

National Collaborative on Education + Health

Supporting Healthy Schools and Student Health and Wellness 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.

In preparation for the meeting of the National Collaborative on Education and Health's steering committee, this background paper highlights the opportunities for promoting healthy schools and student health and wellness as part of ESSA implementation, provides an overview of a strategy to leverage these opportunities, and introduces ideas for how the National Collaborative on Education and Health can seize this opportunity.

Opportunities for Advancing Healthy Schools and Student Health through ESSA Implementation

ESSA implementation provides a number of policy levers for promoting healthy schools and student health and wellness. Many of these levers present opportunities for advancing key focus areas of the National Collaborative on Education and Health, including creating healthy school environments, addressing chronic absenteeism, increasing access to health services delivered in schools, promoting a primary prevention approach to behavioral health and supporting the inclusion of health and wellness metrics in education accountability systems. A summary of the opportunities in ESSA implementation is below:

Opportunities in ESSA Title I

Title I provides funding to SEAs to support LEAs with high numbers or percentages of children from low-income families to help ensure that all children meet challenging state academic standards. Title I provides key opportunities for SEAs and LEAs to support the connection between health and learning including:

- *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:* SEAs can reserve up to seven percent of their Title I funding to support 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. Given that students in the lowest performing schools are disproportionately affected by health conditions that impact their ability to learn, ensuring health and wellness are a part of school improvement plans is a key strategy for supporting student success.
- *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. Since schools can use this funding to implement schoolwide programs, they will be able to implement schoolwide health programs, such as hiring a school nurse to serve all students or implementing a strong physical education program that benefits all students rather than only providing targeted support to the students that are struggling. Allowable uses of this funding include counseling, school-based mental health programs, specialized instructional support services, implementation of a tiered model to prevent and address problem behavior and early intervention services. In addition, ESSA specifically mentions that the services delivered under this provision may be delivered by a nonprofit or for-profit external provider with experience in using evidence-based or other effective strategies to improve student achievement. This provision creates an opportunity to support student health and wellness and for collaboration between the local health and education sectors.

- *Early childhood programs/School readiness:* 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.
- *Parent and family engagement:* LEAs must reserve one percent of their Title I funding to support parent and family engagement. LEAs can use this funding to: support schools and nonprofit organizations in providing professional development in this area; support programs to reach parents and family members at home; disseminate best practices on parent and family engagement; and collaborate with entities with a record of success in improving and increasing parent and family engagement. This presents an important opportunity to ensure SEAs and LEAs support schools in engaging parents and families in efforts to create healthy school environments.

Opportunities in ESSA Title II

- *Professional development:* Title II provides funding to SEAs and LEAs to support professional development for principals, teachers, early childhood educators and other school personnel, including professional development to support school staff in addressing student behavioral and mental health needs and chronic absenteeism. 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:* 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.
- *Literacy education programs:* Title II funding is also included for literacy education programs that fall into three categories: birth through kindergarten, K-12 and innovative literacy programs. In addition to carrying out high quality professional development programming around evidence-based strategies to promote literacy, funding can be used to coordinate the involvement of families, early childhood education program staff, principals, teachers and specialized instructional support personnel in literacy development. In addition, eligible for funding are pediatric literacy programs through which, during well-child visits, medical providers trained in research-based methods of early language and literacy promotion provide developmentally appropriate books and recommendations to parents to encourage them to read aloud to their children starting in infancy.

Opportunities in ESSA Title IV

- *Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants:* ESSA consolidates 49 grant programs, some of which focused on student health, into a new grant program, Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants. SEAs and LEAs can use this to promote student health, increase access to 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. ESSA highlights the following examples of health programs that can be implemented using this funding: evidence-based drug and violence prevention programs; mental health services; programs that support a healthy, active lifestyle; and mentoring and school counseling for children at risk of academic failure, dropping out of school or delinquency.
- *Community support for school success:* Title IV establishes funding for full-service Community Schools and Promise Neighborhoods. Funding for both programs supports ‘pipeline services’ defined as a continuum of coordinated supports, services and opportunities for children from birth through entry into and success in postsecondary education and career attainment. Both full-service Community Schools and Promise Neighborhoods present tremendous opportunities for collaboration between health and education.

Additional ESSA Opportunities

- *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.
- *Well-rounded education:* The term ‘well-rounded education’ replaces the previous use of the term ‘core subject’. The definition of well-rounded education includes health education and physical education. The term well-rounded education appears throughout ESSA and creates an important opportunity to ensure SEAs and LEAs have the knowledge, resources and support needed to implement high quality health and physical education programs.
- *Equity vs. equal:* 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.

There are many examples of existing efforts to integrate health and wellness into education policy and practice that will help inform how states and school districts can implement ESSA to maximize healthy school environments and student health and wellness. For example, a number of school districts across the country have integrated health and wellness goals into their school improvement plans, such as improvements in student physical activity, providing all students with access to a healthy, free breakfast and increasing access to health services delivered by a full-time school nurse.

There are also emerging examples of how states are planning to integrate health and wellness into the new state accountability systems. For example, Connecticut, which is in the process of developing a state accountability system that complies with ESSA, has 12 measures of school quality, including the percentage of chronically absent students and physical fitness. In California some districts have worked on a local-level accountability system that uses a broad range of indicators to determine if a school is successful, including measures of students' social-emotional skills and academic mindsets.

The opportunities presented by ESSA implementation for supporting healthy schools and student health and wellness can help to transform education to better support healthy schools and student health and wellness. We believe the National Collaborative on Education and Health can play a key role to maximize these opportunities so that students across the country have increased access to healthy school environments.