

Overview of Opportunities to Support Healthy Schools and Student Health through the Every Student Succeeds Act

On December 10, 2015, President Obama signed into law the bipartisan Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. ESSA recognizes the need for schools to support the whole child and specifically acknowledges the importance of promoting physical and mental health and wellness. The implementation of ESSA at the federal level and subsequent compliance with the new law by state education agencies (SEAs) and local educational agencies (LEAs) provides an important opportunity to more fully integrate student health into education policy and practice. An overview of the primary opportunities for advancing healthy schools and student health through ESSA follows.

Advancing Healthy Schools and Student Health through State Plans

ESSA transfers a significant amount of authority from the federal government to the state government. While the U.S. Department of Education can play a key role in providing guidance, technical assistance, and other support around ESSA implementation, the key levers for integrating health and wellness into ESSA are at the state level. Below is a summary of the opportunities for incorporating health and wellness into ESSA state plans.

State Accountability Systems

Under ESSA, each SEA is required to create a state accountability system with at least one non-academic indicator (a measure of school quality or success). Examples of non-academic indicators listed in ESSA include measures of school climate and safety, such as chronic absenteeism and incidences of violence. Measurement of these non-academic indicators can support health, since they are related to school climate (social and emotional health, bullying prevention, positive behavioral supports) or measure absences, which are often health-related. Given that state accountability systems define the goals and activities of a number of Title I programs, the inclusion of a non-academic indicator in these systems presents an important opportunity to elevate the connection between health and learning and ensure SEAs and LEAs are held accountable for supporting the whole child.

State Report Cards

SEAs must release an annual state report card describing how the state is meeting Title I requirements. In addition to measures such as per-pupil expenditures and student achievement, the report cards must include rates of chronic absenteeism, and incidences of violence, including bullying and harassment. LEAs are also required to prepare and disseminate report cards to the public that include the same minimum requirements as the SEA report cards (e.g., the requirement to include rates of chronic

absenteeism). Rates of chronic absenteeism and incidences of violence are directly impacted by a school's health and safety environment and their inclusion on report cards can help elevate the connection between health and learning.

School Improvement Plans

SEAs can set aside up to seven percent of their Title I funding for comprehensive support and improvement in the lowest performing schools. SEAs can use this funding to support student engagement and promote healthy, safe, and supportive school environments. LEAs, in partnership with stakeholders, must develop and implement a school improvement plan that is informed by the indicators in the statewide accountability system; is based on a school-level needs assessment; includes evidence-based interventions; and identifies resource inequities.

SEA's can require LEAs to use a template for school improvement plans but it is not required. In addition, ESSA requires SEAs to conduct a timely review of each LEA's' school improvement plans, including monitoring and reviewing implementation of the plans. Given that students in the lowest performing schools are disproportionately affected by health conditions that impact their ability to learn, ensuring health is a part of school improvement plans is a key strategy for supporting student success.

Standards and Assessments

Each state plan must provide an assurance that the state has adopted challenging academic content standards for math, reading or language arts and science and may have them for any other subject determined by the state. In addition, states are required to implement a set of high-quality student academic assessments in math, reading or language arts and science and may implement assessments in other subjects. Assessments must be aligned with challenging state academic standards.

This presents an opportunity to develop and implement standards and assessments for content areas such as social and emotional learning, health education, and physical education, or to refine existing standards to make deliberate connections to human health and wellbeing, such as through science standards. Developing standards and assessments on these content areas will also support the collection of statewide data on these issues and their possible inclusion in state accountability systems. For example, Illinois has social and emotional learning standards but currently does not assess students' progress towards these standards. Assessing students social and emotional learning would both promote implementation of the state's social and emotional learning standards and support the collection of data that would enable social and emotional learning to be included in the state accountability system and/or report card. Likewise, several states require fitness assessments for certain grades already, including California and Texas, but do not use these assessments for accountability as

yet. Connecticut currently includes a measure of student fitness as part of their state accountability system.

Needs Assessments

ESSA requires school-level needs assessments as a component of Title I and Title IV:

- *School improvement*: LEAs, in partnership with stakeholders, must develop and implement a school improvement plan that is based on a school-level needs assessment.
- *Schoolwide Title I programs*: LEAs can consolidate and use Title I and other federal, state, and local funds for schoolwide Title I programs in schools where at least 40 percent of the students are from low-income families. An eligible school must develop a comprehensive plan with input from parents and community members and base the plan on a comprehensive needs assessment of the entire school.
- *Title IV, Part A*: Title IV, Part A of ESSA consolidates 49 grant programs, some of which focused on student health, into a new grant program called the Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grant (SSAEG). SEAs and LEAs can use these grants to promote student health, increase access to a well-rounded education, and improve the use of technology. Any school district that receives more than \$30,000 through this grant program must conduct a needs assessment and use the funding to address the needs identified.

Ensuring that school-level needs assessments include a health and wellness component is a key strategy for better understanding the student health conditions in a given community and identifying areas for improvement in the school health and wellness environment. States can play a key role in providing guidance to school districts on how to conduct needs assessments. State level guidance and models should include a health and wellness component in order to ensure school districts understand how to identify student health needs, and how to identify opportunities to improve the school health and wellness environment through needs assessments.

Equity

ESSA emphasizes the importance of ensuring educational equity for all children. For example, under ESSA, the purpose of Title I is “to provide all children significant opportunity to receive a fair, equitable, and high-quality education, and to close the academic achievement gaps.” Title II emphasizes the need to improve equitable access to quality teachers and Title IV highlights the importance of ensuring equitable access to programming. Given the link between health, education, and equity, understanding how to incorporate equity into state plans is critical to addressing student health and wellness.

Professional Development

Title II provides funding to SEAs and LEAs to support professional development for principals, teachers, early childhood educators, and other school personnel. This includes professional development to support school staff in addressing student behavioral and mental health needs and chronic absenteeism.

The majority of professional development training programs for school staff currently do not provide training on the connection between health and learning. However, there are examples of professional development programs that provide teachers with this type of training, such as Healthy Schools Campaign's Fit to Learn professional development program. This program educates principals and teachers about how to create schools and classrooms that support the conditions of learning. In addition, there are multiple examples of professional development programs that provide teachers with training on how to support student social and emotional health.

As a result, there is an opportunity to inform this professional development programming and ensure that school staff have the knowledge and skills needed to support student health and wellness.

Educator Support and Working Conditions

In addition to supporting professional development programming, Title II funds can be used by states and school districts to conduct and publicly report on an assessment of educator support and working conditions that would be developed with teachers, leaders, parents, students and the community. For example, Title II funds could be used to develop and conduct an evaluation of teacher stress levels to better understand teacher's working conditions. Assessing school staff's working conditions can be a critical step towards identifying strategies to improve overall working conditions and improve teacher satisfaction, reduce teacher burnout, and increase staff retention. In addition, promoting workplace wellness is a proven strategy for supporting student health and learning.

Stakeholder Engagement

The development of Title I state plans and schoolwide Title I programs provide important opportunities for engaging a wide range of stakeholders to ensure these programs meet students' needs and leverage community resources and assets. For example, ESSA requires meaningful stakeholder engagement as a part of the process of developing state plans and also recognizes the need to engage parents in school-level planning.

There is a specific need to build the capacity of all Title I schools to engage parents, families and communities in efforts to create health-promoting school environments, a proven strategy for creating healthier school environments. In addition, SEAs must emphasize the importance of engaging

stakeholders in other sectors to develop state plans and carry out key components of ESSA, such as conducting needs assessments.

The opportunities presented by ESSA implementation for supporting healthy schools and student health and wellness can help to address the physical and mental health needs of students, thereby improving their attendance, ability to learn, and overall well-being.

Transferability

Title V of ESSA allows SEAs and LEAs to redirect federal funds to the programs and activities that most effectively address the unique needs of the states and localities. Specifically, Title V allows Title II and Title IV, Part A funding to be reallocated to Title I or programming to support English language learners (Title III). There is a critical need to ensure states do not transfer funding from Title II or Title IV, Part A and that SEAs and LEAs fully understand the importance of allocating Title IV Part A funding to support safe and healthy school environments.

Early child provisions

LEA plans for using Title I funding must describe how Title I services will support, coordinate, and integrate with early childhood education programs at the LEA or individual school level, including plans for the transition from early childhood programs to local elementary schools. Schoolwide Title I programs can also include strategies for assisting preschool children in the transition from early childhood education programs to local elementary schools. Through this provision, states can help ensure that the programs and services children have access to in early childhood programs are also available in elementary school. For example, if children have access to behavioral health services in their early childhood program, this provision could be used to help ensure the same services are offered once the children enroll in kindergarten at their local elementary school. In addition, this provision could be used to support data sharing between early childhood programs run by an LEA and local elementary schools. This can help the elementary school better understand a child's needs once they arrive and plan to address them accordingly.

Ensuring states support a smooth transition from early childhood programs to elementary schools

As states begin to develop new state plans that comply with ESSA, there is a critical need to ensure stakeholders understand the connection between health and learning and have access to best practices and models for implementing ESSA provisions in a way that supports student health and wellness. A comprehensive health and wellness framework that is easily accessible and provides stakeholders with this information can play an important role in ensuring ESSA is implemented in a way that supports the whole child. Convening health and education stakeholders who can share their expertise and insights is essential to developing this framework and ensuring it is effective at the state and local levels.