts to choose from each group to represent the state (n = 103 districts).

STRENGTH OF NEW YORK STATE WELLNESS POLICIES



AVERAGE NATIONAL SCORE:
33 (OUT OF 100)⁶

Strength assesses whether the language of the policy is strong, specific, and easy to understand.⁵ The low strength score indicates that many policies include vague or weak language. When policies are missing items or use vague language, it can be difficult for schools to implement the policy in a meaningful and effective way.

COMPREHENSIVENESS OF NEW YORK STATE WELLNESS POLICIES



AVERAGE NATIONAL SCORE:
54 (OUT OF 100)⁶

Comprehensiveness considers whether the policy addresses components that are required by federal law as well as items identified as best practices.⁵ While districts are addressing many of the required and recommended elements of a wellness policy, this score indicates that many districts are not including required elements as well as best practices.

FINDING NO. 2:

Most Policies Lack At Least One Federally Required Component

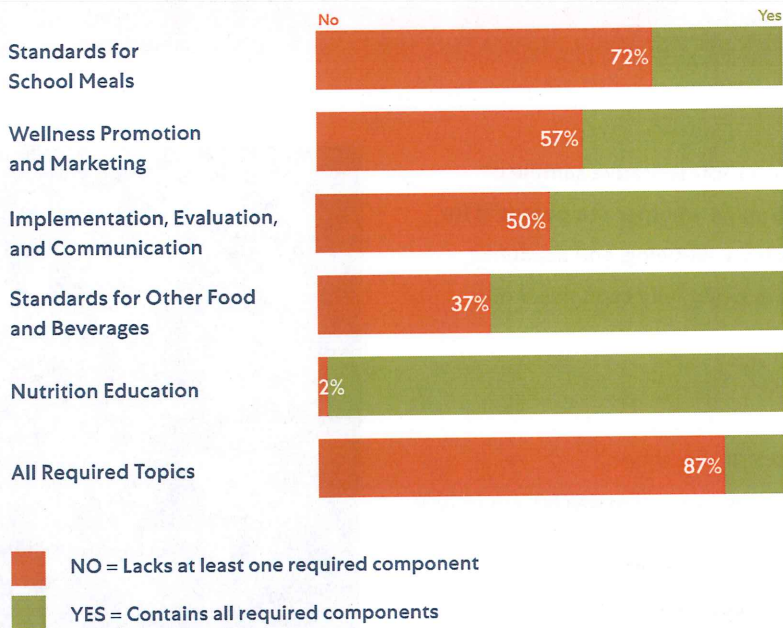
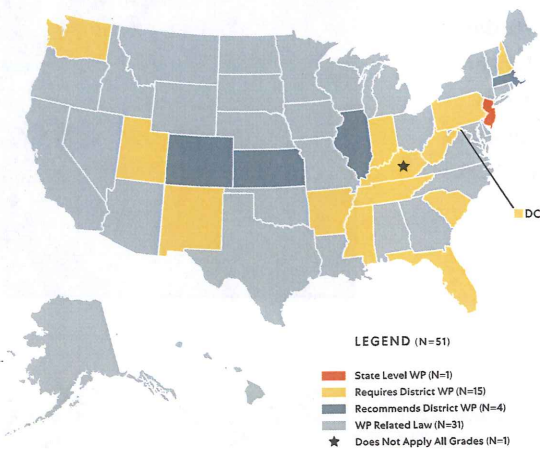


Photo by: FoodCorps/Whitney Kidder

State Wellness Policy Laws Can Improve District Wellness Policies

STATES WITH LAWS THAT REQUIRED OR RECOMMENDED THE ADOPTION OF DISTRICT WELLNESS POLICIES, SY 14-15



Adapted from Piekarz-Porter, E., Leider, J., Schermbeck, R., & Chiqui, J. F. (2017, November). State Wellness Policy Requirements as a Framework for Local Wellness Policies. Poster presented at the annual meeting of the American Public Health Association. Atlanta, GA.

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This research suggests that many New York school districts could make their wellness policies stronger and more comprehensive in order to maximize the policies' potential to support student's health, well-being, and academic success.

When districts write strong, comprehensive policies, they are more likely to be successfully implemented.⁵ A key way to improve wellness policies is through state-level policy. Research shows that states with laws about wellness policies have more comprehensive policies than those that don't.⁹ Currently, 19 states have laws requiring or recommending districts adopt wellness policies.⁹ New York is not one of them.