



# Building a Culture of Health in Cooperative Extension

## Policy, Systems, and Environmental Change

Cooperative Extension programs have historically focused on changing individual health behaviors through direct education. This expert-teaching model assumes that if you teach someone how to be healthy, they will follow through and make healthier choices. Although direct education can raise awareness, improve knowledge, and build skills, it is less effective in making lasting improvements in health. Being healthy is not only about the choices that we make, but *if* the environments in which we live, learn, work, and play provide the opportunity to be healthy. To help create healthier communities, Cooperative Extension must engage in community-level approaches that address the barriers to making healthy choices. This approach is called policy, systems, and environmental change, or PSE.

### What is Policy, Systems, and Environmental Change?

PSE strategies are approaches to creating lasting improvements in individual and community health and well-being. PSE strategies change the environment to make healthy choices available and accessible to community members. These initiatives must be built upon the unique cultural and social assets of a community and are most successful when they are driven by engaged community members who advocate for health and well-being.

*Policy change* includes the passing and enforcement of laws, ordinances, resolutions, mandates, regulations, and rules. Policies are developed by government bodies, schools, parks, healthcare organizations, worksites, and other community institutions.



### Direct Education or PSE?

- Direct education raises awareness, improves knowledge, and builds skills.
- Policy, Systems, and Environmental changes create environments that facilitate, promote, and sustain healthy behaviors.
- These approaches are complementary and should be used together to improve individual, family, and community health.

Policy change is sometimes categorized as *BIG P* or *small p*. *BIG P* policy change typically refers to federal, state, or local legislative actions. These changes involve many stakeholders and can be difficult to influence, but the implications for change affect a large population. *Small p* changes can occur in private or non-governmental settings, such as organizations, workplaces, schools, and communities. *Small p* changes make a big difference, but for fewer people. *BIG P* and *small p* policies are both important.

## Examples of policy changes include:

BIG P	small p
Passing a federal law that requires calorie and nutrition labeling on restaurant menus	Restricting the sale of sugar-sweetened beverages in school buildings and concession stands
Enacting a state law that allows the growth of fruit trees and public harvesting in public spaces and parks	Implementing a Complete Streets policy to increase safety while walking, biking, and driving
Adopting a zoning ordinance that allows mobile food vendors to serve residential neighborhoods	Establishing a new policy to offer paid family leave to employees of a local restaurant organization
Implementing a county-wide free composting program to redirect food waste	Adopting a policy in a local school system that aims to reduce substance misuse

**Systems change.** This includes modification to the rules, operations, procedures, or goals of an organization or system. These changes may be unwritten, but often result in new activities that benefit many people. Examples of systems change include:

Integrating clinical referrals into Cooperative Extension educational programming	Developing a system that distributes unutilized or imperfect produce to food pantries
Requiring screening for hunger and food security in clinics and hospitals	Modifying the hours of operation of resource centers to increase access, convenience, and use
Asking a distributor to only stock healthy beverages in workplace vending machines	Offering an annual flu shot clinic in schools
Improving data collection and sharing systems to facilitate shared decision-making	Providing technical assistance to organizations working to build their capacity for implementing PSE

**Environmental Change.** Environmental changes occur in the physical spaces in which we live. Examples of environmental change include:

Building health clinics in communities that are critically under-resourced	Creating community gardens on vacant lands or community parks
Posting signs that designate smoke-free areas	Providing accessible, clean, and private spaces for breastfeeding
Installing accessible, all-weather exercise equipment in community parks	Reducing harmful exposure to environmental toxins and pollution
Improving the lighting in public spaces for enhanced safety and security	Establishing accessible, affordable, and convenient community childcare options

## What is the difference between Policy, Systems, and Environmental Change and Direct Education Programs?

Cooperative Extension can complement direct education by being a leader and partner in implementing PSE strategies that have the potential to improve individual and community health. These strategies are often complex and take time, but they lead to long-lasting improvements. To be successful, it is important to:

- have a high level of community engagement,
- have a thorough understanding of community needs,
- balance data with community input to support the work being done,
- have effective communication and education practices,
- work alongside partners and coalitions,
- advocate for PSE strategies among key decision makers,
- have excellent support from administrators and key stakeholders,
- promote health equity and health justice in every endeavor, and
- measure and share successes.

## Where can I learn more?

- CDC Places: Local Data for Better Health: <https://www.cdc.gov/places/index.html>
- Community Commons: [www.communitycommons.org](http://www.communitycommons.org)
- Community Toolbox: <https://ctb.ku.edu>
- County Health Rankings and Roadmaps: [www.countyhealthrankings.org](http://www.countyhealthrankings.org)
- Healthy People 2030: <https://health.gov/healthypeople>
- Robert Wood Johnson Foundation: <https://www.rwjf.org/>

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