Evaluation of School Wellness Policies Using the WellSAT

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Background

The purpose of written **school wellness policies** is to ensure that school meal sponsors have a comprehensive plan to support student health. School wellness policies have been required by federal law for all sponsors of the federal meal programs since 2006. Additional requirements were released in 2016.

Current federal regulations require sponsors to create a committee of key stakeholders and write a policy that addresses multiple domains of health promotion. These include nutrition education; school meals; food sold or served outside of school meals; physical education; opportunities for additional physical activity; limiting unhealthy food marketing; and a plan to review and revise the policy at regular intervals. Many sponsors address other components of school health as conceptualized by the **Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC)** model (www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/wscc/).

The Connecticut School Wellness Project is a collaboration between the Connecticut State Department of Education and two University of Connecticut centers – the **Collaboratory for School and Child Health** and the **Rudd Center for Food Policy and Health**. The aim is to support Connecticut sponsors in assessing their (a) written policies and (b) current practices concerning an array of wellness topics.

WellSAT.org

WellSAT: 3.0
Wellness School Assessment Tool

The Wellness School Assessment Tool, or **WellSAT 3.0** is a quantitative assessment tool to help schools and districts score and improve their local School Wellness Policy. Since 2010, this measure has been used by thousands of people across the country, representing schools from every state.

The **WellSAT-I** is an interview that measures how fully a school or district is *implementing* wellness practices in its schools. It is designed to be used in conjunction with WellSAT 3.0.

WellSAT–I
Wellness School Assessment Tool for Implementation

Scoring Systems

WellSAT 3.0	WellSAT-I
Self-assessed by sponsor	Based on interviews with key stakeholders
0 - Not Mentioned	**0 - Not Implemented**
This item is not included in the text of the policy.	The practice does not occur in schools.
1 - Weak Statement	**1 - Partially Implemented**
The policy is mentioned, but the statement is vague, clear, or confusing.	The practice occurs sometimes or inconsistently. Improvements should be made
2 - Meets or Exceeds Expectations	**2 - Fully Implemented**
The policy is mentioned using strong, concrete language.	The practice occurs consistently.

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Domains of Interest & Outcomes

The 67-item policy list was separated into 5 distinct domains for each sponsor. Each domain encompasses a facet of a school to which a wellness policy may apply.

Evaluation Domains

Physical Education and Activity

Cafeterias

Classrooms and Curricula

Outside of the School Day

Wellness Implementation
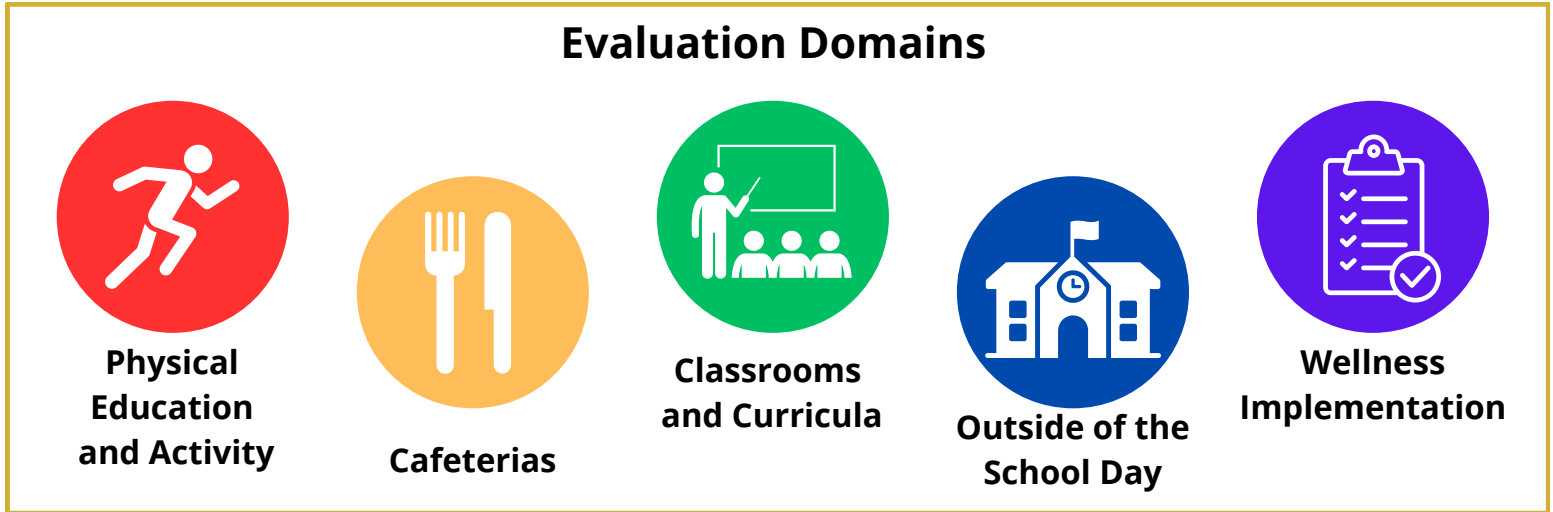
This assessment was created using information that schools input into the WellSAT tool. We looked at data from **110 school meal sponsors across the state of Connecticut.**

Each sponsor's individual item policy scores were matched and compared with its corresponding practice implementation scores. Those individual item scores were categorized into 4 groupings and provided recommendations based on its result.

4 Outcomes & Recommendations

Strong policies ←→ **Weak policies**

Strong practices ↑

Weak practices ↓

Strong Policies & Aligned Practices

This recognizes areas in which a sponsor has a strong policy and exhibits successful implementation of practices that align with the policy. Recommendation is to continue current practices and keep policies up-to-date.

Update Policies

This recognizes certain areas where the sponsor exhibits successful (or partial) implementation of practices, but there is no language – or only weak language – in the written policy. Recommendation is to update the written policy to match the current level of implemented practice.

Create Implementation Plan

This recognizes areas with strong policies, but the implemented practice may either be absent or limited. Recommendation is to work with key stakeholders and develop plans that successfully implement the policy as it is written.
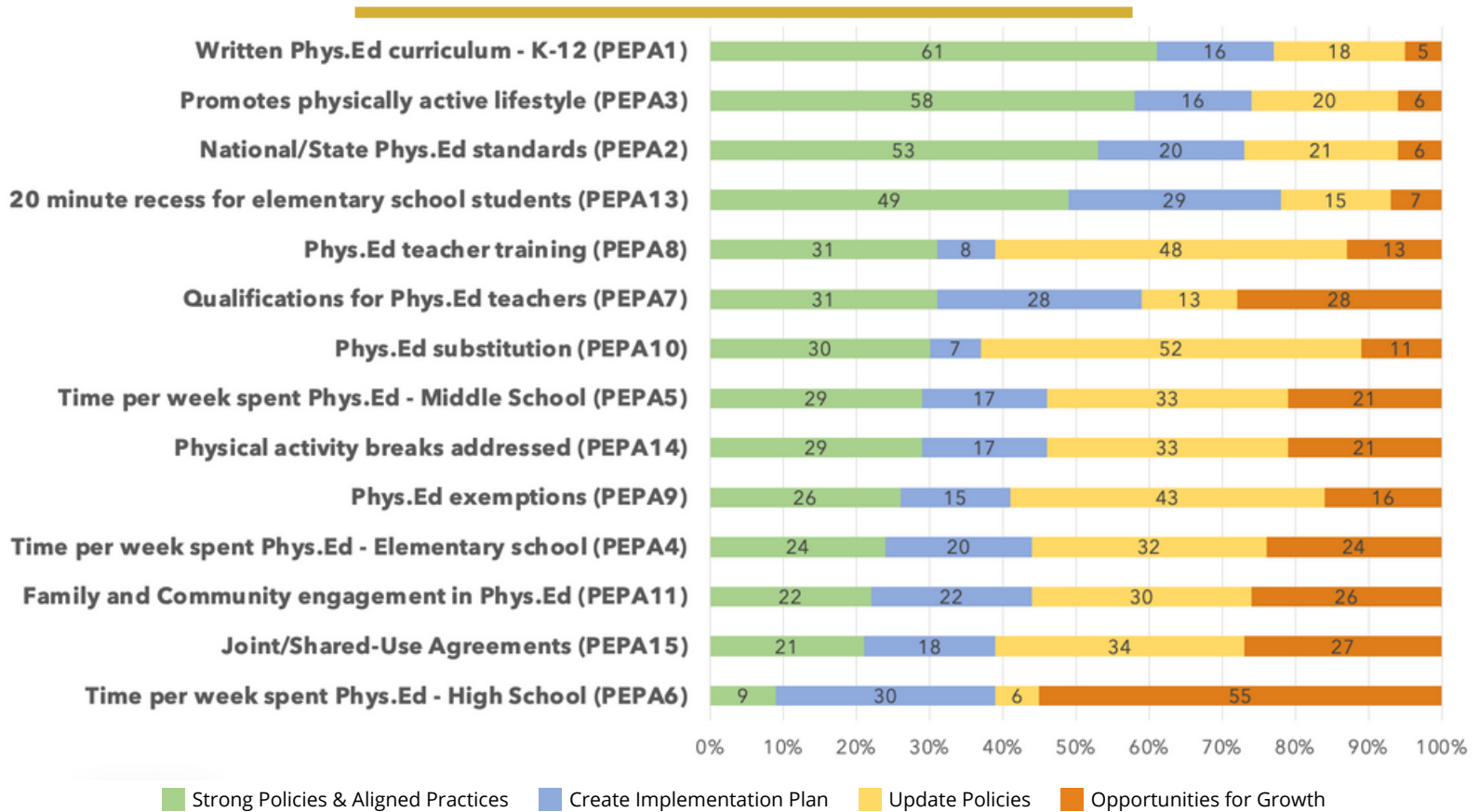
Opportunities for Growth

This recognizes topic areas not addressed in the policy or implemented practice, or addressed in a very limited way. Recommendation is to decide if the topic area is a priority and, subsequently, update written policy and develop an implementation plan for that practice.

Physical Education and Activity

PEPA1 - PEPA11, PEPA13 - PEPA15

This domain encapsulates any policy or implementation practice related to the theme of physical education or activity. Topics include but are not limited to, physical education teacher qualifications, physical education curricula, physical education exemptions, physical activity breaks, and national/state standards.

Measure	Strong Policies & Aligned Practices	Create Implementation Plan	Update Policies	Opportunities for Growth
Written Phys.Ed curriculum - K-12 (PEPA1)	61	16	18	5
Promotes physically active lifestyle (PEPA3)	58	16	20	6
National/State Phys.Ed standards (PEPA2)	53	20	21	6
20 minute recess for elementary school students (PEPA13)	49	29	15	7
Phys.Ed teacher training (PEPA8)	31	8	48	13
Qualifications for Phys.Ed teachers (PEPA7)	31	28	13	28
Phys.Ed substitution (PEPA10)	30	7	52	11
Time per week spent Phys.Ed - Middle School (PEPA5)	29	17	33	21
Physical activity breaks addressed (PEPA14)	29	17	33	21
Phys.Ed exemptions (PEPA9)	26	15	43	16
Time per week spent Phys.Ed - Elementary school (PEPA4)	24	20	32	24
Family and Community engagement in Phys.Ed (PEPA11)	22	22	30	26
Joint/Shared-Use Agreements (PEPA15)	21	18	34	27
Time per week spent Phys.Ed - High School (PEPA6)	9	30	6	55

Legend: ■ Strong Policies & Aligned Practices ■ Create Implementation Plan ■ Update Policies ■ Opportunities for Growth

"Written physical education curriculum for grades K-12." (PEPA1)"

has the strongest average implementation

"Time per week spent Phys.Ed - High School" (PEPA6)"

has the most opportunity for growth

Key Points

- Most sponsors have written Phys. Ed. curricula that promote physically active lifestyles and align with national or state standards.

- Many sponsors need to promote more family and community engagement in Phys. Ed., including through shared-use agreements.

- Sponsors should ensure that older students are as likely as elementary students to receive the recommended minutes per week in Phys. Ed.
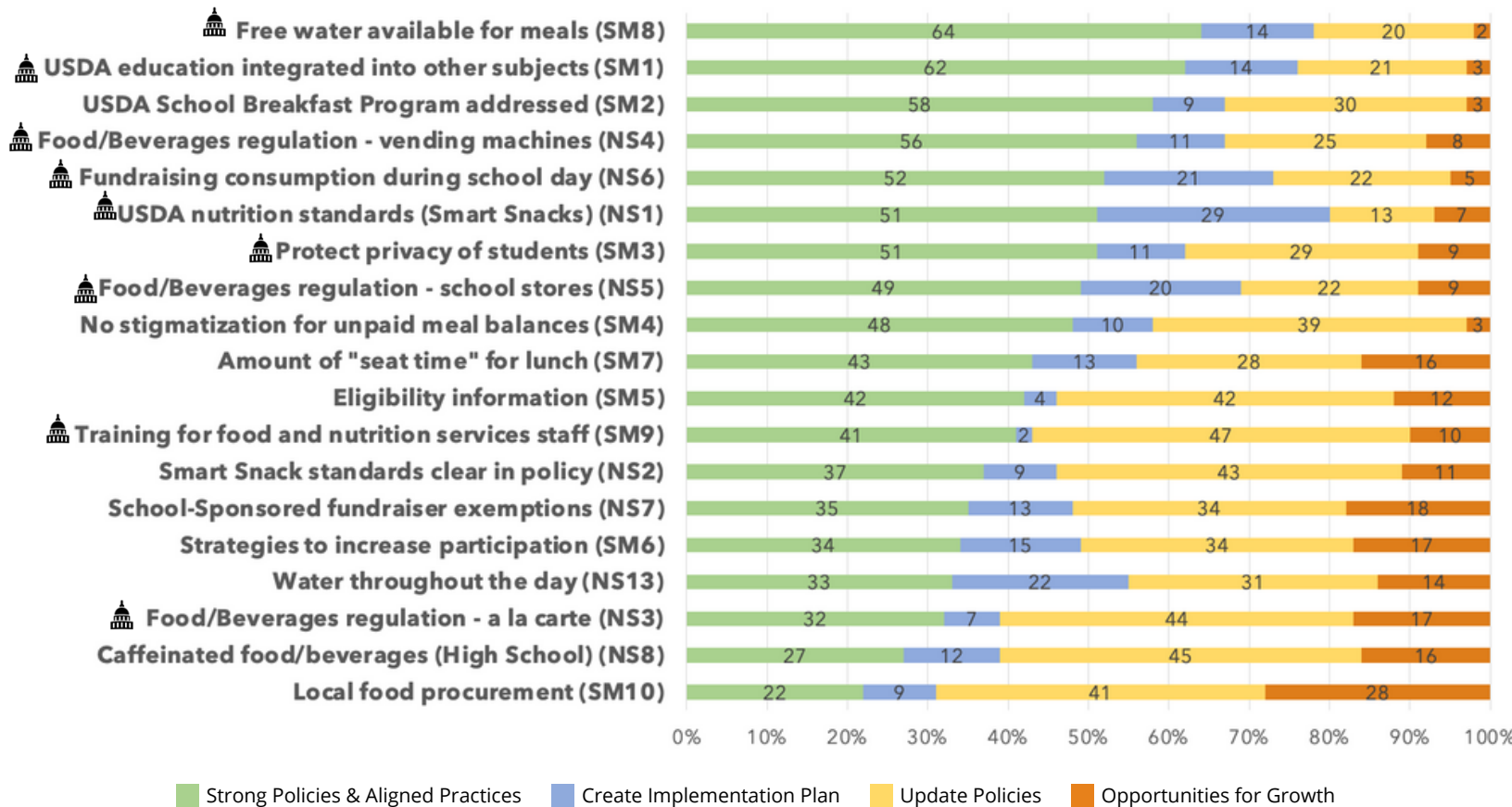
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Cafeterias

SM1-SM10, NS1-NS8, NS13

This domain encapsulates any policy or implemented practice that relates to the cafeteria. Items categorized in this domain include but are not limited to, cafeteria water access, USDA Smart Snack standards, food and beverage regulation, "seat time" for students at lunch, and school meal program eligibility.

Item	Strong Policies & Aligned Practices	Create Implementation Plan	Update Policies	Opportunities for Growth
Free water available for meals (SM8)	64	14	20	2
USDA education integrated into other subjects (SM1)	62	14	21	3
USDA School Breakfast Program addressed (SM2)	58	9	30	3
Food/Beverages regulation - vending machines (NS4)	56	11	25	8
Fundraising consumption during school day (NS6)	52	21	22	5
USDA nutrition standards (Smart Snacks) (NS1)	51	29	13	7
Protect privacy of students (SM3)	51	11	29	9
Food/Beverages regulation - school stores (NS5)	49	20	22	9
No stigmatization for unpaid meal balances (SM4)	48	10	39	3
Amount of "seat time" for lunch (SM7)	43	13	28	16
Eligibility information (SM5)	42	4	42	12
Training for food and nutrition services staff (SM9)	41	2	47	10
Smart Snack standards clear in policy (NS2)	37	9	43	11
School-Sponsored fundraiser exemptions (NS7)	35	13	34	18
Strategies to increase participation (SM6)	34	15	34	17
Water throughout the day (NS13)	33	22	31	14
Food/Beverages regulation - a la carte (NS3)	32	7	44	17
Caffeinated food/beverages (High School) (NS8)	27	12	45	16
Local food procurement (SM10)	22	9	41	28

Legend: ■ Strong Policies & Aligned Practices ■ Create Implementation Plan ■ Update Policies ■ Opportunities for Growth

"Free water available for meals (SM8)" has the strongest average implementation

"Local food procurement (SM10)" has the most opportunity for growth

Key Points

- The cafeteria is strongest among all domains with higher percentages of Strong Policies & Aligned Practices.

- Nearly every item has a large percentage of sponsors that need to update their policy, despite already implementing it.

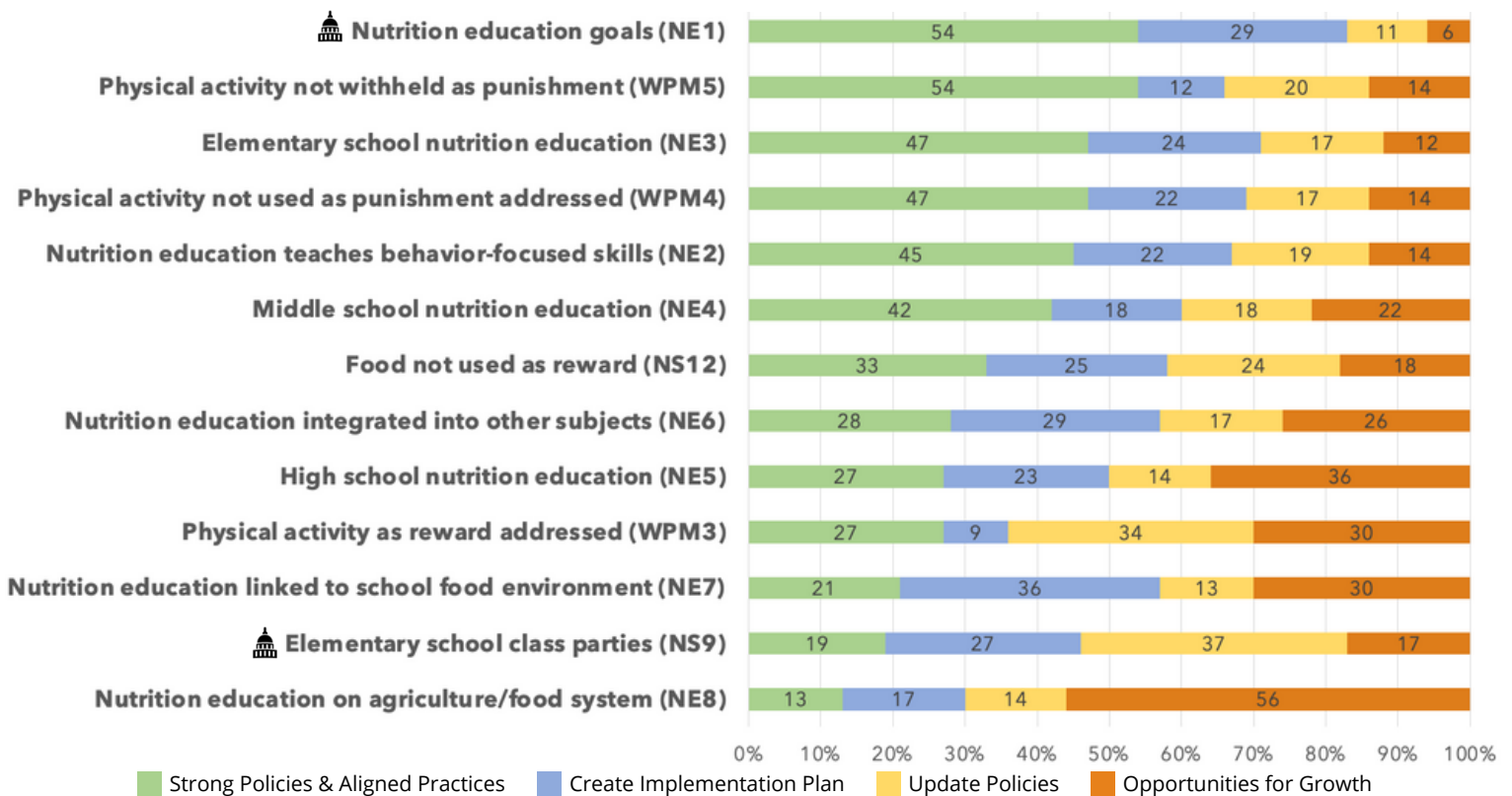- Many sponsors could benefit from updating their policies regarding local food procurement.

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Classrooms and Curricula
NE1-NE8, NS9, NS12, WPM3-WPM5

This domain encapsulates any policy or implemented practice related to classrooms or curriculum. Items in this domain apply to classrooms, teachers, school curricula relating to nutrition education, and punishment impacting physical activity time for students.

Item	Strong Policies & Aligned Practices	Create Implementation Plan	Update Policies	Opportunities for Growth
🏛 Nutrition education goals (NE1)	54	29	11	6
Physical activity not withheld as punishment (WPM5)	54	12	20	14
Elementary school nutrition education (NE3)	47	24	17	12
Physical activity not used as punishment addressed (WPM4)	47	22	17	14
Nutrition education teaches behavior-focused skills (NE2)	45	22	19	14
Middle school nutrition education (NE4)	42	18	18	22
Food not used as reward (NS12)	33	25	24	18
Nutrition education integrated into other subjects (NE6)	28	29	17	26
High school nutrition education (NE5)	27	23	14	36
Physical activity as reward addressed (WPM3)	27	9	34	30
Nutrition education linked to school food environment (NE7)	21	36	13	30
🏛 Elementary school class parties (NS9)	19	27	37	17
Nutrition education on agriculture/food system (NE8)	13	17	14	56

Legend: ■ Strong Policies & Aligned Practices ■ Create Implementation Plan ■ Update Policies ■ Opportunities for Growth

"Nutrition education goals (NE1)"

has the strongest average implementation

"Nutrition Education on agriculture/food system (NE8)"

has the most opportunity for growth

Key Points

- Most sponsors need to implement more nutrition education on agriculture and food systems.
- Sponsors should ensure that middle and high schoolers are as likely to receive nutrition education as elementary students.
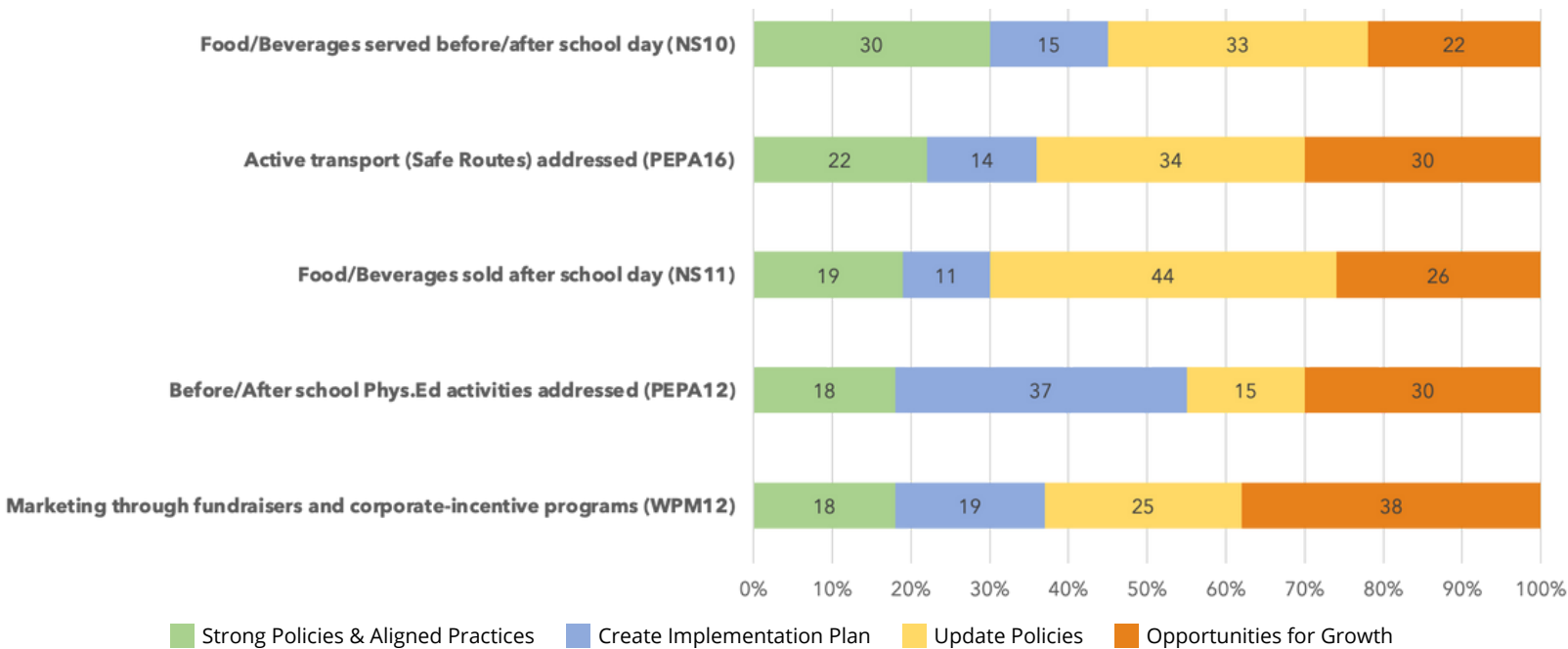- More sponsors could benefit from not using food as a reward.

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Outside of the School Day
NS10-NS11, PEPA12, PEPA16, WPM12

This domain encapsulates any policy or implemented practice that relates to programs outside of the school day. Items selected for placement into this domain include topics that occur before or after school and not programs that occur during the school day.

	Strong Policies & Aligned Practices	Create Implementation Plan	Update Policies	Opportunities for Growth
Food/Beverages served before/after school day (NS10)	30	15	33	22
Active transport (Safe Routes) addressed (PEPA16)	22	14	34	30
Food/Beverages sold after school day (NS11)	19	11	44	26
Before/After school Phys.Ed activities addressed (PEPA12)	18	37	15	30
Marketing through fundraisers and corporate-incentive programs (WPM12)	18	19	25	38

"Food/Beverages served before/after school day (NS10)"

has the strongest average implementation

"Marketing through fundraisers and corporate-incentive programs (WPM12)"

has the most opportunity for growth

Key Points

- Almost half (44%) of sponsors regulate food and beverages sold after school, but need to update their written policy.

- 37% of sponsors need to implement Phys. Ed. activities before and after school.

- Many sponsors should update their policies regarding food and beverages served before/after the school day.
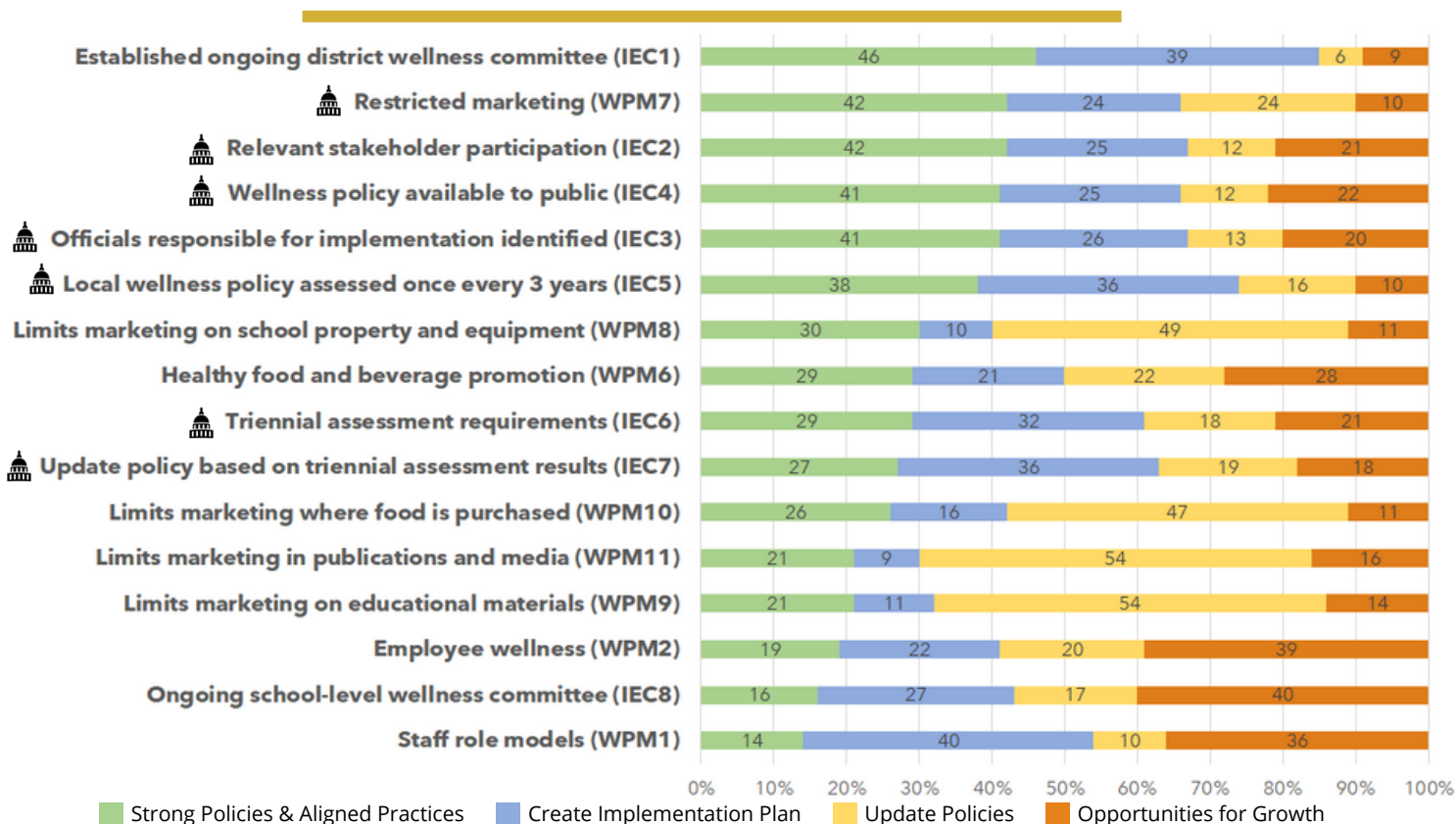
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Wellness Implementation
IEC1-IEC8, WPM1-WPM2, WPM6-WPM11

This domain encapsulates any policy or implemented practice that relates to wellness implementation. Individual item placement for this domain was based on its relation to a sponsor's wellness committee, local wellness policy, triennial assessment results, marketing and stakeholder participation.

Item	Strong Policies & Aligned Practices	Create Implementation Plan	Update Policies	Opportunities for Growth
Established ongoing district wellness committee (IEC1)	46	39	6	9
Restricted marketing (WPM7)	42	24	24	10
Relevant stakeholder participation (IEC2)	42	25	12	21
Wellness policy available to public (IEC4)	41	25	12	22
Officials responsible for implementation identified (IEC3)	41	26	13	20
Local wellness policy assessed once every 3 years (IEC5)	38	36	16	10
Limits marketing on school property and equipment (WPM8)	30	10	49	11
Healthy food and beverage promotion (WPM6)	29	21	22	28
Triennial assessment requirements (IEC6)	29	32	18	21
Update policy based on triennial assessment results (IEC7)	27	36	19	18
Limits marketing where food is purchased (WPM10)	26	16	47	11
Limits marketing in publications and media (WPM11)	21	9	54	16
Limits marketing on educational materials (WPM9)	21	11	54	14
Employee wellness (WPM2)	19	22	20	39
Ongoing school-level wellness committee (IEC8)	16	27	17	40
Staff role models (WPM1)	14	40	10	36

Legend: ■ Strong Policies & Aligned Practices ■ Create Implementation Plan ■ Update Policies ■ Opportunities for Growth

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"Established ongoing district wellness committee (IEC1)"

has the strongest average implementation

"Ongoing school-level wellness committee (IEC8)"

has the most opportunity for growth

Key Points

- District-level wellness committees have been created; however, school-level teams should also be established.

- Sponsors can strengthen policies by naming specific areas where food and beverages cannot be advertised.

- Sponsors should do more to support employee wellness and encourage staff to model healthy behaviors.

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Compliance with Federal Requirements for Wellness Policies

Recommendations to ensure Connecticut school meal sponsors comply with federal wellness policy requirements

1

Recommendation #1

Federal requirements implemented in cafeterias are the most likely to be fully in place in policies and practices. **Sponsors should ensure that all staff (not just food service staff) are aware of the federal requirements for student wellness.**

- For example, Federal Rule language requires standards for foods and beverages served at school parties and celebrations (NS9). We found that 44% of sponsors are not fully implementing this in practice.

2

Recommendation #2

Many sponsors report implementing federal requirements in practice but do not include them in their written local school wellness policies. Sponsors are required to include many of these practices in their written policies, not just in practice. **Updating written policies to include language about all federal requirements ensures that sponsors are in compliance with federal policies.**

- Including federal requirements in written policy also makes this information more readily available to staff, students, and families.

3

Recommendation #3

Many sponsors do not include policy language regarding the federally-required triennial assessment (IEC5-IEC7). **Sponsors should add language about the triennial assessment to their policies to ensure they fully comply with the requirements.**

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Triennial Assessments: Technical Assistance (TA)

All local educational agencies participating in the National School Lunch Program or School Breakfast Program (also called "sponsors") must assess their wellness policy at least every three years. The first-ever triennial assessments for Connecticut school meal sponsors were due to the Connecticut State Department of Education on **June 30, 2022**.

To complete the triennial assessment process, sponsors must measure these metrics and make the results publically available:

> **1 - The extent to which schools are implementing the LSWP**

> **2 - How the sponsor's LSWP compares to a model policy**

> **3 - The sponsor's progress toward attaining its wellness policy goals**

The UConn Rudd Center collaborated with CSDE beginning in late 2020 to create guidance and provide technical assistance for sponsors completing the triennial assessment. Together, we:

- created a **four-step process** for sponsors in the state to use, with each step corresponding to the federally required components of the triennial assessment;
- created **instructions, worksheets, and videos** for each step, posted on a website hosted by CSDE that listed each step and linked to our resources
- created a series of 14 **webinars** between February 2021 and May 2022
  - 4 covered the entire process
  - 1 covered the process for RCCIs
  - 9 covered the individual steps
  - 203 individuals from 134 sponsors attended the webinars (several sponsors attended multiple workshops)
- provided **one-on-one assistance** for sponsors via email, phone, and videoconferencing software (WebEx)
- **verified** that all sponsors had posted their triennial assessment results publicly (complete as of June 2023)

Technical Assistance Experience Survey

We sent a survey to all school meal sponsors that had completed the triennial assessment as of January 1, 2023 (N = 141). We received 52 responses (37%) representing 60 sponsors (36% of all in the state).

Forms of assistance received and reported helpful

Handout 91%, Worksheets 85%, Webinars 76%, Website 87%, WellSAT scored 93%, Videos 86%, Email 72%, Phone 83%, Virtual meetings 67%, Other 100%, Did not use any

■ Used and reported helpful   ■ Used
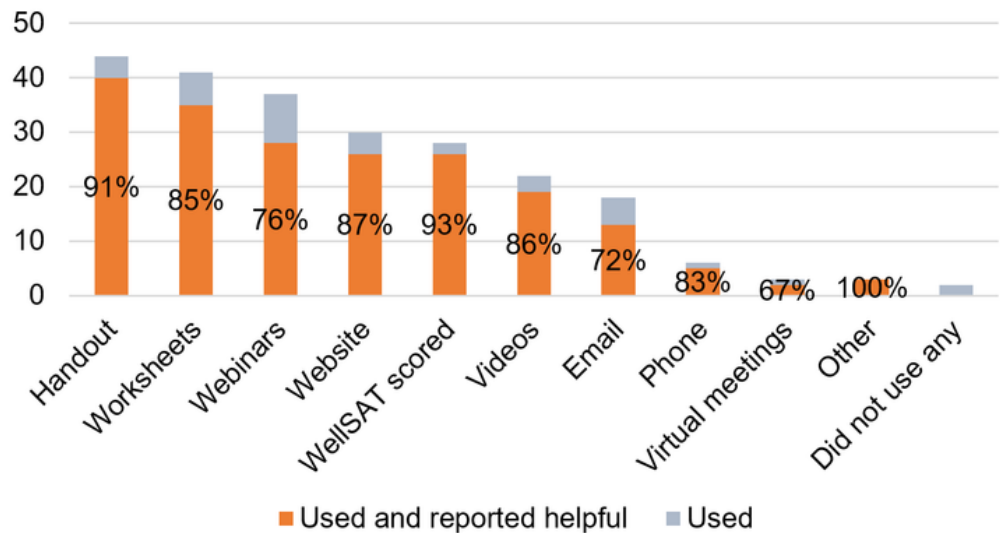
Note: Percentages indicate the percentage of respondents that used each type of assistance who reported it was helpful. The values on the vertical axis represent the number of respondents (total N = 52) that reported using each type of assistance.

Triennial Assessments: Technical Assistance (TA)

Survey questions

1. Which forms of technical assistance have you used from CSDE and the Rudd Center to help you complete the triennial assessment? (Select all that apply)
2. Which forms of technical assistance did you find helpful? (Select all forms of assistance that you found helpful)
3. What type of technical assistance would you like to have available in the future for completing the triennial assessment?
4. What other thoughts do you have about technical assistance for completing the triennial assessment that you would like to share?

Open-ended Survey Responses

Themes

1 - Generally, the TA provided was helpful

Subtheme: Each of the resources and forms of assistance helped sponsors

2 - Early TA had some problems that were resolved as they were discovered

3 - Food service directors need support from other parties (e.g, superintendents)

4 - TA should be further streamlined for future assessments

Key Findings

- Sponsors generally reported being satisfied with TA
  - No clear consensus on the most or least preferred format
- The most-used forms of assistance were developed for broad use; the least-used forms were individualized assistance, but all received high ratings of usefulness
- There were some issues with early TA that have now been resolved

Recommendations

- **Multiple forms** of technical assistance may help ensure that all sponsors' needs are met
- Provide **technical assistance** for sponsors during future triennial assessments
- Need to ensure that the stated requirements remain **consistent**
- Burden of completing the triennial assessment should be **shared**
  - Superintendents and others within districts and schools should be aware of the importance of the assessment and the need to assist wellness committees in completing this task