

# Unpacking "implementation climate:" mixed methods exploration of climate for wellness initiatives in U.S. elementary schools

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## BACKGROUND

- When well-implemented, **school wellness policies and practices** can reduce child health inequities by facilitating healthy eating and promoting physical activity
- Implementation is not always feasible in complex school climates, particularly in schools with fewer resources such as those in rural and urban areas where wellness may not be prioritized
- Understanding contextual factors that influence whether a school promotes wellness can inform future implementation strategies

### Study Objective

To describe how having a "Climate for Wellness" influences implementation of wellness initiatives in urban and rural schools

## METHODS

### Study Design

- Nested explanatory mixed methods national surveillance study of wellness policy implementation determinants and strategies

Quantitative Survey with nationally representative sample of schools

Qualitative interviews with urban and rural schools

### Measures

- Quantitative:** 6-item Climate of Wellness at School Scale ( $\alpha=0.90$ ) scored on 3-item Likert scale (max score=12)

#### Indicate to what extent each is true for your school (not at all to very much)

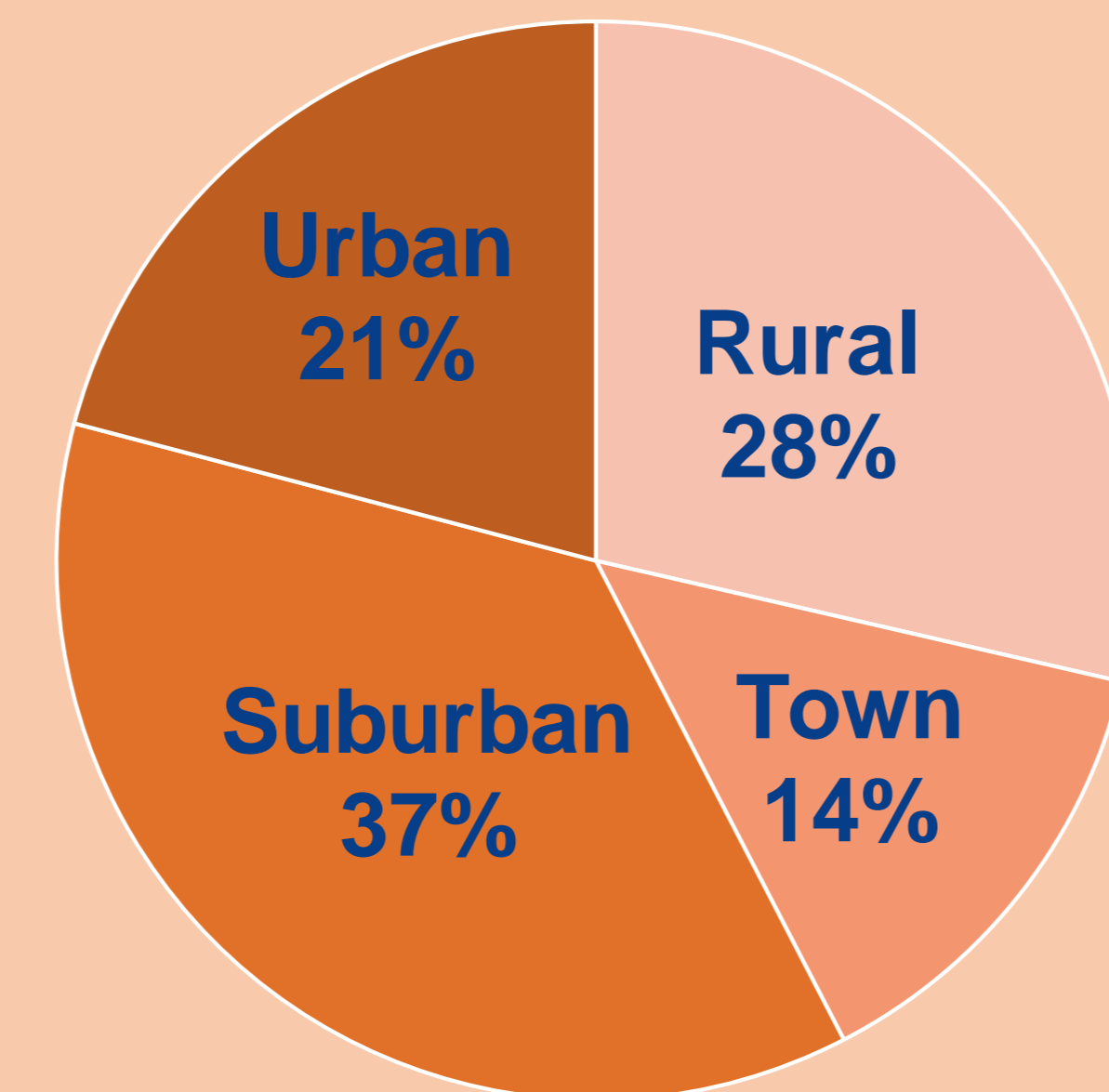
- Staff are supported in healthy lifestyle habits
- School provides staff with sufficient resources to foster healthy school environment
- Leadership provides consistent message of support for wellness-related initiatives
- The school culture prioritizes healthy choices
- Staff work together effectively on school wellness initiatives
- Staff share a collective belief that wellness initiatives are worthwhile

### Data Analysis

- Summed Climate of Wellness at School scores and dichotomized into higher ( $\geq 7$ ) or lower ( $< 0-6$ ) climate scores
- Qualitative comparative analysis to identify areas of focus for future implementation strategies to improve "climate for wellness"

## RESULTS

### Quantitative Sample (n=521 schools)



- Represent all 4 U.S. regions
- Climate for Wellness at School Scores**
  - Mean (SD): 7.4 (3.3)
  - Dichotomized Scores:
    - Higher: ( $\geq 7$ ): 60.3%
    - Lower: (0-6) 39.7%

### Qualitative Sample (n=39 schools)

- 51% rural, 49% urban
- 50 informants (20 principals, 9 teachers, 21 staff; 80% female)
- Climate for Wellness at School Scores**
  - Mean (SD): 8.0 (3.2)
  - Dichotomized Scores:
    - Higher: ( $\geq 7$ ): 61.5%
    - Lower: (0-6) 38.5%

### Themes Across Higher and Lower Climate Schools (n=39)

- Implementation success is enabled by the overlapping presence of culture, leadership, and communication networks
- COVID-19 may have improved schools' "climate for wellness" through more tension for change and prioritization of health initiatives

Positive school culture reflected in mission and values

Tangible support from leadership

Communication network that includes parents/families

Before COVID, there was not much [tension for change]. It had been brought up that [we wanted to] develop a wellness committee, but no one had taken initiative to get that going, it was just an idea that was thrown out. But that may actually change now that there's more focus on health. ~Physical Education Teacher, Low Climate School

### Themes in Lower Climate Schools (n=15)

- Even with a positive school culture, implementation is hindered by limited engagement/support from parents and community
- Wellness initiatives promoted by a few champions contribute less to a "climate for wellness" than school-wide efforts
- Priorities of school leaders might be misaligned with those of teachers, students and parents, especially related to wellness vs. academics

The culture of our school is something our community is not. [The community] is not set up where people are active for health reasons. That shows up in our kids, too. They enjoy PE and they're active in PE, but I don't think they're being active at home. Streets are not designed to go out and move around, and probably at home, none of our students get the need or the value of being active for health reasons. ~Physical Education Teacher

"I think that we could have a little bit better culture in terms of support. I have support from a lot of the teachers, but it's more individual support rather than like an entire school culture. I think I would like to see more on that." ~Physical Education Teacher, Low Climate School

Our school culture has never been towards the whole child. It's always been towards how are they doing academically. So moving that culture from thinking about just grades to thinking about what the needs are beyond academics is something we need to work on. ~Principal, Low Climate School

## CONCLUSIONS

- Findings reveal key overlapping inner setting factors in both higher and lower climate schools, suggesting that additional CFIR factors warrant exploration as mechanisms for implementation climate for wellness initiatives
- Pragmatic D&I research should test implementation strategies that go beyond specific targets, and focus on the intersection of culture, leadership and communication
- Post-COVID-19 is a crucial period for such research, as schools may have increased prioritization and tension for new initiatives

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