

School Staff Perspectives on Building Healthier School Communities

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Background: School staff spend significant time with students, positioning schools as key settings for shaping health behaviors. The Patachou Foundation's PataSchool program partners with two Indianapolis charter schools to promote health equity through scratch-cooked meals and staff training. However, little research exists on school staff perspectives regarding community health and wellness.

Project Method: 36 staff members, including teachers, administrators, and cafeteria staff, participated in interviews or focus groups. Transcripts were standardized and uploaded to NVivo for qualitative thematic analysis. Descriptive analysis focused on staff health definitions, motivations, barriers, and perceptions of healthy school environments.

Results: Staff defined health as a balance of physical, mental, and emotional well-being, with motivation grounded in personal and family experiences with illness. Common barriers included fatigue and time, with staff stating "By the time we get home... I'm drained out." Staff emphasized schools' responsibility in promoting student health beyond academics, emphasizing how "schools have very important roles to try and just promote the overall health and well-being of kids, not just academic[s]." Staff's perceived barriers to student health included food insecurity, limited access to fresh food, and lack of consistent health education for both students and parents. Several staff also described that new programming should use strategies that are interactive, visually-engaging, and family-inclusive.

Potential Impact: Given staff's emphasis on schools as key environments for well-being, future wellness strategies should reinforce schools' role in modeling and supporting healthy behaviors. To address barriers such as fatigue, time, and inconsistent health education, programming should include visually engaging, hands-on health education that extends beyond students to staff and families. New partnerships that expand staff wellness support and incorporating these facets may help create healthier school communities and strengthen the impact of programs like PataSchool across Indianapolis schools.