

Triennial Assessment Report: January 2026 Assessment (1/2026)

District: WATAUGA COUNTY SCHOOLS

Introduction

Watauga County Schools completed its triennial assessment of the Local School Wellness Policy in January 2026. This assessment is a federally required review conducted every three years to evaluate how well district policies and school practices support student health and wellness, including nutrition, physical activity, and overall well-being.

Overall, the assessment showed that Watauga County Schools generally meets or exceeds federal requirements, particularly in areas related to school meals, nutrition standards, access to drinking water, and wellness policy transparency. The results also highlighted areas where written policies can be updated to better reflect current practices and where additional improvements can continue to strengthen student and staff wellness. Compared to previous assessments, the district has made continued progress in implementing wellness practices across schools.

The assessment was completed using the WellSAT Policy and Practice tools. Prior to the assessment, the School Health Advisory Committee (including district staff, community resources, parents, teachers, administrators, etc.) worked diligently over the past two years to implement strong wellness practices in the schools and prepare for the assessment.

Strong Policies and Aligned Practices

The triennial assessment identified several areas where Watauga County Schools has strong wellness policies and is fully implementing practices that align with those policies. These areas reflect meaningful progress toward the district’s wellness goals and demonstrate a strong commitment to supporting student health and well-being.

Several federal requirements fall within this category, including compliance with USDA meal standards, Smart Snacks nutrition standards, access to free drinking water during meals and throughout the school day, public access to the wellness policy, regular evaluation of wellness policy implementation, and required reporting of triennial assessment results. These findings show that the district is meeting key federal expectations while also aligning with best practices.

In support of the district’s Nutrition Promotion goal, schools consistently provide meals that meet federal nutrition standards and ensure students have access to free drinking water. Competitive foods and beverages sold during the school day, including à la carte items and vending machine offerings, meet Smart Snacks standards, helping promote healthier food choices across school campuses.

Progress was also evident in Nutrition Education, with strong alignment between policy and practice in providing students access to nutrition education and reinforcing healthy habits throughout the school environment. These efforts help students develop the knowledge and skills needed to make informed food choices.

The district demonstrated success related to Physical Education and Physical Activity by ensuring students have regular access to physical activity, including daily recess at the elementary level and consistent opportunities for movement during the school day. Additionally, policies supporting certified physical education teachers and staff modeling healthy behaviors are being fully implemented.

Finally, under Other School-Based Activities to Promote Wellness, the assessment showed strong implementation of practices related to employee wellness, active wellness committees, and transparent communication with families and the community. These efforts contribute to a school culture that supports wellness for students, staff, and families alike.

Some of the items in this section showed improvement compared to previous triennial assessments. In particular, stronger implementation and clearer procedures have helped move areas such as nutrition standards, water access, and wellness policy evaluation into full alignment. These improvements reflect the district’s ongoing efforts to strengthen both policies and practices over time.

		Policy Score	Practice Score	
FR1	Does the district have specific goals for nutrition education designed to promote student wellness?	2	2	★
FR4	Is free (i.e., no cost to students) drinking water available to students during meals?	2	2	★
FR6	Do all competitive foods and beverages sold to students during the school day meet or exceed the USDA's nutrition standards, commonly called Smart Snacks?	2	2	★
FR7	Do all a la carte foods and beverages sold in the cafeteria meet Smart Snacks standards?	2	2	★

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FR8	Do all foods and beverages sold in vending machines meet Smart Snack standards?	2	2	
FR13	Which groups are represented on the district-level wellness committee?	2	2	
FR15	How is the wellness policy made available to the public?	2	2	
FR16	Is wellness policy implementation evaluated every three years?	2	2	
FR17	What is included in the triennial assessment report to the public?	2	2	
NES6	Do students have at least 10 minutes to eat breakfast and at least 20 minutes to eat lunch, counting from the time they are seated?	2	2	
NES14	Do students have consistent and easy access to free drinking water throughout the school day?	2	2	
EW2	Are school staff encouraged to model healthy eating and physical activity behaviors in front of students?	2	2	

Create Practice Implementation Plan

The triennial assessment identified several areas where district wellness policies are in place, but implementation is inconsistent or limited across schools. These areas represent important opportunities to strengthen practices and ensure full compliance with the Local School Wellness Policy (LSWP) and federal requirements.

The federal requirements included in this section relate primarily to nutrition standards and accountability, including Smart Snacks compliance for school-day fundraisers, foods served at classroom celebrations, food and beverage marketing on campus, and the designation of responsible officials at the school level to oversee wellness policy implementation. Additional areas include nutrition standards for foods served during afterschool programs and consistent application of physical education and physical activity expectations across grade levels.

To improve implementation, the district will develop practice implementation plans that focus on clear expectations, consistent communication, and monitoring at the school level. Planned actions include:

Providing guidance and training to staff regarding Smart Snacks standards for fundraisers, classroom celebrations, and food marketing;

Establishing clearer procedures to ensure foods served during afterschool programs meet federal nutrition standards;

Reinforcing expectations around the appropriate use of food and physical activity as rewards or discipline;

Reviewing physical education schedules to improve consistency in meeting recommended instructional minutes at all grade levels; and

Expanding opportunities for family and community engagement in physical activity through school-based events and partnerships.

The district wellness committee, in collaboration with school administrators, the school nutrition director, physical education staff, and other relevant personnel, will be responsible for creating and overseeing the practice implementation plans. School principals and designated building-level wellness contacts will play a key role in supporting and monitoring implementation at individual schools.

The practice implementation plan will be developed by the end of the 2025–2026 school year and implemented during the 2026–2027 school year. Progress will be monitored through administrative review, feedback from schools, and future wellness committee check-ins. Success will be assessed by reviewing implementation consistency across schools and by improved alignment between policy and practice in the next triennial assessment.

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		Policy Score	Practice Score	
FR10	Are there fundraisers that sell foods or beverages to be consumed during the school day? If yes, do the foods and beverages sold meet Smart Snacks standards?	2	1	
FR11	Does your district regulate foods and beverages served at class parties and other school celebrations in elementary schools?	1	0	
FR12	Is there food or beverage marketing on the school campus during the school day? If yes, do the marketed items meet Smart Snacks criteria?	2	1	
FR14	Is there an official who is responsible for the implementation and compliance with the wellness policy at the building level for each school?	2	1	
NES11	Do all foods or beverages SERVED (not sold) to students after the school day on school grounds (including aftercare, clubs, and afterschool programming) meet federal nutrition standards (e.g., CACFP or Smart Snacks)?	2	1	
NES13	Do teachers or school staff give students food as a reward?	2	1	
PEPA4	How many minutes per week of PE does each grade in elementary school receive?	2	1	
PEPA5	How many minutes per week of PE does each grade in middle school receive?	2	1	
PEPA6	How many minutes per week of PE does each grade in high school receive?	2	0	
PEPA11	 Are there opportunities for families and community members to engage in physical activity at school?	1	0	
PEPA18	Do teachers ever use physical activity as a punishment?	2	1	
PEPA19	Do teachers ever withhold physical activity as a classroom management tool?	2	1	

Update Policies

The triennial assessment identified several areas where district practices fully meet federal requirements, but the Local School Wellness Policy (LSWP) does not specifically reference all related procedures or requirements. In most cases, the missing or non-specific language is already addressed in other district policies, administrative regulations, or operating procedures, rather than within the wellness policy itself.

The federal requirements included in this section relate primarily to school nutrition services, student privacy and equity, nutrition education, physical education, employee wellness, and wellness coordination. These include USDA meal standards, protection of student privacy for free and reduced-price meals, professional standards and training for nutrition staff, daily breakfast availability, procedures for unpaid meal balances, communication with families about meal eligibility, physical education curriculum alignment, staffing of certified physical education teachers, monitoring of PE exemptions and substitutions, shared-use agreements, employee wellness supports, and the operation of a district-level wellness committee.

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Because these requirements are already implemented and governed through existing district policies and procedures, updates to the wellness policy itself are not necessary at this time. Instead, the district will focus on improving transparency and accessibility by clearly directing families, staff, and community members to the appropriate related policies where this information is already outlined. This approach ensures compliance with federal requirements while avoiding duplication across district policy documents.

The district wellness committee, in collaboration with district leadership and relevant departments, will be responsible for identifying and referencing the applicable policies and ensuring that links or guidance are made available to the public. This work will be completed during the 2025–2026 school year, with updated references shared alongside the triennial assessment and through district communication channels.

For any practices that were identified as partially implemented, the district will continue to support consistent implementation through staff guidance, professional development, and administrative oversight. Ongoing review by the wellness committee will help ensure that existing policies are applied consistently across schools and that families and community members can easily access accurate information.

		Policy Score	Practice Score	
FR2	Do your National School Lunch Program meals (and, if applicable, School Breakfast Program meals) meet all federal standards for meal patterns, nutrient levels, and calorie requirements for the grade levels served?	1	2	
FR3	Does your school take steps to protect the privacy of students who qualify for free or reduced-price meals?	0	2	
FR5	Do all school nutrition program directors, managers, and staff meet or exceed the annual continuing education/training hours required by the USDA's Professional Standards requirements?	0	2	
NES1	Does the district offer breakfast every day to all students?	1	2	
NES2	Does your school take steps to address feeding students with unpaid meal balances without stigmatizing them?	0	2	
NES3	Does your school or district provide information to families about eligibility for free or reduced-price meals?	0	2	
NES4	Does your school use strategies to maximize participation in the school breakfast program and/or school lunch program?	1	2	
NE1	Are skills-based, behavior-focused, and interactive/participatory methods used in nutrition education to develop student skills?	1	2	
NE2	Do all elementary school students receive sequential and comprehensive nutrition education?	1	2	
NE3	Do all middle school students receive sequential and comprehensive nutrition education?	1	2	
PEPA2	Does the district have a written physical education curriculum that is aligned with national and/or state standards?	1	2	
PEPA3	How does your physical education program promote a physically active lifestyle?	1	2	

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PEPA7	Are all physical education classes taught by state certified/licensed teachers who are endorsed to teach physical education?	1	2	
PEPA9	What percentage of students do you estimate do not take PE each year due to exemptions?	0	2	
PEPA10	What percentage of students do you estimate do not take PE each year due to substitutions?	0	2	
PEPA15	Does the district have "joint-use" or "shared-use" agreements?	1	2	
EW1	 Are there strategies used by the school to support employee wellness?	1	2	
IC1	Is there an active district-level wellness committee?	1	2	

Opportunities for Growth

The triennial assessment identified several areas where wellness topics are addressed inconsistently, informally, or in a limited way across the district. These areas represent opportunities to strengthen coordination, clarity, and consistency in both policy and practice, while continuing to support the district's overall wellness goals.

The federal requirement included in this section is the regular review and revision of the Local School Wellness Policy following each triennial assessment. Additional priority areas identified by the district include nutrition promotion and marketing, access to Smart Snacks guidance, afterschool food and beverage standards, Farm to School efforts, nutrition education at the high school level, physical education and physical activity supports, and wellness coordination at the school level.

To improve implementation, the district will focus on strengthening guidance, communication, and coordination, rather than creating entirely new programs. Planned actions include:

Establishing clearer procedures for reviewing and updating the wellness policy following each triennial assessment;

Expanding the use of marketing strategies that promote healthy food and beverage choices;

Increasing awareness of Smart Snacks nutrition standards among staff responsible for food sales;

Improving consistency of nutrition standards for foods and beverages sold during afterschool programs;

Exploring opportunities to expand Farm to School practices and agriculture-based nutrition education;

Strengthening nutrition education and cross-curricular connections at the high school level;

Supporting consistent physical activity opportunities during, before, and after the school day; and

Encouraging the development and sustainability of school-level wellness committees.

The district wellness committee, in collaboration with school administrators, nutrition services, physical education staff, and instructional leadership, will be responsible for developing practice implementation plans and identifying any necessary policy clarifications. School administrators will support implementation at the building level.

Practice implementation planning will occur during the 2025–2026 school year, with phased implementation beginning in the 2026–2027 school year. Progress will be assessed through wellness committee reviews, administrative feedback, and future triennial assessments to determine improvements in consistency and alignment.

If policy updates or clarifications are needed, the district will focus on strengthening references, guidance, or cross-links to existing policies and procedures, rather than duplicating language. Any updates will follow established district review and approval processes and will be shared publicly to ensure transparency for families and community members.

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		Policy Score	Practice Score	
FR18	Has the wellness policy been revised based on the previous triennial assessment?	1	1	
NES5	Are marketing strategies used to promote healthy food and beverage choices in school?	1	1	
NES7	 In your district, is it a priority to procure locally produced foods for school meals?	0	1	
NES8	Do you know where to access the USDA Smart Snacks nutrition standards to check and see if an item can be sold in school during the school day?	1	1	
NES10	Are foods or beverages containing caffeine sold at the high school level?	0	1	
NES12	Do all foods or beverages SOLD (not served) to students after the school day on school grounds (including aftercare, clubs, and afterschool programming) meet federal nutrition standards (e.g., CACFP or Smart Snacks)?	0	0	
NE4	Do all high school students receive sequential and comprehensive nutrition education?	1	1	
NE5	Is nutrition education integrated into other subjects beyond health education?	1	1	
NE6	Do school nutrition services staff members use the following methods to collaborate with teachers to reinforce nutrition education lessons taught in the classroom?	1	1	
NE7	 Does nutrition education address agriculture and the food system?	1	1	
PEPA1	 Does the district have a written physical education curriculum that is implemented consistently for every grade?	1	1	
PEPA8	Is ongoing professional development offered every year for PE teachers that is relevant and specific to physical education?	1	1	
PEPA12	 Are there opportunities for all students to engage in physical activity before and after school?	1	1	
PEPA13	Is there daily recess for all grades in elementary school?	1	1	
PEPA14	 Do teachers provide regular physical activity breaks for students in the classroom?	1	1	
PEPA16	What proportion of students walk or bike to school?	0	1	

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PEPA17	 Are teachers encouraged to use physical activity as a reward for students?	1	1	
IC2	Is there an active school-level wellness committee?	0	1	

Conclusion

The triennial wellness assessment confirms that Watauga County Schools is successfully supporting student health and well-being while meeting federal requirements. Strong practices are in place across the district, particularly in nutrition services, physical activity, and wellness supports for students and staff.

The assessment also helps guide next steps by highlighting ways to strengthen consistency and communication. Overall, the results reflect the district’s ongoing commitment to continuous improvement and to creating healthy, supportive school environments for all students.

Key

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Strong Policies and Aligned Practices
- District has a strong policy and is fully implementing practices that align with the policy
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Create Practice Implementation Plan
- District has a strong or weak policy, but practice implementation is either absent or limited
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Update Policies Update Policies
- District is fully implementing a practice but there is no or only weak language in the written policy, or the district is partially implementing practices and there is no language in the policy
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Opportunities for Growth
- District has either not addressed the topic in policy or practice; or has only addressed the topic in a very limited way

For more resources, visit: wellsat.org/resources

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