

Howard health council calls for stronger focus on wellness language

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A health advisory group to the Howard County Board of Education is calling for stronger language in policy-making that focuses on the health and wellness of county students — including the policy currently before the board that has drawn criticism for not doing enough.

"We do feel as a group that currently, the draft includes major improvements, but there might be some need to have some umbrella (statement) that states more broadly what wellness is about in the county," Anne Markus, chair of the School Health Council, said on Thursday, May 2.

The School Health Council is a group of representatives from the community and school system that acts as an advisory board to the Board of Education, advocating on a broad level for health, well, fit and safe youth. The council has existed for more than 20 years and reports annually to the board, superintendent and the county's health officer and Board of Health. Thursday was the first time in at least two years the group had sat down with the board publicly to discuss its work, and the state of health in county schools.

During the meeting, council members discussed their work — how they've seen an uptick in asthma and obesity among students, the need for more comprehensive data regarding student health and increased safety on student transportation to combat bullying.

When it comes to the health and wellness policy specifically, the council recommended that language be stronger in saying it is directly tied to physical activity and nutrition — rather than the Center for Disease Control-recommended eight components of coordinated school health.

Those eight components are health education, physical education, health services, nutrition services, counseling, psychological and social services, healthy and safe school environment, health promotion for staff and family and community involvement.

"Howard County is already a leader in many ways in the health field," Markus said. "And what we know about achieving wellness — we know it's not just through nutrition and physical activity. There are many other things that contribute to health. Streamlining and coordinating all the pieces that are already in place would help."

The draft policy does include language defining "coordinated school health," but only covers physical activity, physical education, nutrition and nutrition education. Some council members suggested creating a short policy on the CDC components that would refer to all the other policies containing language related to them, but board members were hesitant to create yet another policy.

Katrina Burton, co-chair of the committee to review the policy, said there was about 30 current policies that mention or address the eight CDC components.

Board members instead suggested strengthening the language of the policy currently before them — a work session is scheduled for Thursday, May 9 — and mentioned that a similar health mission statement is included in

the draft of Superintendent Renee Foose's new strategic plan which will be unveiled July 1.

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