

Evaluating School Wellness Policies Using the WellSAT Triennial Assessment Report

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This report summarizes the results from the triennial assessments of over 150 school meal sponsors in Connecticut. Sponsors' WellSAT Policy and Practice scores were used to assess their policy strength and level of implementation.

Background

The purpose of written **school wellness policies** is to ensure that school meal sponsors have a comprehensive plan to support student health. Current federal regulations require all sponsors of the federal meal programs to create a committee of key stakeholders and write a policy addressing multiple health promotion domains. These include nutrition education; school meals; food sold or served outside of school meals; physical education; opportunities for additional physical activity; limiting unhealthy food marketing; and a plan to review and revise the policy at regular intervals.

The Connecticut School Wellness Project is a collaboration between the Connecticut State Department of Education, the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Health, and the Connecticut Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child Partnership. The aim is to support Connecticut sponsors in assessing their written policies and current practices concerning an array of wellness topics.

Acknowledgements

The Rudd Center team would like to thank all Connecticut school districts that have used the WellSAT tool to assess their local school wellness policies and wellness implementation. Additionally, we would like to thank Fionnuala Brown, Shannon Yearwood, and John Frassinelli at the Connecticut State Department of Education. They have been champions of the WellSAT for many years, and their support has been instrumental to our school wellness work. Finally, we would like to thank UConn I3 (led by Joel Salisbury) and Chris Lenz (who built the very first WellSAT website) for their work updating the new WellSAT.

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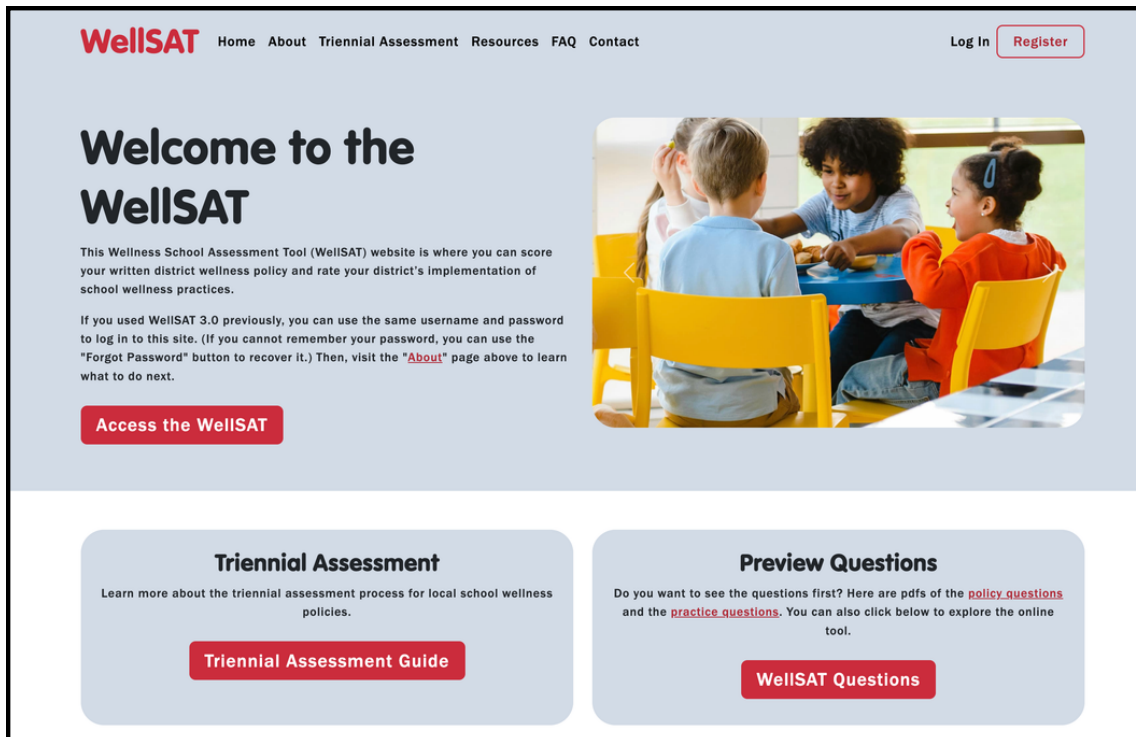


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WellSAT.org

WellSAT Policy

The **WellSAT Policy** (formerly known as WellSAT 3.0) is a quantitative assessment tool to help schools and districts score and improve their local School Wellness Policy. Since 2010, this measure has been used by thousands of people across the country, representing schools from every state.

The **WellSAT Practice** (formerly known as WellSAT-I) assesses how fully a school or district is *implementing* wellness practices in its schools. It is designed to be used in conjunction with WellSAT Policy.

WellSAT Practice

Scoring Systems

WellSAT Policy

0 - Not Mentioned

This item is not included in the text of the policy.

1 - Weak Statement

The policy is mentioned, but the statement is vague, clear, or confusing.

2 - Meets or Exceeds Expectations

The policy is mentioned using strong, concrete language.

WellSAT Practice

0 - Not Implemented

The practice does not occur in schools.

1 - Partially Implemented

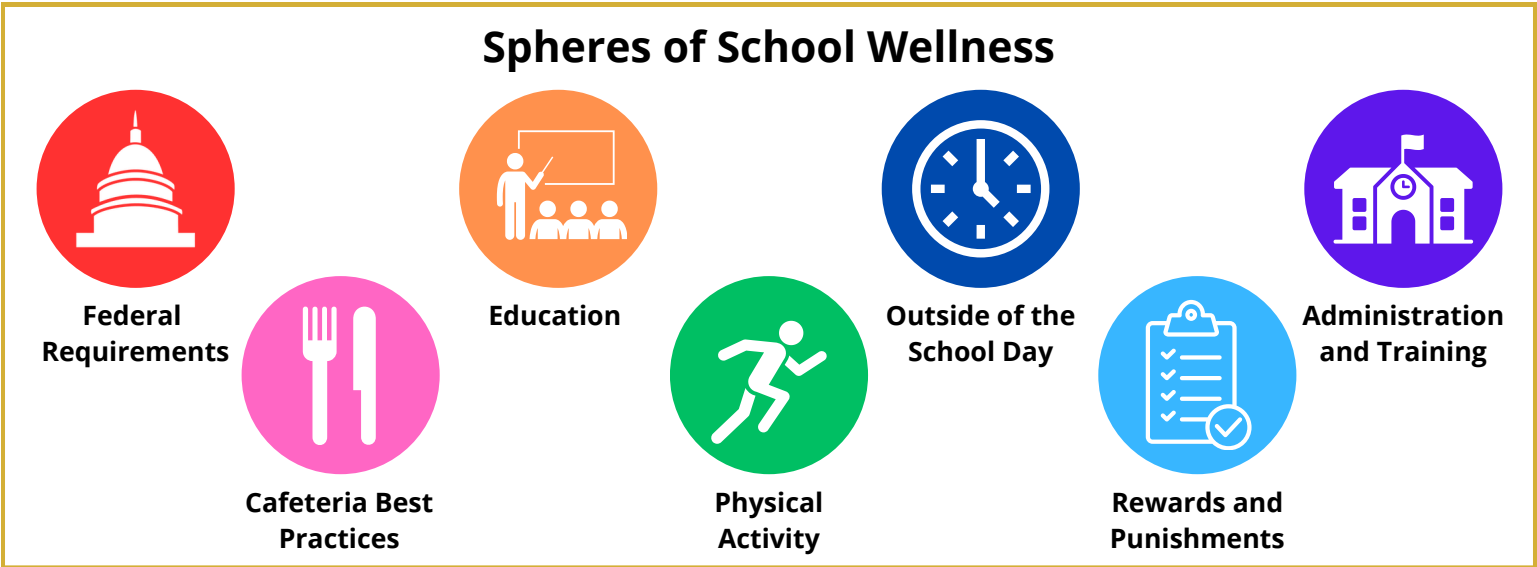
The practice occurs sometimes or inconsistently. Improvements should be made

2 - Fully Implemented

The practice occurs consistently.

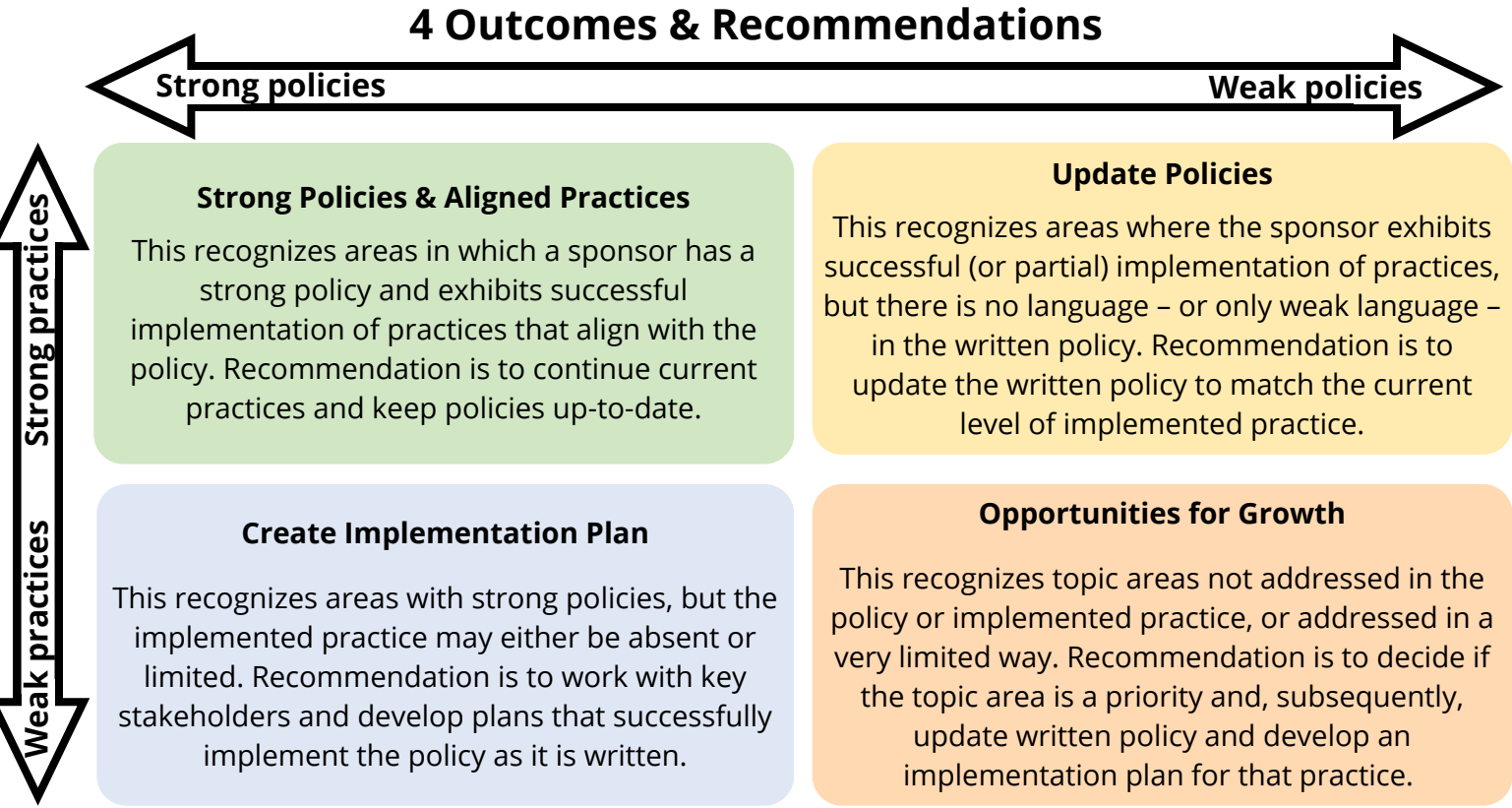
On the WellsAT, the 62 items are separated into 6 distinct domains: Federal Requirements; Nutrition Environment; Nutrition Education; Physical Activity and Physical Education; Employee Wellness; and Integration and Coordination. Each domain encompasses a facet of a school to which a wellness policy may apply.

For this report, we have divided the items into 7 evaluation domains of interest to show key trends:

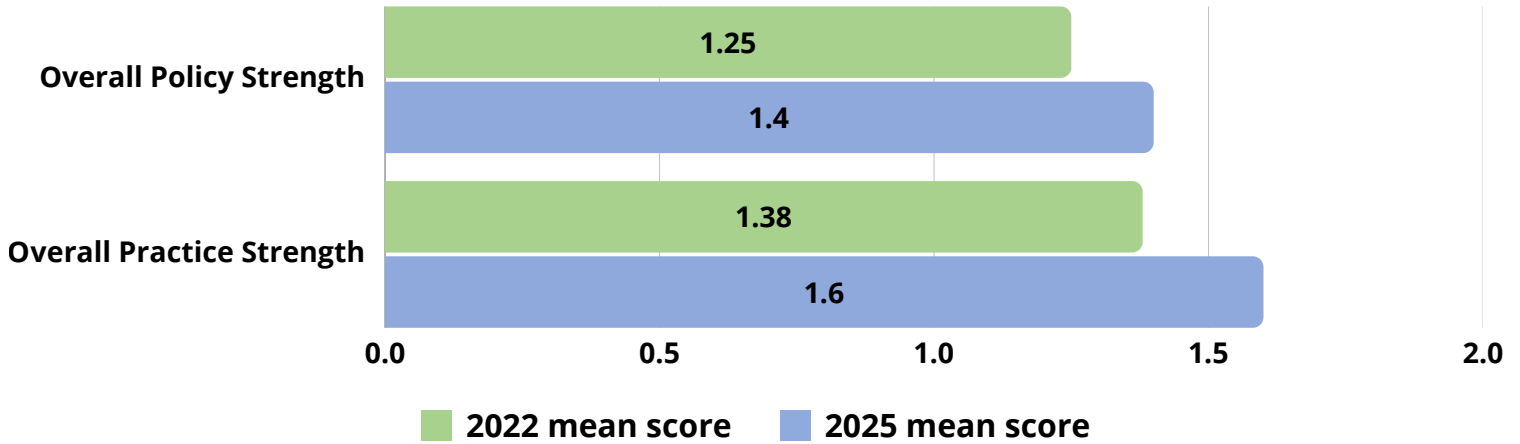


This assessment is based on data from WellsAT records for **over 150 school districts in Connecticut**. Quotes throughout the assessment are taken from the public reports.

Each sponsor’s individual policy item scores were matched and compared with its corresponding practice implementation scores. Those individual item scores were categorized into four groupings and recommendations were provided based on their results.



Improvement Over Time: 2022 and 2025



“The latest Triennial Assessment affirms that we have not only met multiple of its essential federal requirements but has made significant measurable progress in fostering a truly healthy and supportive school environment for every student and staff member.”

Key Points

- Overall, sponsors showed statistically significant improvements in the overall strength of their written policies and practices from 2022 to 2025. These findings highlight a continued strong commitment among Connecticut school districts in supporting the health and well-being of their students.
- School districts have expressed that the new WellSAT website made the triennial assessment process smooth and easy to understand. Additionally, the collaboration features on the site made it easy to complete the assessment with a full school wellness team instead of the responsibility falling on one person.

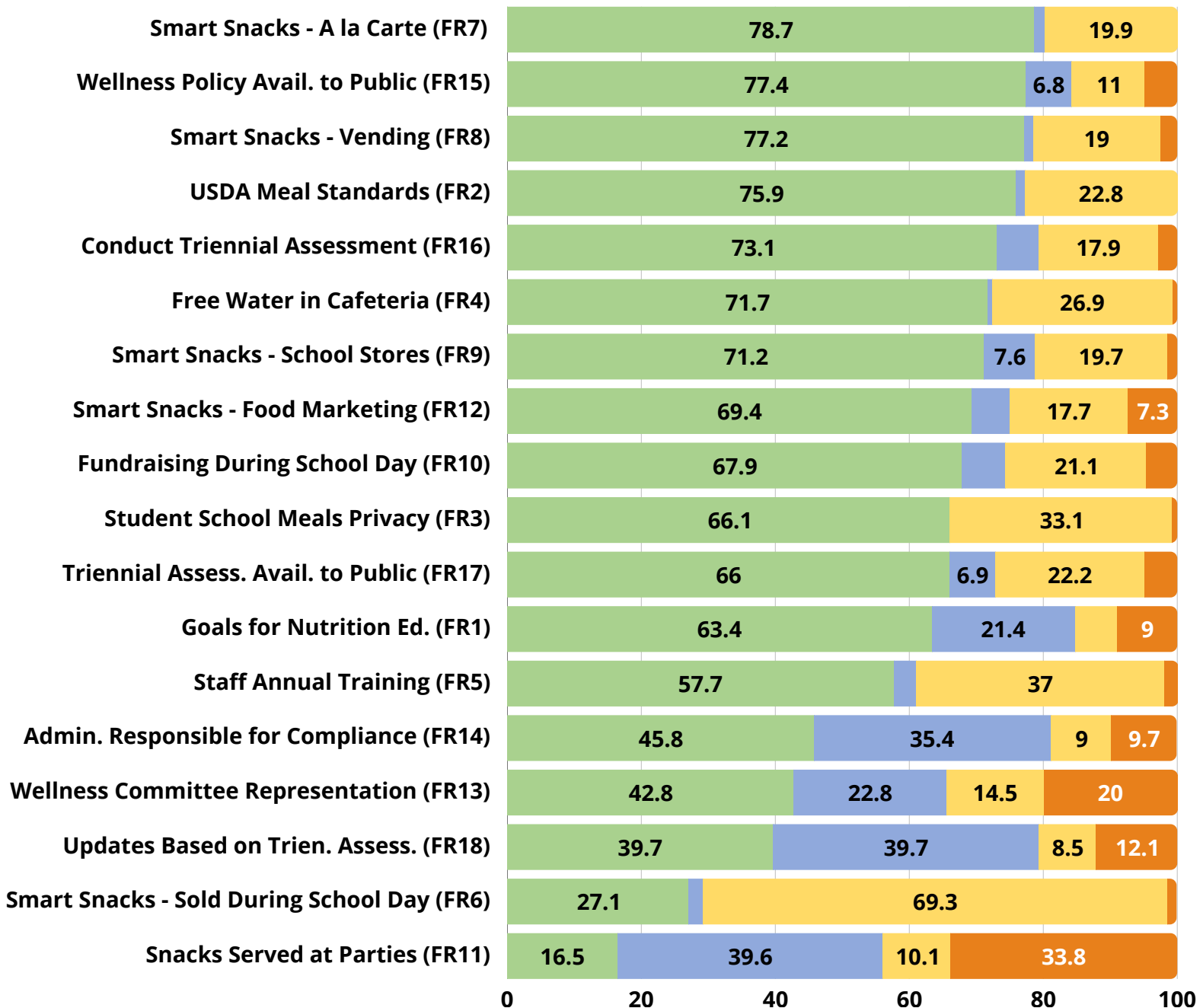




Federal Requirements

FR1 - FR18

This domain includes all items that school districts are *required* to address through federal regulations. These items are in their own domain at the start of the assessment.





Federal Requirements

Key Points

"Regulates food and beverages sold in a la carte" (FR7)

has the strongest average implementation

"Regulates food and beverages served at class parties..." (FR11)

has the most opportunity for growth

1

Key Finding #1

Three federal requirements concerning the process of implementing and updating the policy have significant opportunities for growth: identifying an administrator responsible for compliance, making regular updates based on the triennial assessment, and ensuring broad representation on the wellness committee.



"Overall, our district's policies and practices are well aligned with federal requirements and best practices. In most areas, we are either strongly or somewhat aligned. Even where our policy language may need revision, we are implementing the vast majority of federal regulations and recommended practices throughout the district."

2

Key Finding #2

While most districts ensure that all a la carte sales are Smart Snacks, many districts need to fully implement their policies for food served during the school day, such as food at classroom parties.

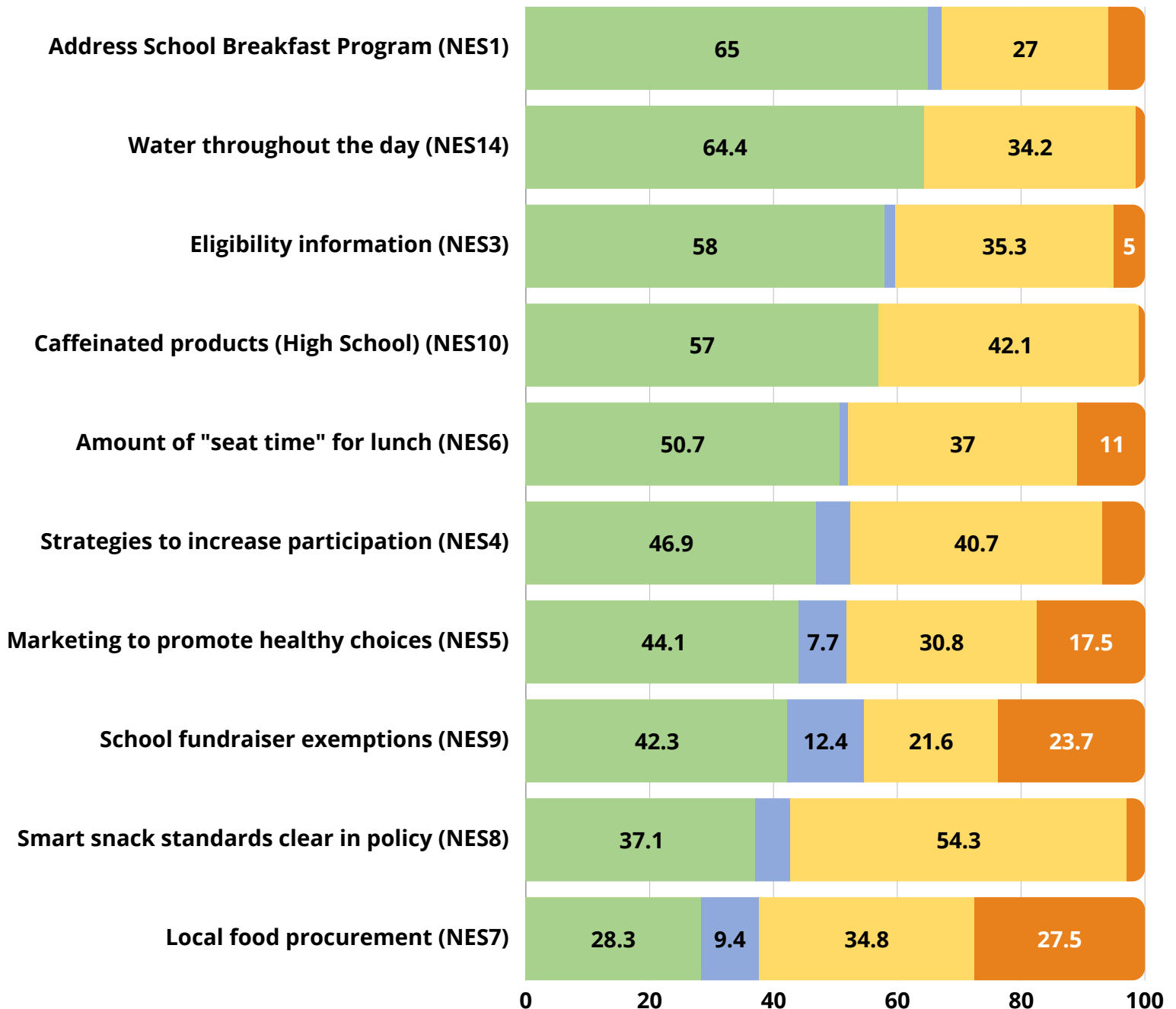
"Marketing of foods is minimal or nonexistent; any marketed foods meet HFC and Smart Snack standards."



Cafeteria Best Practices

NES1 - NES10; NES14

This domain includes best practices that take place in the cafeteria.





Cafeteria Best Practices

Key Points

"Addresses access to the USDA School Breakfast Program" (NES1)

has the strongest average implementation

"Addresses purchasing local foods for the school meals program" (NES7)

has the most opportunity for growth

1

Key Finding #1

An area of strength across the state is the full implementation of best practices in school cafeterias. Over half of school districts report strong policies and practices across items focused on breakfast, water accessibility, free/reduced price meal eligibility information, and caffeinated beverages.

2

Key Finding #2

Many school districts have best practices in place, but lack written language that supports these practices through policy. For example, an important policy element is including a link to the Smart Snack standard so that anyone can easily find them.

3

Key Finding #3

With support from Connecticut's new CT Fresh Ed initiative, districts should update their policies for local food procurement.

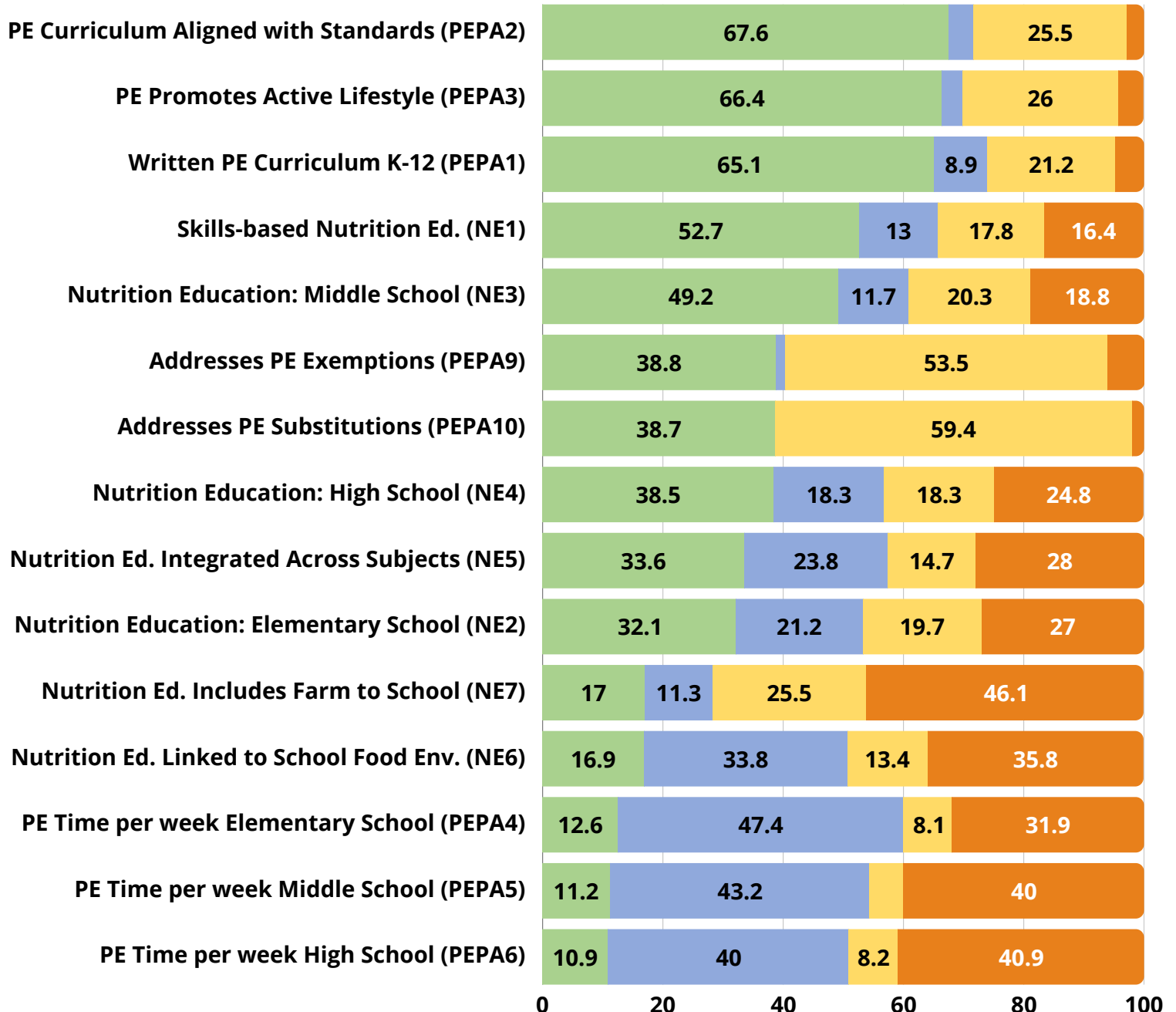




Education

NE1 - NE7; PEPA1 - PEPA6; PEPA9 - PEPA10

This domain incorporates best practices related to nutrition and physical education.





Education

Key Points

"PE curriculum for each grade is aligned with national and/or state standards" (PEPA2)

has the strongest average implementation

"Addresses time per week of physical education instruction for all high school students" (PEPA6)

has the most opportunity for growth

1

Key Finding #1

Although over half of school districts report a strong written PE curriculum that aligns with state and national standards, the majority do not implement enough time for PE across all grade levels.

2

Key Finding #2

Although districts recognize the value of integrating agriculture into nutrition education, few have already done this. Nearly half of districts indicates that this is an opportunity for growth.

3

Key Finding #3

Comprehensive nutrition education appears most strongly implemented in middle schools (49.2%), as opposed to high schools (38.5%) and elementary schools (32.1%). Districts need to improve their implementation of a sequential nutrition curriculum across all schools.



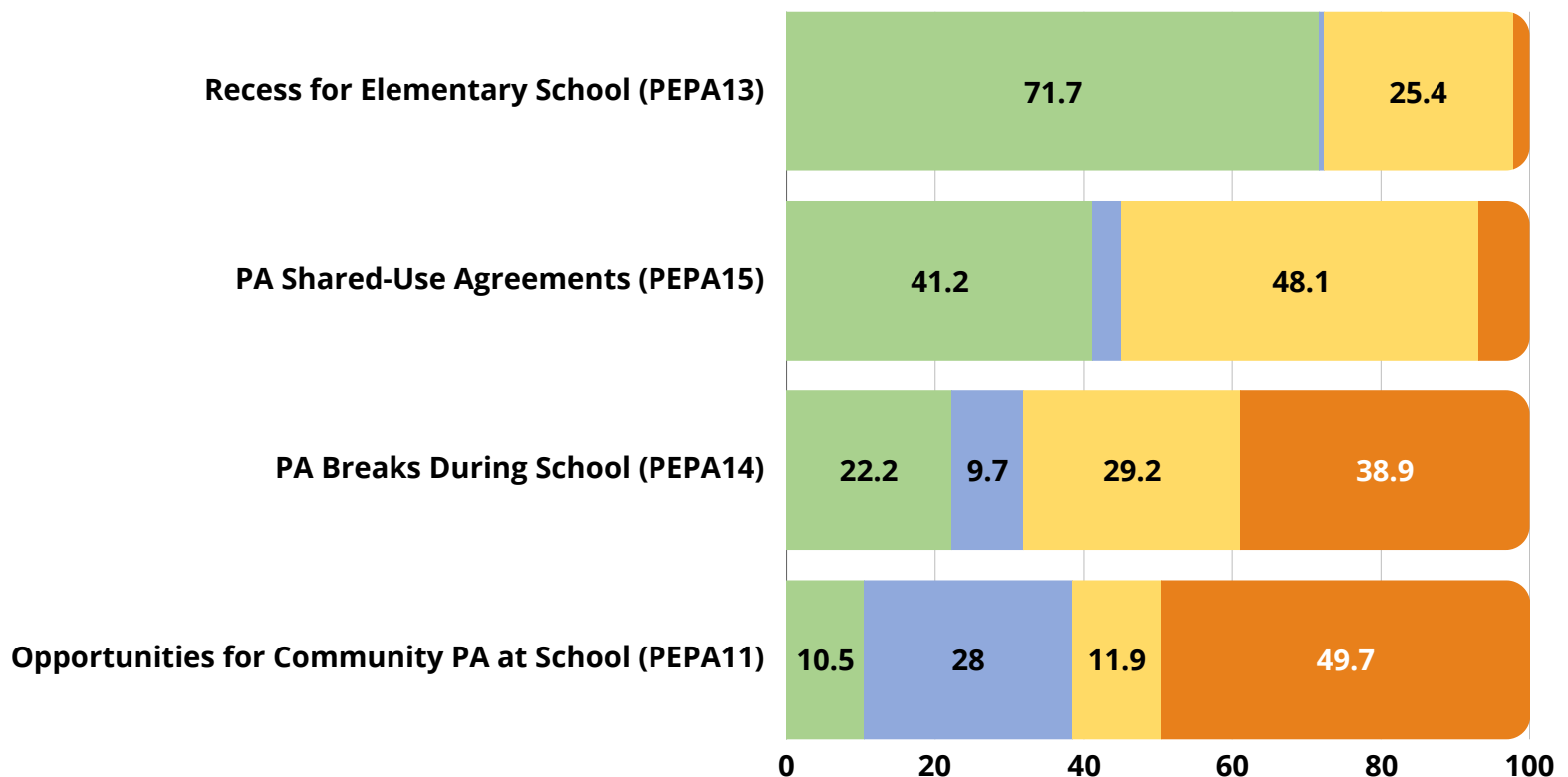
"Our district currently has limited integration of nutrition education into other subjects, and minimal collaboration between nutrition staff and teachers. This is an area for us to focus on in the future."



Physical Activity

PEPA11; PEPA13 - PEPA15

This domain includes best practices related to physical activity (PA).





Physical Activity

Key Points

"Addresses recess for all elementary school students" (PEPA13)

has the strongest average implementation

"Addresses family and community engagement in physical activity opportunities..." (PEPA11)

has the most opportunity for growth

1

Key Finding #1

Elementary school children in Connecticut have access to at least 20 minutes of daily recess. This indicates that districts have overcome challenges such as scheduling, supervising students while outside, and weather.



"Elementary students receive daily recess, and all students benefit from regular physical activity breaks during the school day."

2

Key Finding #2

The vast majority of districts report having shared use agreements, but of those, fewer than half have this written into their policies. Districts may benefit from updating their policies to reflect how they share their facilities with the community for physical activity.

3

Key Finding #3

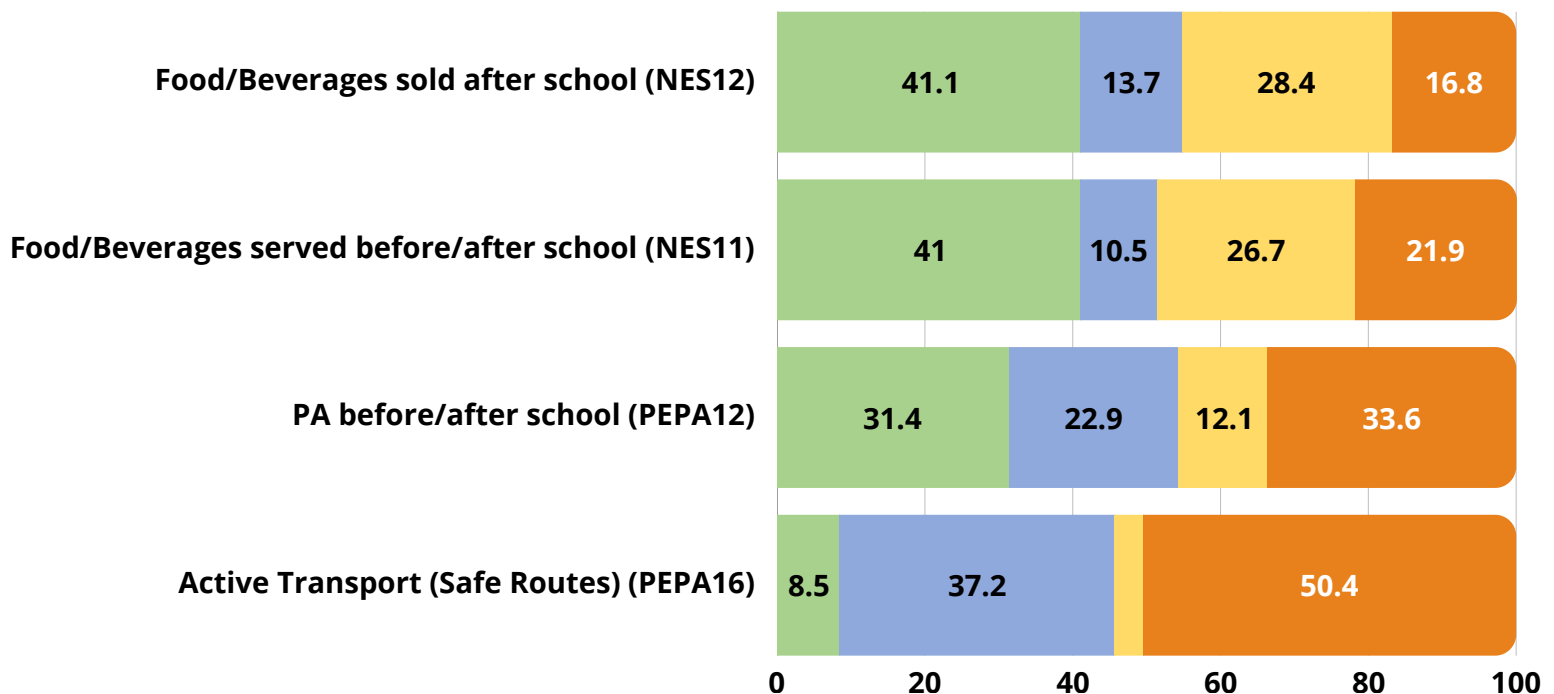
Relatedly, despite the high prevalence of shared-use agreements, fewer than a quarter of all districts report that they have opportunities for families and community members to use school facilities for physical activity.



Outside of the School Day

NES11 - NES12; PEPA12; PEPA16

This domain encapsulates any policy or implemented practice that relates to programs outside of the school day.





Outside of the School Day

Key Points

"Addresses nutrition standards for all foods and beverages sold (not served) to students after the school day..." (NES12)

has the strongest average implementation

"District addresses active transport (Safe Routes to School)..." (PEPA16)

has the most opportunity for growth

1

Key Finding #1

Despite not having a written policy, about a quarter of districts report regulating foods and beverages sold and served students before and after school. This language should be added to their policies to ensure this practice continues.

2

Key Finding #2

More than half of all districts report that they are not providing opportunities for physical activity before and after school. It may be useful for them to learn strategies from the districts that have implemented this practice.



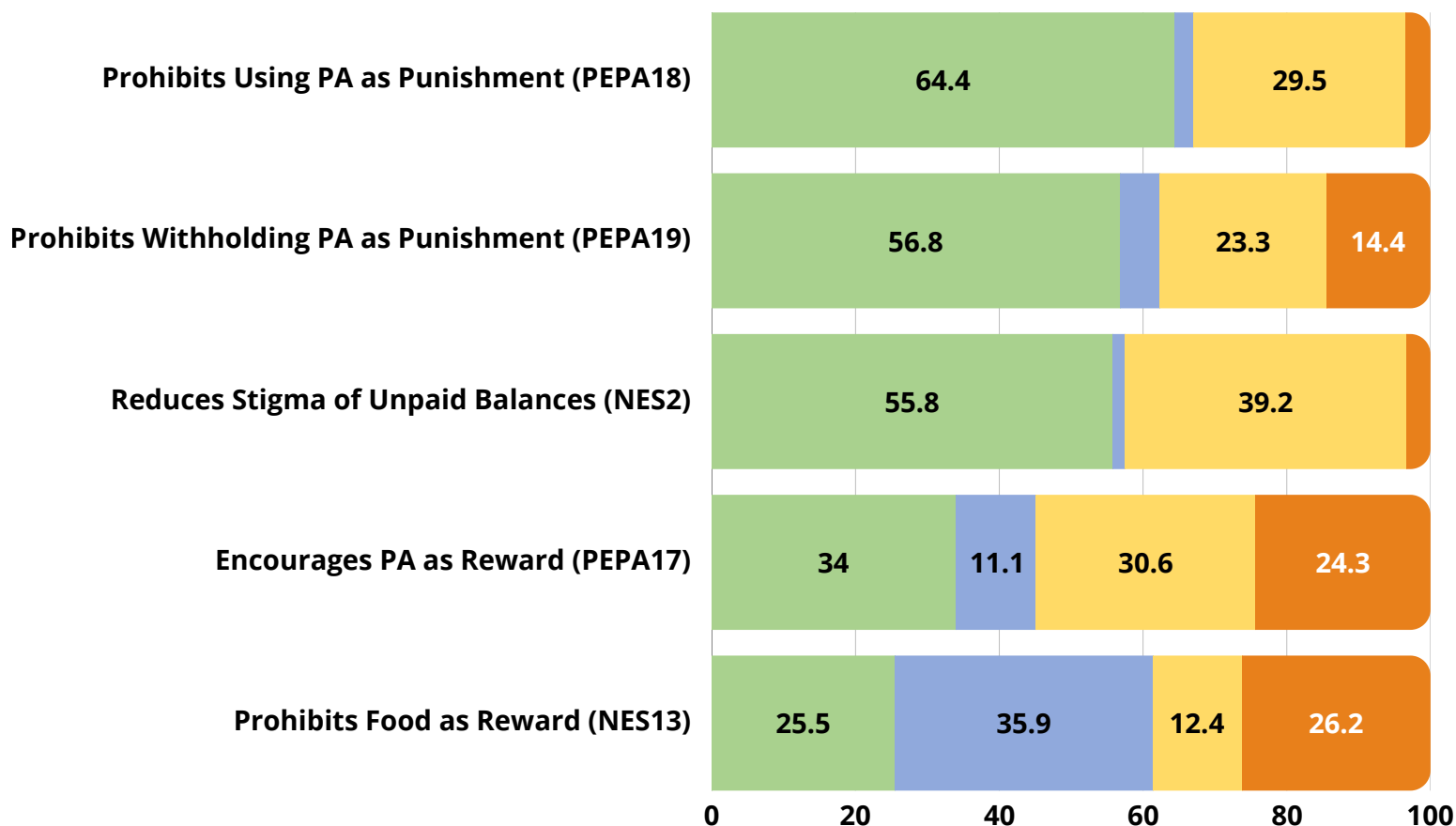
"Through the THRIVE Afterschool Program, elementary-aged students in select schools have access to structured afterschool sports and physical activity programs. Despite funding and staffing challenges, the programs have shown high levels of student engagement and highlight the importance of continued investment in extracurricular physical activity opportunities."



Rewards and Punishments

NES2; NES13; PEPA17 - PEPA19

This domain denotes any items that indicate rewards and punishments on students.





Rewards and Punishments

Key Points

"Addresses physical activity not being used as a punishment" (PEPA18)

has the strongest average implementation

"Addresses food not being used as reward" (NES13)

has the most opportunity for growth

1

Key Finding #1

Most schools reported strong policies and aligned practices that prevent the use - or removal - of physical activity as a form of punishment. On the other hand, few districts reported written policies that promote the best practice of using physical activity as a reward.



"We are committed to elevating the school-wide culture concerning nutrition. We will swiftly address the current practice gaps surrounding food in the classroom - specifically the prohibition of food as reward."

2

Key Finding #2

One of the most challenging policies to write and implement consistently is the use of food as a reward in the classroom. Only a quarter of districts have a strong policy and aligned practices for this item. More than half report that food is used as an award in the classroom, and more than a third of all districts are violating their own policies with this practice. This is a key area for future technical assistance.

3

Key Finding #3

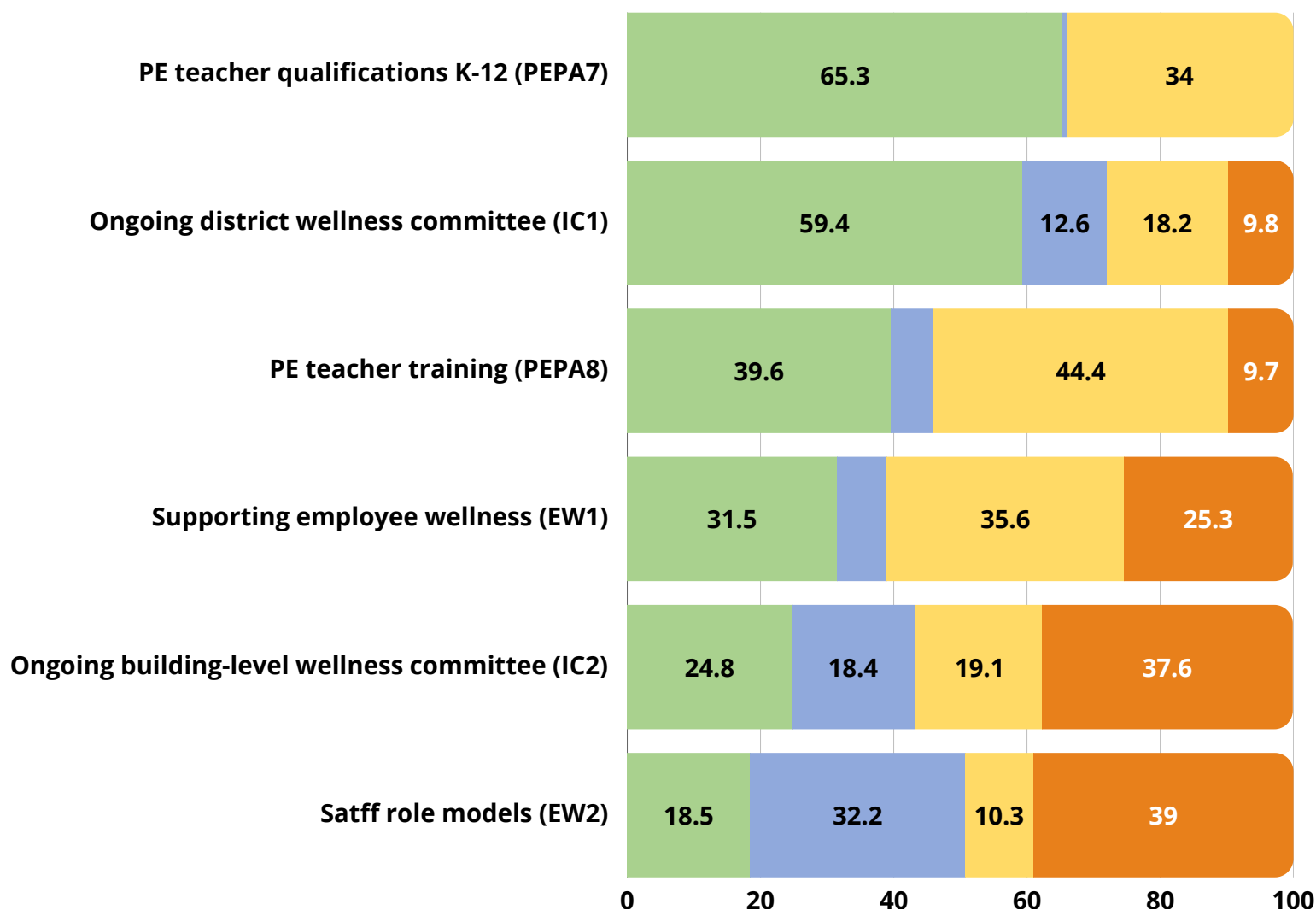
Consistent with Connecticut state law, nearly all districts report implementing practices to avoid stigmatizing students with unpaid meal balances.



Administration and Training

PEPA7 - PEPA8; EW1 - EW2; IC1 - IC2

These items address the district's wellness committee, local wellness policy, triennial assessment results, stakeholder participation, and training.





Administration and Training

Key Points

"Addresses qualifications for physical education teachers" (PEPA7)

has the strongest average implementation

"Encourages staff to model healthy eating and physical activity behaviors" (EW2)

has the most opportunity for growth

1

Key Finding #1

Most school districts have strong policies and practices in place to support ongoing wellness committees at the district level. However, evidence suggests that wellness policy implementation is better when there are also teams at the school building level. There is considerable room for growth of school wellness teams in Connecticut.

2

Key Finding #2

Although most districts have a strong policy and practice that supports *qualifications* for PE teachers, fewer than half of districts have a strong policy and practice in place to support *training* among PE teachers. Districts should consider adding a written policy to support training among PE teachers.

3

Key Finding #3

School districts could benefit from strengthening their policies and practices that relate to supporting employee wellness and encouraging staff role modeling.



"To meet the need, the director of curriculum developed a professional development training session which was completed by district faculty and staff. This made staff aware of the wellness related policies, expectations, and the health-related reasoning behind policies. A version of the training is available on a school portal."

Overall Recommendations for Wellness Policies: Changes from 2022 to 2025

1

Recommendation #1

Comparing across domains, Federal Requirements continue to be the most likely to be fully in place in policies and practices. Additionally, we saw significant improvements in policies and practices from 2022 to 2025. However, some Federal Requirements did not show improvements in this time frame. For example, in 2025, we found that only 17% of sponsors were fully implementing FR11 in policy *and* practice, a small decrease from the 19% in 2022. **Sponsors should continue to ensure that all school staff are aware of the federal requirements for student wellness.**

2

Recommendation #2

Many sponsors showed improvements in their **practices** of wellness policies related to Nutrition Education, Physical Activity, and Physical Education from 2022 to 2025. However, we observed fewer improvements in **written policies** across these same domains from 2022 to 2025. **Policy language must be updated to support the longevity of these best practices.**

3

Recommendation #3

Employee Wellness and Integration and Coordination remain key areas to strive for growth in 2025. **Districts should continue to add stronger policy language focused on employee wellness and establishing school-level wellness committees.**



Federal Requirement Progress Between 2022 and 2025

Item	Description	2022 Policy Mean	2025 Policy Mean	2022 Practice Mean	2025 Practice Mean
FR1	Nutrition education goals	1.84	1.85	1.54	1.70
FR2	Compliance with USDA school meal standards	1.72	1.77	1.77	1.98
FR3	Privacy for free/reduced price meal students	1.27	1.49	1.76	1.99
FR4	Freedrinking water during meals	1.47	1.58	1.80	1.98
FR5	Annual training for food/nutrition staff	1.23	1.46	1.91	1.93
FR6	Smart Snacks compliance (all foods sold)	1.76	1.28	1.56	1.95
FR7	A la carte food/beverage regulation	1.65	1.80	1.74	1.98
FR8	Vending machine food/beverage regulation	1.5	1.74	1.71	1.93
FR9	School store food/beverage regulation	1.57	1.67	1.62	1.93
FR10	Fundraising food during school day	1.60	1.68	1.58	1.85
FR11	Class parties/celebrations (elementary)	1.20	1.32	1.24	1.01
FR12	Marketing restricted to Smart Snacks foods	1.39	1.64	1.53	1.87
FR13	Stakeholder participation in policy	1.56	1.63	1.40	1.51
FR14	Officials responsible for compliance	1.85	1.79	1.35	1.46
FR15	Wellness policy available to public	1.54	1.78	1.42	1.87
FR16	Triennial assessment of policy implementation	1.59	1.75	1.40	1.88
FR17	Triennial assessment results made public	1.33	1.63	1.23	1.88
FR18	Policy update plan based on triennial assessment	1.33	1.64	1.01	1.18

Note. Bolded values indicate a significant difference in the scores from 2022 to 2025. Green cells reflect instances where the average policy/practice was higher in 2025 compared to 2022, whereas red cells reflect instances where the average policy/practice was lower in 2025 compared to 2022. Scores ranged from 0-2.

Key Points

- Overall, 9 items showed significant improvements in policy inclusion, and 8 items showed significant improvements in implementation.
- One item had a significant step backward in policy inclusion: FR6. This item addresses compliance with USDA nutrition standards (Smart Snacks) for all food and beverages sold to students during the school day. While this decrease may suggest that districts *removed* language related to this item from their policies during this time period, it is also possible that more detailed language in the assessment contributed to this change. Districts should check their policies to ensure they have strong language related to products sold during the school day.

Nutrition Environment Progress Between 2022 and 2025

Item	Description	2022 Policy Mean	2025 Policy Mean	2022 Practice Mean	2025 Practice Mean
NES1	Access to School Breakfast Program	1.43	1.54	1.71	1.89
NES2	Unpaid meal balances (no stigma)	0.89	1.34	1.63	1.93
NES3	Free/reduced price meal eligibility info for families	1.04	1.37	1.74	1.95
NES4	Strategies to increase meal program participation	1.20	1.36	1.60	1.87
NES5	Marketing to promote healthy food/beverage choices	1.20	1.37	1.37	1.74
NES6	Seat time for school meals	1.25	1.34	1.60	1.90
NES7	Purchasing local foods for school meals	0.81	0.98	1.54	1.57
NES8	Smart Snack standards accessible in policy	1.06	1.25	1.69	1.88
NES9	Exemptions for infrequent fundraisers	1.17	1.26	1.43	1.63
NES10	Caffeinated foods/beverages at high schools	0.93	1.20	1.50	1.99
NES11	Standards for foods/beverages served after school	0.89	1.12	1.15	1.58
NES12	Standards for foods/beverages sold after school	1.00	1.15	1.47	1.60
NES13	Food not used as a reward	1.30	1.35	1.36	1.13
NES14	Free drinking water throughout school day	1.18	1.39	1.50	1.98

Note. Bolded values indicate a significant difference in the scores from 2022 to 2025. Green cells reflect instances where the policy/practice average was higher in 2025 compared to 2022, whereas red cells reflect instances where the policy/practice average was lower in 2025 compared to 2022. Scores ranged from 0-2.

Key Points

- Overall, 8 items showed significant improvements in policy inclusion, and 10 items showed significant improvements in implementation.
- One item had a significant step backward in implementation: NES13. This item addresses teachers and staff not using food as a reward in schools. A corresponding decrease in written policy was not observed for this practice item. This suggests that, although the written policy on food being used as a reward remained relatively unchanged, fewer districts are implementing this policy in practice in 2025 than in 2022. Districts should ensure that all school staff are aware of policies related to not using food as a reward in schools.

Nutrition Education Progress Between 2022 and 2025

Item	Description	2022 Policy Mean	2025 Policy Mean	2022 Practice Mean	2025 Practice Mean
NE1	Interactive nutrition education	1.62	1.51	1.51	1.70
NE2	Sequential nutrition education (elementary)	1.44	1.42	1.20	1.49
NE3	Sequential nutrition education (middle school)	1.58	1.48	1.46	1.73
NE4	Sequential nutrition education (high school)	1.55	1.44	1.35	1.58
NE5	Nutrition education integrated into other subjects	1.44	1.44	1.28	1.42
NE6	Nutrition education linked to food environment	1.23	1.35	1.00	1.06
NE7	Nutrition education addresses agriculture/food system	0.89	0.80	0.93	1.39

Note. Bolded values indicate a significant difference in the scores from 2022 to 2025. Green cells reflect instances where the policy/practice average was higher in 2025 compared to 2022, whereas red cells reflect instances where the policy/practice average was lower in 2025 compared to 2022. Scores ranged from 0-2.

Key Points

- Overall, no items showed significant changes in policy inclusion, but 5 items showed significant improvements in implementation.
- Nearly all items related to Nutrition Education showed significant improvements in implementation across districts. Although the limited changes in written policies may be explained by a higher overall baseline in 2022 (with the exception of NE6 and NE7), many practice scores surpassed the corresponding policy score in 2025.
- Districts should consider strengthening their written policies related to Nutrition Education in schools to support the longevity of the improvements in implementation.

Physical Education & Activity Progress Between 2022 and 2025

Item	Description	2022 Policy Mean	2025 Policy Mean	2022 Practice Mean	2025 Practice Mean
PEPA1	Written PE curriculum for K-12	1.69	1.74	1.70	1.83
PEPA2	PE curriculum aligned with national/state standards	1.51	1.64	1.60	1.90
PEPA3	PE promotes physically active lifestyle	1.69	1.68	1.68	1.93
PEPA4	PE time per week (elementary)	0.93	1.02	1.26	0.57
PEPA5	PE time per week (middle school)	0.85	0.98	0.40	0.58
PEPA6	PE time per week (high school)	0.76	0.94	0.50	0.61
PEPA7	PE teacher qualifications	1.24	1.49	1.05	1.98
PEPA8	PE teacher professional development	0.88	1.13	1.65	1.84
PEPA9	PE exemption requirements	0.95	1.15	1.56	1.93
PEPA10	PE substitution requirements	0.79	0.97	1.72	1.99
PEPA11	Family/community engagement in physical activity	0.97	1.09	1.26	1.15
PEPA12	Before/after school physical activity opportunities	1.27	1.38	1.09	1.39
PEPA13	Recess for elementary students	1.66	1.68	1.49	1.98
PEPA14	Physical activity breaks during school	1.12	1.09	1.45	1.50
PEPA15	Joint/shared-use agreements for physical activity	1.00	1.12	1.36	1.90
PEPA16	Active transport (Safe Routes to School)	0.87	0.99	1.29	0.76
PEPA17	Physical activity used as a reward	0.80	1.10	1.48	1.60
PEPA18	Physical activity not used as punishment	1.43	1.51	1.49	1.94
PEPA19	Physical activity not withheld as punishment	1.39	1.44	1.61	1.79

Note. Bolded values indicate a significant difference in the scores from 2022 to 2025. Green cells reflect instances where the policy/practice average was higher in 2025 compared to 2022, whereas red cells reflect instances where the policy/practice average was lower in 2025 compared to 2022. Scores ranged from 0-2.

Key Points

- Overall, 5 items showed significant improvements in policy inclusion, and 11 items showed significant improvements in implementation.
- Two items had significant steps backward in implementation: PEPA4 and PEPA16. These two items are focused on addressing 1) time per week of physical education instruction for elementary school students and 2) active transport (Safe Routes to School) for all K-12 students who live within walkable/bikeable distance from school. While these changes indicate that districts reduced the degree to which they implemented these two practices during this time period, it could also be that districts are more familiar with the assessment and able to respond more accurately.

Employee Wellness and Integration Progress Between 2022 and 2025

Item	Description	2022 Policy Mean	2025 Policy Mean	2022 Practice Mean	2025 Practice Mean
EW1	Strategies to support employee wellness	0.96	1.07	1.19	1.62
EW2	Staff model healthy eating and physical activity	1.21	1.20	0.83	1.19
IC1	Ongoing district wellness committee	1.62	1.65	1.31	1.73
IC2	Ongoing school building-level wellness committee	0.80	1.02	0.83	1.14

Note. Bolded values indicate a significant difference in the scores from 2022 to 2025. Green cells reflect instances where the policy/practice average was higher in 2025 compared to 2022, whereas red cells reflect instances where the policy/practice average was lower in 2025 compared to 2022. Scores ranged from 0-2.

Key Points

- Overall, 1 item showed a significant improvement in policy inclusion, and 4 items showed significant improvements in implementation.
- Notably, all employee wellness and integration practices showed improvements from 2022 to 2025. The limited changes across policies suggest that districts should consider strengthening their written policies, particularly around supporting employee wellness.
- Although establishing wellness committees at the school-level significantly improved from 2022 to 2025, the average policy score remains a 1, which shows considerable room for growth. Districts should consider strengthening this by revising their policy language around the establishment of wellness committees in schools.