

WHAT CONTRIBUTED TO SUCCESSFUL POLICY AND SYSTEMS CHANGE IN JEFFCO?

What Those Involved Had to Say



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OVERVIEW

Policy and systems change is necessary to confront the root causes of social issues and inequities that plague our local communities. Addressing these social issues (substance misuse, violence, housing insecurity, food insecurity, etc.) leads communities towards experiencing better health outcomes, more community connectedness, and safer, more stable homes. Policy and systems change is complex and challenging, but it can be done, as shown by the Jeffco School District adopting a revised policy that would expand comprehensive health education across the district. That change did not happen out of thin air. Many people in the school community (parents, students, staff, etc.), as well as the broader community, contributed towards the success of these efforts, often over a long period of time. This report can be used to celebrate everything the community has achieved around this work up to this point and can also be leveraged to inform future policy and systems change efforts in Jefferson County and in other communities as well.

In the fall of 2023, a representative of the Community Organizing for Prevention (COFP) evaluation team interviewed a group of Jeffco changemakers to learn more about what contributed to successful systems change efforts. All those interviewed were members of the Social Emotional Learning and Health Education workgroup—some were coalition members, and some were contracted to help support the efforts. These individuals represent different ages, racial/ethnic groups, sectors, and identity backgrounds and spoke from their perspectives. Taken together, a broader story emerged about what contributed to successful policy and systems change in their community.

The COFP evaluation team is grateful to the community members who participated in interviews and shared their candid experiences around this process in their community.

DESCRIPTION OF THE POLICY CHANGE IN JEFFCO:

In 2019, as part of a Jeffco CTC planning process, members of the Jefferson County Communities That Care (Jeffco CTC) Coalition, most notably students, identified the need for more education around physical, social, emotional, and behavior health. To understand the current state of health education offerings, including social emotional wellness, Jeffco CTC collected information – interviewing school staff, youth, and community partners; - and summarized findings in a report. To expand health education offerings, a Jeffco CTC workgroup (Social Emotional Learning and Health Education) convened and identified a potential policy change effort. The workgroup decided to make recommendations to change the Health Education Policy (coded as IHAM) to address students' desire to have the same comprehensive health education as their peers in other nearby districts.

The workgroup researched best practice language for the policy, identified what health education offerings and resources existed in the district as well as potential opportunities to fill gaps, learned more from the district's leadership on how to recommend changes to the Board of Education policy, developed draft policy language, and submitted the recommended changes to the Jeffco Public Schools Board of Education in early 2021. The policy change process can be slow, and due to COVID-19, a change in the superintendent, and a Board election, the policy was not officially introduced for several months. During this time, communications were shared with the Board and district leadership to maintain momentum and promote the policy change. In April 2022, this policy change recommendation was added to the school board's agenda to be voted upon and, subsequently, was passed.

When a particular program is only accessible to some students and not others, it can be seen as unjust and unequal. Further, it can lead to disproportionate health outcomes among certain populations in the community as having a comprehensive health education program has shown to impact multiple health outcomes across a community, including reducing sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unintended pregnancies, decreasing substance and tobacco use, and improving academic performance.¹ Expanding the IHAM policy to include guaranteed, viable, facts-based, comprehensive health education, along with information on accessing needed resources for implementation, can help to address these concerns. The efforts do not end with changes to policy language. Policy change must be complemented by communication and implementation support. Many schools want to address health education; however, time and resources can be limited.

¹ www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/health-education/index.htm

HERE IS WHAT COMMUNITY MEMBERS HAD TO SAY ABOUT WHAT CONTRIBUTED TO THE POLICY CHANGE AND THE SUCCESS OF THE WORK BEHIND IT:



The power of awareness and education.

Awareness around the issue. A driving factor in the success of this initiative was the work that was put into raising awareness among those who are a part of the school community (i.e., parents, students, staff, etc.), as many within that community were unaware that access to a comprehensive health education was available to some students and not others. Once students and parents were made aware of this gap, they wanted to have the option of the same level of education for themselves and their families.

Awareness around the systems and processes. Providing education around the existing policies, processes, and structures that impact school policy was crucial. Doing so allowed those involved in the work around this policy change to know the appropriate channels and ways to advocate for the changes they wanted to see.

Youth voice matters and makes an impact.

Youth shared their voice throughout the entire process, speaking up for what they wanted and needed at town halls and other public forums, including Board of Education meetings. Their voice and energy were seen as key in moving this policy change forward.

Having paid staff lead the conversation is crucial to move towards action.

Having the resources to pay staff to facilitate conversations, coordinate efforts, and organize around this initiative was essential for success. Further, it was important to have a paid staff person who was not only from the community but who also understood the systems and processes relevant to the policy change process.

Organizational support is important.

Successful policy change required partnering with the school district and having school district employees who could inform the process; COFP's Menu of Systems Change **Strategies**; and funding from the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment's (CDPHE) COFP program.

HERE IS WHAT COMMUNITY MEMBERS SAID WERE CHALLENGES IN THE SYSTEMS CHANGE PROCESS:

Capacities were maxed.

While there were many people in the community who cared deeply about this issue and moving the work forward, the reality was that they did not have the capacity to lead this policy change process. Without someone to take the lead, efforts struggled to progress. This is why paid staff were included to help move the policy change forward.

Collaboration in the community can be a challenge.

Various organizations, groups, and individuals in the community sometimes tend to work alone around issues that impact the community, especially regarding issues that impact the entire county. This makes it very challenging for the community to come together to collaborate on similar interests and goals.

Policy change can be slow.

There is a lot that goes into the policy process. Even when one has this understanding, other things can factor in (e.g., pandemic, staff turnover, election cycles) that can slow things down even more than expected. It is important to be aware of this reality and to anticipate the need to be patient with the process.

OPPORTUNITIES MOVING FORWARD:

Continuation of support.

While the policy has passed, it has yet to be fully implemented. People close to the initiative can keep the conversation alive and continue to offer support to those who are tasked with building out the plan for the implementation of this updated policy.

One systems change can lead to other changes.

The passing of this updated policy has shown the community that change is possible. The individuals involved in this policy change effort feel more confident and capable of advocating for change in their community. Keep this momentum moving, learn from it, share out the successes, and tap into it to address other issues that are identified within the community!



