

# Creating Healthier School Environments through Local School Wellness Councils

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## Background

The Healthy Montgomery TCI strategies focus on policy, systems, and environmental changes that offer long-term benefits for community health improvement and the prevention of chronic disease, with a specific focus on the communities of Gaithersburg, Germantown, Long Branch and Takoma Park in Montgomery County. One of the five TCI strategies is the adoption and implementation of Local School Wellness Councils (LSWCs) to reduce childhood obesity in these priority communities. This strategy is implemented by the Eat Well Be Active Partnership School Work Group, a county-wide group formed in 2014 to implement a coordinated strategy to decrease obesity in Montgomery County. The group has developed an action plan that focuses on the formation of LSWCs.

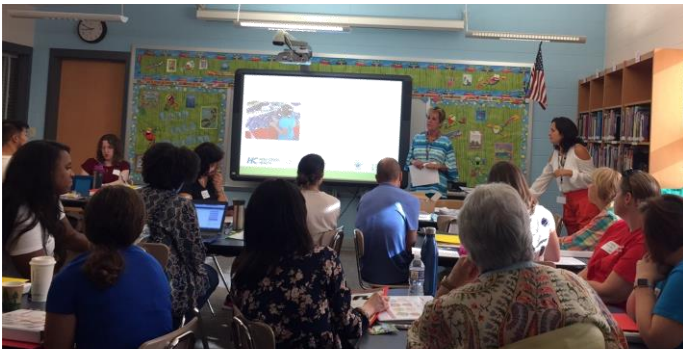
The project is coordinated and implemented by Institute for Public Health Innovation (IPHI) project staff. LSWC implementation, training, and technical assistance is a collaborative effort with participation from the School Wellness Coordinator and TCI community partners, including Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS), the Maryland State Department of Education, the University of Maryland Extension and community based organizations among others.



Lea Jaspers (MSDE), Marla Caplon (MCPS), Evelyn Kelly, Gaby Massie, Julia Groenfeldt (IPHI) and Joi Vogin (UMD FSNE) at the fall 2017 LSWC Training.

## Purpose

The LSWC strategy seeks to reduce obesity and promote healthier school environments among students in TCI priority areas. According to the Maryland Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, nearly four out of every ten Montgomery County children (36.3%) are either overweight or obese<sup>1</sup>. Since 2000, the rate of hospitalizations for Montgomery County residents with a primary or secondary diagnosis of obesity has increased more than three-fold for adults and more than four-fold for children<sup>1</sup>. LSWCs will be instrumental in assessing school needs, identifying priority practices for improvement, and enhancing the implementation and monitoring of the MCPS wellness policy. LSWCs will address priority health needs identified in the Healthy Montgomery Community Health Improvement Plan and the Action Plan Report on Obesity. Through the implementation of LSWCs, TCI partners seek to increase the percentage of students that report eating breakfast from 59% to 65%, increase the percentage of students that report being physically active at least one hour per day from 61% to 67%, and decrease the percentage of students who are obese from 23% in 2014 to 21% in 2020<sup>2</sup>.



Marla Caplon (MCPS) and Gaby Massie (IPHI) presenting on Wellness Council objectives and strategies at the LSWC Training.

*"The relationship with IPHI has been a wonderful collaboration; their dedication and focus on health and wellness has been inspiring. As we continue our work in MCPS, I look forward to establishing healthy school environments and best practices that can be shared throughout our nation".*

*Marla Caplon, R.D., L.D.  
Director of School Wellness Initiatives,  
MCPS*

## Action

LSWCs are spearheaded by Wellness Champions from individual schools. These Wellness Champions then identify other interested stakeholders from the school community to form the LSWC: teachers, students, parents, school personnel, and other community partners. Each school is provided with \$3,000 to assist with implementation of wellness goals. Additional funding is provided for school personnel to attend training on school wellness topics, advocacy skills, and implementation planning.

In August 2017, IPHI hosted the first training for Wellness Champions. Teachers and school personnel learned about school wellness, advocacy skills, and implementation planning. The training was also an opportunity to introduce Wellness Champions to TCI partners and technical assistance resources they will be able to utilize for their wellness strategies. Thirty-two teachers and school personnel attended from nine of the

ten pilot schools within the TCI priority areas. The resources provided will help schools build the partnerships needed to create successful LSWCs, implement wellness strategies, and share best practices.

## Next Steps

Throughout the school year, Wellness Champions will benefit from ongoing technical assistance and will be provided with resources and tools for a successful LSWC launch and implementation. Teams will develop a recruitment plan for engaging new LSWC members in all target schools. Once the LSWCs have been established, each will conduct the Alliance for a Healthier Generation school wellness environment assessment. Using this assessment, teams will develop an action plan to implement strategies to achieve each school's specific wellness goals. Strategies will be carried out throughout the school year. TCI's Wellness Coordinator will continue to expand the LSWC program to additional schools in Montgomery County. By 2020, all schools in Montgomery County will have established LSWCs and will be implementing established wellness goals in their school environment.



Marla Caplon (MCPS) and Lea Jaspers (MSDE) presenting on the Maryland Wellness Policy objectives.

## Sources

<sup>1</sup> Healthy Montgomery Obesity Action Plan Report. 2014: [http://assets.thehcn.net/content/sites/montgomery/FINAL\\_Obesity\\_Action\\_Plan\\_Report\\_3\\_10\\_14\\_20140328130842.pdf](http://assets.thehcn.net/content/sites/montgomery/FINAL_Obesity_Action_Plan_Report_3_10_14_20140328130842.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Youth Risk Behavior Survey (Montgomery County). 2014: <https://phpa.health.maryland.gov/ccdpc/Reports/Pages/yrbs.aspx>

## ABOUT

The Institute for Public Innovation (IPHI) creates partnerships across sectors and cultivates innovative solutions that improve health and well-being for all populations and communities across the District of Columbia, Maryland and Virginia, particularly those most affected by health inequities. IPHI's work enhances the environments and conditions in which people live, age, work, learn, and play; strengthens health service systems and public policy; and builds organizational and community capacity to sustain progress. IPHI is one of over 40 public health institutes across the country and a member of the National Network of Public Health Institutes.