Three years ago, the Wyandanch Wellness Committee decided to launch a monthly newsletter. Its initial purpose was to inform school staff, students and families about the District Wellness Policy and how specific elements were being implemented. It has since evolved into a much broader and more comprehensive overview and celebration of local wellness initiatives and accomplishments that promote health and wellness in the schools and community. Through widespread distribution at the school level and throughout Wyandanch, the newsletter has gained a degree of recognition.

Wyandanch Wellness Warriors Newsletter Gains Traction

The early issues of the newsletter featured specific topics that related to the District Wellness Policy such as classroom celebrations, fundraisers, and physical activity events. Each edition of the newsletter was translated into Spanish and Haitian Creole and once approved, was sent electronically to school staff and Wellness Committee members, and posted on the District website. As the year went on, the content of the lead stories evolved to highlight a specific best practice, success and/or monthly theme. For example, during National Nutrition Month in March, a Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School (MLK) teacher wrote about how she used a Tower Garden to teach 2nd grade students science and nutrition through growing, harvesting and tasting. In the April issue, Every Kid Healthy Week, an annual campaign created by Action for Healthy Kids, was acknowledged with a list of scheduled events and programs. The remaining spring issues in the first year of publication featured a walking initiative launched at Milton L. Olive Middle School (MLO) and several indoor and outdoor garden initiatives, with special attention to the successful MLO garden. To close out Year 1, two positive steps were taken: 1) assignment of a district clerical staff person to design and distribute the newsletter, and 2) dissemination of a newsletter survey to district staff to gauge readership and usefulness.

Positive Feedback is Encouraging

Overall, results of the staff survey were extremely positive, and allowed for open-ended suggestions.
for future topics. One challenge that was revealed was that not everyone was seeing or reading the newsletter. In response to the statement “I read this newsletter”, 27% responded “always”; 56% “sometimes”; and 17% “never”. Upon further inquiry, it was found that unless one knew about it and looked for it, the newsletter could easily get lost in an already full inbox. A majority of responses suggested that the newsletter was informative, that readers learned something new, and found the list of upcoming events and resources to be helpful. Open-ended responses from recipients provided additional feedback. One such reply came from a high school teacher, “The newsletter looks great and conveys a poignant message in a friendly manner.” Survey results and suggestions were considered to provide ideas for new themes and topics to explore in Year 2.

Year 2 began with positive news that all four school buildings had received Bronze Awards from the United States Department of Agriculture’s HealthierUS School Challenge: Smarter Lunchrooms (HUSSC: SL). This uplifting news was appropriately covered in the first newsletter edition of the new school year. As more Comprehensive School Physical Activity Program (CSPAP) strategies were implemented in the district, their stories were highlighted: MLO’s morning walking initiative and Yoga4Classrooms; monthly fitness challenges at LaFrancis Hardiman Elementary (LFH); Math and Movement at MLK; and High School Leaders of the Future members’ creative 25 Steps to Fitmas. There was no lack of topics and successes to broadcast to the district and the larger community. Anecdotal feedback continued to be positive and consensus at the District Wellness Committee determined that the newsletter should continue through the summer months. In addition to social media, the newsletter provided a wonderful platform to publicize the physical activity and nutrition opportunities taking place in July and August, such as the Summer Saturdays at Delano Stewart Plaza featuring free yoga, Zumba and dance classes, and a farmers’ market where summer meals were provided.

Celebrating and Communicating Accomplishments

At the beginning of Year 3 of publication, a revised questionnaire was distributed with an additional question about behavior change. Seventy-three percent of respondents indicated that they were either walking more, choosing more healthy snacks or drinking more water. Similar to the first survey, 79% believed that they had learned something new from the newsletter. One individual commented, “I like seeing what other schools are doing.” The newsletter has served as a source for celebrating health promotion strategies and informing those from different classrooms, hallways, buildings and throughout the community of positive efforts underway.
“The Wellness Warrior Newsletter is an important chronicle of what we’re doing and how we’re doing it. Newsletters can be a roadmap, archive and a message board. Through the newsletter we celebrate achievement, communicate accomplishments and establish recognition for all things wellness. In Wyandanch, to most people, the newsletter IS the Wellness Committee. Photos and personal stories enhance the attractiveness and value of the newsletter. We hope to always bring what’s going on to a broader audience, but we want to do so in a way that people can say we brought some value to their lives.” Monty Granger, Assistant Administrator for Operations & Physical Education and Wellness Committee Co-Chair

Looking Forward

There are many school and community wellness champions who have emerged who can contribute their stories. Western Suffolk BOCES will continue to support these leaders, engage new ones, strengthen the District Wellness Committee and building-level Wellness Teams, and maximize resources and partnerships to sustain the newsletter.

To learn more about our work:
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The Wellness Warriors Newsletter will continue to expand its readership and value. Western Suffolk BOCES will provide the necessary technical assistance to sustain it, and, hopefully, find a permanent place for it at the district level.

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