

## The San Diego County Childhood Obesity Initiative: A model for collaboration and comprehensive efforts to address childhood obesity

*To learn more about how a successful collaborative process is being used to address childhood obesity in San Diego County, California, NSBA staff asked Cheryl Moder (CM), director of the San Diego County Childhood Obesity Initiative, to respond to a series of questions. Her answers are a useful case study in cooperation and collaboration that involve everyone in the community, including schools, as very important contributors to strategies and solutions.*

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### **NSBA: What is the San Diego County Childhood Obesity Initiative and why was it formed?**

**CM:** The San Diego County Childhood Obesity Initiative (the Initiative) is a public/private partnership with the mission to reduce and prevent childhood obesity in San Diego County by creating healthy environments for all children and families through advocacy, education, policy development and environmental change. Our purpose is to:

- create, support, and mobilize partnerships across multiple sectors or “domains”—local government, healthcare, schools, early childhood, community, media and business;
- provide leadership and vision; and
- coordinate county-wide efforts to prevent and reduce childhood obesity.

By engaging schools, agencies, institutions, organizations, neighborhoods and individuals to work together to combat childhood obesity, the Initiative is leveraging existing resources and promising practices and inspiring new partners to join the cause.

Some of the activities/accomplishments of the Initiative include:

- development of an infrastructure that includes engagement of volunteer leaders or “champions” in each of the seven domains ;
- engagement of new and existing partners;
- leadership of ongoing domain meetings;
- convening of quarterly domain council meetings at which domain champions share their work and identify cross-collaborative opportunities.

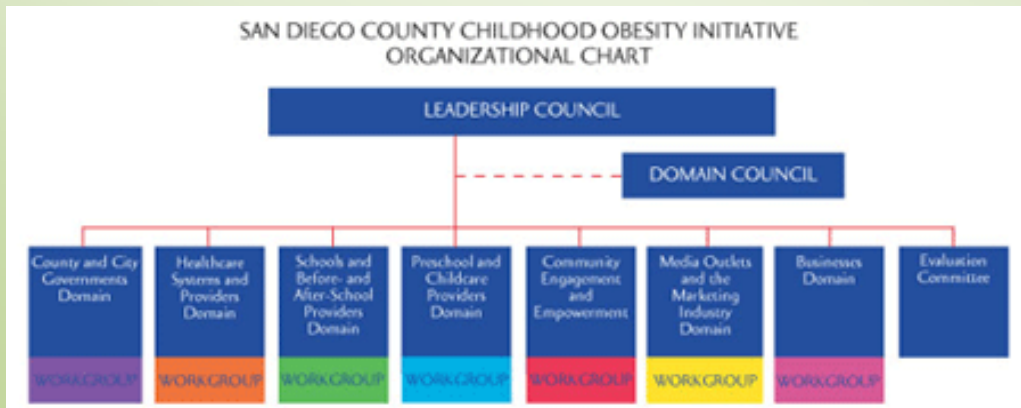
Core funding support for the Initiative is provided by the County of San Diego Health & Human Services Agency, the First 5 Commission of San Diego County and The California Endowment. The Initiative is facilitated by Community Health Improvement Partners, a voluntary collaborative of health care stakeholders working toward optimal health for San Diego County’s communities through collaboration and assessment. To learn more about the Initiative, go to [www.OurCommunityOurKids.org](http://www.OurCommunityOurKids.org).

### **The San Diego County Childhood Obesity is Organized into Domains**

The Initiative creates, supports, and mobilizes partners from multiple sectors to work toward policy and environmental changes in the seven most influential “domains” involved in creating healthy environments. These “domains” are:

- County and City Governments Domain
- Healthcare Systems and Providers Domain
- Schools and Before- and After-school Providers Domain
- Childcare and Preschool Providers Domain
- Community Engagement and Empowerment Domain
- Media Outlets and the Marketing Industry Domain
- Businesses Domain

The Initiative has established active workgroups in each domain to develop, leverage, and replicate best practices and resources throughout San Diego County and shape a healthy future.



### **NSBA: How are schools involved in the Initiative?**

**CM:** Childhood obesity prevention in schools is addressed through the Initiative’s “Schools and Before- and After-School Providers Domain.” “Domain partners” include representatives of organizations and agencies that promote healthy school environments, as well as school and school district staff members. Key projects over the past three years have focused on providing training and support to school district staff as they created and began implementation of their Local School Wellness Policies (LSWP).

Domain partners in many cases act as district representatives, providing continued support to school district wellness committees. A district representative’s main function is to serve as a liaison between the district wellness committee and the domain workgroup to direct resources and share information.

### **NSBA: What have schools involved with the Initiative accomplished?**

**CM:** Within San Diego County, many of the 42 school districts created strong wellness committees that continue to meet and promote LSWP implementation and monitoring. Active wellness committees have helped communicate the policy to staff and parents, created wellness policy fairs, supported creation of physical education curriculum and grants, and fostered innovative partnerships between student groups and food services departments.

“Breakfast in the Classroom” has been a particularly successful program in the San Diego Unified School District—40 elementary schools are now offering the program. While it has been well documented that children and adults who eat breakfast regularly are less apt to be overweight, there are academic benefits as well. In San Diego, schools offering a no-cost breakfast during the first 10 minutes of the school day have experienced decreased tardiness, absenteeism and hunger-related visits to the nurse. To learn more about this program click [here](#).

**NSBA:** *What have been the keys to these successes?*

**CM:** A key to successful implementation of LSWPs is the support of the superintendents for their designated district wellness leads to have the time, resources and authority to implement and monitor wellness policies. The implementation of LSWPs is also more likely to be successful if the wellness lead is a staff person in a position to coordinate efforts across all relevant departments, including food services and physical education. Other key factors include having a consistent wellness lead in place; holding regular (at least quarterly) wellness committee meetings that include staff, parents and community organizations; and requiring regular (at least annual) status reports to the school board.



**NSBA:** *What critical partnerships have been developed to achieve these successes?*

**CM:** With the Initiative’s “School and Before- and After-School Domain,” the key partners coordinating wellness policy trainings and support to districts are San Diego County’s Health & Human Services Agency, the San Diego County Office of Education, the California School Boards Association, California Project LEAN (a program of the State of California’s Department of Public Health) and the Network for a Healthy California. With the Initiative acting as a neutral convener, these partners and the other domain members are able to coordinate their efforts to support all 42 districts in San Diego County in a more effective way.

Individual domain members also bring their own expertise and organization’s resources to the district wellness committees on which they serve and can also call on the combined resources of all the other domain partners when a need is identified. For example, when five schools in a particular district

needed help to implement a Family Fitness Night, domain partner organizations came through with assistance in providing health screenings, fun activities and prizes. The domain representative for that district is now writing a Family Fitness Night Planning Manual to assist other schools interested in holding a similar event.

**NSBA: *What role does school leadership (school boards, superintendents) play?***

**CM:** School leaders need to make wellness for staff and students not an add-on, but a priority. There must be an expectation that all policies will be followed and that monitoring compliance will be ongoing. In addition, it is helpful for school boards to require that districts establish and maintain active wellness councils that provide ongoing reporting on wellness policy implementation. For example, Chula Vista Elementary School District provides an annual update on various aspects of student wellness, and has used "Monitoring for Success," a guide from the California School Boards Association, to track progress on wellness policy implementation. District Wellness Lead Sharon Hillidge credits this guide with helping her prepare for a California Department of Education compliance review that resulted in her district receiving a commendation for thorough documentation of their wellness policy implementation activities.

Change is a slow process and without a leaders' strong vision, the good work accomplished in creating wellness policies will not be maintained. The most successful districts have leadership that has dedicated staff time and resources to support wellness, even though funds may be tight. For example, at one high school in the Sweetwater Union High School District, the associated student body worked with district food services staff to pilot a new lunch area concept with students staffing mobile carts selling complete meals and sharing in the profits. This replaced student stores that sold mainly non-nutritious foods while allowing the student organization to still raise funds. This venture was approved despite the risk of losing resources if the pilot failed. However, the pilot was very successful and has since been expanded to other sites—this could not have happened without school leader support.



**NSBA: *What advice would you give to school boards looking to develop collaborative partnerships with other community leaders to address childhood obesity?***

**CM:** Support from the district's superintendent is critical in creating community partnerships. We recommend approaching others who are passionate about children's wellbeing. It is ideal to have a neutral convener like the San Diego County Childhood Obesity Initiative. Our balance of local government, medical entities, faith communities, community-based organizations and nutrition and physical activity advocates has been invaluable in our work.

**NSBA: *What other strategies is the Initiative working on, particularly near schools?***

**CM:** The Initiative recognizes that schools can be a hub for wellness activities in neighborhoods and that good solutions solve multiple problems. School and community gardens can not only teach children

about nutrition in a hands-on way, but also to engage community residents in the effort. Farm-to-school programs not only provide more fresh fruits and vegetables to schools, but also support local agriculture. Development of safe walking and biking routes to schools not only create more opportunities for physical activity, but also improve public safety.

The Initiative is also engaging community residents, including youth, to advocate for improvements in healthy food access and environments that support physical activity. For example, in Chula Vista, a youth group identified a run-down neighborhood park with public safety hazards. Through advocacy with the city council, public safety officials and other policymakers, the youth were successful in getting funds allocated for park improvements, including walking paths, drinking fountains, improved lighting and water drainage and recreational equipment. This policy is helping to create a safer and more welcoming place for families to be physically active in their neighborhoods and interact with neighbors.

A youth group in La Mesa identified the need for a safe walking route to a local high school. They took photos, created computer-generated visioning images and presented obstacles and proposed solutions to the city council, school boards and state representatives/transportation officials. They were instrumental in helping the city obtain over \$500,000 in Safe Routes to School grant funding for sidewalk connectivity infrastructure improvements. The Initiative has created a training manual and curriculum for youth leaders to leverage the success of these projects and enhance opportunities for long-lasting community change. We are also working with local youth organizations and high schools to create an extracurricular club that supports youth engagement and advocacy.

***NSBA: What are the Initiative's future plans for continuing to work with schools?***

**CM:** The Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization of 2009 is an opportunity for school districts to review their wellness policies to see how they might be strengthened or clarified. The Initiative's "School and Before- and After-School Domain" is planning a project to solicit input from wellness leads on key areas for revision or strengthening of policies and will then provide sample policy language in these areas. In addition, we will continue to offer training, support, resources and technical assistance to school districts, schools, after school providers and parents.

***Please direct questions about the San Diego County Childhood Obesity Initiative to [Cheryl Moder](mailto:Cheryl.Moder@sdco.org), director.***

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