

Food Positivity

Chapter 20 Bonus Handout:

Advocating for District-Level Change

Introduction

Whether your child is just starting school or you've already noticed lessons that don't quite sit right, it's reasonable to think ahead about how schools talk to kids about food, bodies, health, and "good choices." In Chapter 20 of ***Food Positivity***, "Partnering with Schools to Redefine Food Education," you learned that schools play a powerful role in shaping how children understand themselves and the world around them, and even well-intended lessons can leave lasting impressions.

This guide is here to help support you in advocating for change on nutrition and health lessons in your child's school district in ways that are clear, effective, and respectful of educators' realities. It will help you protect your child's well-being, contribute to positive change where possible, and do so without adding unnecessary stress to teachers (or yourself!)

A Note on School Settings

This guide is written primarily for parents of children in **U.S. public schools**, where curriculum decisions are often made at the district level and shaped by state standards. That's why much of the guidance here focuses on district processes, school boards, and channels for parent input.

That said, many of the core ideas still apply beyond this setting. If your child attends a **private or independent school**, you may find that decision-making is more centralized at the school level, but the same principles (like understanding who holds authority, approaching concerns collaboratively, and keeping teachers out of the middle) remain relevant. Similarly, families outside the U.S. may encounter different systems and terminology, but the underlying strategy of directing advocacy toward the appropriate level of decision-making still holds.

If your school context looks different, remember that the goal is not to follow each step of this guide exactly, but to help you identify where decisions are made in *your* setting and advocate in ways that are thoughtful, effective, and sustainable.

Getting Started

Step 1: Protecting Your Child

Before you try to change the system, make sure your child is supported in the present. District-level advocacy can take time, and even when school administrators take your concern seriously, change rarely happens overnight. That's why the first step is always to protect your own child right now. If you haven't already, check out the other bonus resource for Chapter 20, **A Parent's One-Pager for Teachers** and share it with your child's teacher.

Step 2: Understand Where the Power Actually Lives

Many parents understandably start by talking to teachers. Teachers are the most visible part of the school system, and they're the ones standing in front of students each day. But here's an important reality that can save you a lot of frustration: **Most teachers do not choose the curriculum they teach.**

In many districts, classroom lessons (especially in areas like health, nutrition, wellness, and social-emotional learning) come from district-approved materials. These may be purchased as full curriculum packages, complete with worksheets and activities. Teachers are often expected to follow them closely and may have limited flexibility to change or omit content.

That means if your goal is to reduce harm across classrooms or prevent future lessons from being used, the most effective question is not:

"Why is this teacher teaching this?" Instead, it's: *"Who approved this curriculum, and how does our district review or change it?"*

Recognizing this distinction will help you direct your energy where it can actually make a difference!

Step 3: Working with Your School's Principal

Principals play an important role in the school system, but their authority is often misunderstood. Knowing what principals can and cannot influence will help you use this relationship strategically, without putting the principal (or teachers) at your school in a difficult position.

What Principals Typically **Do** Control:

In most districts, principals are responsible for **implementing** district-approved curriculum within their school. While they don't usually choose the curriculum, they often have influence over how concerns are handled locally.

Principals can often:

- Clarify whether a lesson is **district-mandated or optional**
- Explain how **opt-outs or accommodations** are handled in their building
- Help you understand how widely a lesson is being used across grade levels
- Direct you to the **right district contact** for curriculum concerns
- Flag recurring parent concerns to district leadership
- Set a school-wide tone that prioritizes student well-being and respectful communication

Think of your principal as a **connector** who can help move your concerns to the right place.

What Principals Typically Do Not Control

Keep in mind that most principals:

- Do not select or purchase curriculum
- Do not have authority to replace district-adopted materials
- Do not control state standards
- Do not have the power to change lessons across the district

Understanding these limitations helps keep your conversations productive.

How to Frame the Conversation

A productive conversation starter with your principal could sound something like this:

“I understand that curriculum decisions come from the district, and I’m not asking you or teachers to change lessons. I wanted to share my concerns about health and nutrition lessons and ask where the appropriate place is to raise this at the district level.”

Many principals are balancing district mandates, staff capacity, and family concerns simultaneously. So it helps to approach them thoughtfully so they can quickly direct your concern up the chain.

Step 4: Learn How Curriculum Decisions Are Made in Your District

Every district works a little differently, but most follow a similar structure. For public schools in the U.S., educational standards (what all kids must learn at each grade level) are set at the state level. Then, districts choose materials that align with those standards, and schools and teachers implement what’s been approved.

Your goal in this step is to learn three things:

- Who oversees curriculum decisions for the area you’re concerned about (health, wellness, nutrition, etc.)
- When curriculum is reviewed or updated
- Where parent input fits into that process

How to find this information

Your school's principal can be a great resource, or visit your district's website and look for administrators with titles like *Director of Curriculum*, *Director of Educational Services*, *Assistant Superintendent for Instruction*, or *Health and Wellness Coordinator*.

If the website isn't clear, a single email or phone call to the district office can get you oriented. You don't need to raise concerns yet—just ask how the system works.

A short message might sound like:

"Hi, I'm a parent in the district and I'm trying to better understand how classroom curriculum is selected and reviewed, particularly for health and wellness lessons. Could you help me understand who oversees that process and how parents can provide input?"

Think of this step as drawing a map—you're not raising any concerns just yet.

Taking Action

Step 5: Consider Building a Small Coalition

While optional, district-level change is often easier when concerns come from more than one family (even if that group is small!) When you're not the only voice raising an issue, it signals that your concern is more than individual.

Building a coalition usually starts informally. You might notice another parent asking similar questions, expressing discomfort with a lesson, or sharing an experience similar to your own (such as a history of disordered eating in their own past). A quick conversation at pickup, a message in a class chat, or brief email is often enough to see who's interested in joining you.

Once you've identified a few parents who share your concern, your coalition's role is simple and focused. You're working together to:

- **Clarify the shared concern** about health or nutrition lessons
- **Decide how to show up**, whether that's attending a meeting together, submitting joint feedback, or supporting one person as the main point of contact
- **Agree on one clear ask** to bring to the district (more information below!)
- **Share the workload**, so no one person is carrying everything

If your school has a PTA, PTO, or parent council, getting involved is a great starting place. You can often use that structure to form your coalition in a formalized setting, but even an informal group still helps.

Step 6: Determine an Advocacy Channel

Now that you understand how decisions are made in your district, you (and perhaps your coalition) can decide where to engage. You don't need to pursue every option. Just one well-chosen channel is often enough! Some common channels include:

Curriculum review committees

Many districts convene committees to review instructional materials before they're adopted or renewed. These groups may include administrators, teachers, and sometimes parents or community members. If your district has one, this is often the most direct way to influence curriculum decisions early in the process.

School board meetings

School boards typically approve curriculum purchases and set district priorities. Public comment periods exist specifically so community members can raise concerns and ask for action.

Before speaking, it can help to attend one meeting just to observe. Pay attention to how comments are structured, how much time speakers are given, and how board members respond. When you're ready, focus on one clear request rather than a broad critique.

District advisory councils

Some districts have wellness councils, family engagement committees, or advisory groups tied to student services. These bodies are often underutilized and can be a meaningful way to provide ongoing input.

Meetings with district leaders

In some cases, a meeting with the appropriate district administrator—such as a curriculum director or wellness lead—can be effective, especially when you come prepared with a clear ask and a collaborative tone.

Step 7: Decide on A Clear Ask (and Frame It So It's Heard)

District leaders are more likely to respond when your request is **specific and actionable**. Instead of trying to overhaul the entire health curriculum, focus on one outcome you want to see. That might be:

- A formal review of certain lessons
- Clear criteria for evaluating health or wellness curriculum
- An opt-out policy for specific lesson types
- A pilot of an alternative approach
- Parent representation on review committees

A clear ask sounds like something the district could realistically say **yes** to.

At the same time, **tone matters**. Advocacy is most effective when it centers student wellbeing rather than blame. Be sure to anchor your message in:

- Developmental appropriateness
- Emotional safety and inclusion
- Eating disorder prevention or mental health support
- Long-term learning, not short-term behavior control

It can also help to explicitly name that your concern is **system-level**, not teacher-level. This reassures decision-makers that you're not asking teachers to carry more responsibility or professional risk.

Eating Disorder Prevention Belongs in School Mental Health Planning

Many districts prioritize student mental health through efforts focused on behavior, substance use prevention, and self-harm prevention. But eating disorders are often left out of these conversations, despite being a serious mental health concern for adolescents.

Eating disorders are **the second deadliest mental health disorder**¹. They are also far more common than many realize:

- **22% of children** and adolescents engage in disordered eating behaviors²
- Up to **17.9% of girls** and **2.4% of boys** will be diagnosed with an eating disorder by young adulthood³

Working with your district to include eating disorder prevention in school mental health efforts supports a more complete, proactive approach to student well-being.

¹ Chesney, E., Goodwin, G. M., & Fazel, S. (2014). Risks of all-cause and suicide mortality in mental disorders: a meta-review. *World Psychiatry*, 13(2), 153–160.

² López-Gil, J. F. et al. (2023). Global proportion of disordered eating in children and adolescents: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 177(4).

³ Silén, Y., & Keski-Rahkonen, A. (2022). Worldwide prevalence of DSM-5 eating disorders among young people. *Current Opinion in Psychiatry*, 35(6), 362–371.

Keep Up the Momentum

Step 8: Follow Up and Keep It Moving

Most advocacy doesn't move forward when a meeting wraps up—it moves forward **after** conversations, when decision makers decide on their next steps. That's why a brief follow-up matters.

After any meeting with your district's leaders, send a short email summarizing what you discussed and asking about next steps. This helps clarify your ask and keep the momentum going. It also creates a paper trail that makes it easier to return to the issue later without starting over.

If things go quiet, a gentle check-in is appropriate. Staying engaged doesn't require constant follow-up, but given the many issues that school administrators juggle on a daily basis, a brief check-in can help keep your concerns front-of-mind.

When Administrators Push Back

While well-meaning, administrators sometimes respond to parental concerns about diet culture by emphasizing the importance of teaching kids to make “healthy” choices. This response often reflects a genuine desire to support students, even when you disagree about how those lessons affect children.

When you encounter pushback, start by naming shared goals. You can acknowledge that you also want students to feel healthy and supported, and explain that you want lessons to promote long-term well-being without increasing shame, anxiety, or the kind of rigid thinking that contributes to eating disorders.

Instead of debating definitions, invite openness and curiosity with district leaders. Ask how the district evaluates whether lessons meet children's developmental needs and support emotional safety, especially for vulnerable students. When you frame the conversation around what's best for kids and signal your openness to learning, you help lower defensiveness and keep the dialogue moving.

Step 9: Keep Your Coalition Engaged

When advocacy stretches across weeks or months (as it often does at the district level), it's easy for things to stall simply because no one is quite sure what comes next. Brief coalition check-ins help you and other parents decide whether to take additional action or wait to hear from the district.

Coalition meetings are especially useful for:

- **Re-grounding after district conversations.** After a meeting, public comment, or email exchange, a short check-in helps you compare notes, confirm what you each took away from the meeting, and avoid miscommunications.
- **Deciding next steps together.** Instead of one person carrying the decision-making alone, the group can decide whether to follow up, wait for a response, or shift your strategy.
- **Sharing the emotional load.** Advocacy can feel discouraging when progress is slow. Meeting with others helps normalize that pace and prevents frustration from turning into reactivity.
- **Preserving consistency.** When multiple parents are involved, coalition check-ins help keep your messaging aligned so follow-up communication remains focused on the agreed-upon ask.

Most importantly, coalition meetings help prevent burnout. With a shared goal, your advocacy becomes something you can sustain.

Using a Food Positivity Book Club to Build Momentum

If you've already read ***Food Positivity***, you likely have language and insights that many parents in your community aren't yet aware of. A small Food Positivity book club can be a gentle way to share that understanding and keep momentum going within your coalition (and beyond!)

Rather than asking other parents to jump straight into advocacy, you're inviting them into a shared learning experience. This often feels more approachable for parents who have questions but aren't yet ready to act.

As parents read and reflect together, conversations naturally shift from individual concerns to patterns they've noticed in your community. This understanding can give your coalition direction and attract new parents who care about supportive, developmentally appropriate approaches to food and body education.

You can keep the book club simple and flexible: a few parents meeting occasionally, a discussion over coffee, or a virtual gathering. Remember, you're just creating a space for learning, connection, and supporting positive change.

Step 10: Celebrate Your Wins!

District-level change rarely happens all at once. Progress usually shows up in small, incremental steps. Take time to notice and celebrate wins such as:

- District leaders schedule a curriculum review
- The district forms a committee or adds parent representation
- Leaders add clearer criteria for evaluating lessons
- The district clarifies or formalizes an opt-out policy
- District leaders acknowledge concerns in writing or during a meeting
- Leaders commit to revisiting materials at a future date

Recognizing these moments helps you sustain momentum and reminds you that your advocacy makes a real impact (even when change feels slow!) Small wins signal that systems are shifting—and that steady, thoughtful effort works.

A Final Word

Remind yourself of what you learned in Chapter 20: At its core, this work is about children: How they learn, how they grow to understand themselves and the world, and how safe they feel in the classroom. When parents advocate with curiosity and care, they help ensure that school lessons support not just academic growth, but emotional well-being, belonging, and life-long health-promoting habits, too.