

Healthy Students Promising Futures

Leveraging the Every Student Succeeds Act to Support Student Health and Wellness in Tennessee

A Healthy Students, Promising Futures Learning Collaborative Case Study

New opportunities exist to advance the role schools can play in supporting children's health and improving equity in health and education outcomes. The Healthy Students, Promising Futures Learning Collaborative (HSPF) is pleased to elevate promising practices and innovative models for leveraging these policy opportunities.

The U.S. Departments of Education and Health and Human Services launched HSPF in 2016 with support from Healthy Schools Campaign (HSC) and Trust for America's Health (TFAH). HSC and TFAH now lead HSPF, which brings together 15 state teams working to improve health and education outcomes by increasing Medicaid services in schools and promoting safe and supportive learning environments. State teams include representatives from the state education agency, state Medicaid agency, school districts, and in some cases, state and local advocates, public health or others. HSPF provides state teams with training, technical assistance, peer learning opportunities, and connections to federal officials and national partners to learn how school health services are delivered and reimbursed, leverage policy opportunities to create more comprehensive and coordinated care in schools, and build safe and supportive learning environments.

This case study highlights Tennessee's work to leverage the nation's education law, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), to support the critical connection between health and learning. Federal, state, and local education policy and practice are important pathways to impact student health and wellness, and ESSA provides key opportunities for states and school districts to support the critical connection between health and learning. Tennessee's inclusion of health and wellness in its ESSA plan and the guidance developed to support district-level implementation provide best practices and lessons learned for states striving to support student health and wellness through education policy and practice.

What is the Every Student Succeeds Act?

The [Every Student Succeeds Act](#) (ESSA) was signed into law in December 2015. ESSA gives states and school districts authority and flexibility to create standards for accountability and regulate school performance, and it specifically recognizes the critical connection between health and learning. ESSA provides an opportunity to ensure equitable access to quality education and the conditions that support student learning, including safe and supportive school environments, and provides clear opportunities for cross-sector engagement and collaboration.

ESSA requires every state education agency (SEA) to submit a state plan detailing how they will implement the federal law. All [states submitted plans](#) in 2017 and the U.S. Department of Education approved them by fall 2018. States are currently in the process of implementing their state plans. They have the option to revise their state plans annually.

How does the Every Student Succeeds Act Support Student Health and Wellness?

ESSA acknowledges the importance of supporting student health and school wellness in several ways¹:

State Accountability Systems

ESSA requires states to include at least one measure of school quality or student success in their state accountability system (i.e., a state's plan to set education goals and hold schools accountable for student performance). Examples of school quality or student success measures that are related to health include chronic absence rates, school climate measures, and access to physical education, health education, and mental health supports. Thirty-six states and the District of Columbia include chronic absence in their state accountability system.²

¹ Additional information about the ways in which ESSA supports student health and school wellness is available in Healthy Schools Campaign's report [State Education Policy that Supports Student Health and Wellness](#).

² Additional information about which states selected chronic absenteeism as their measure of school quality or student success is available in an [analysis from FutureEd](#).

What is chronic absenteeism?

Chronic absenteeism—or missing 10 percent or more of school days for any reason, excused or unexcused—detracts from learning and is a proven early warning sign of academic risk and school dropout. While the causes are multi-fold, one stands out as especially significant: student health. Students with unmanaged chronic health conditions (such as asthma or diabetes) are more likely to miss class because of the symptoms of their illness or because they are receiving medical treatment during the school day. Students can also be chronically absent because of health issues such as fever, flu, dental pain, vision problems or mental health and anxiety issues.

Healthy Schools Campaign

In addition, eight states included school climate, as measured by student surveys, in their accountability systems. Five states use other measures of health and wellness, including access to physical education or health education classes, mental health supports, or fitness assessments.³

What is school climate?

School climate is a broad, multifaceted concept that involves many aspects of the student’s educational experience. A positive school climate is the product of a school’s attention to fostering safety; promoting a supportive academic, disciplinary, and physical environment; and encouraging and maintaining respectful, trusting, and caring relationships throughout the school community no matter the setting—from Pre-K/Elementary School to higher education.

National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments

State School Report Cards

ESSA requires states to release yearly report cards that include student demographics and achievement, as well as indicators of student well-being, such as suspension and chronic absence rates. Local report cards mirror the state report cards. However, they must also include school-specific information that shows how the performance of each school in the local educational agency (LEA) compares to state averages and how the performance of students in each school compares to LEA averages.

Needs Assessments

Needs assessments present an important opportunity to understand the root causes of poor academic performance. Integrating health and wellness data into needs assessment is a key strategy for building effective solutions that recognize the critical connection between health and learning.

³ Details about other measures of health and wellness included in each state’s accountability system is available in [this analysis from Child Trends](#).

ESSA requires needs assessments when a state identifies a school as needing comprehensive support and improvement due to poor performance on the state’s accountability system. Schools must use a school-level needs assessment to develop and implement a school improvement plan. In addition, needs assessments are required when schools use certain funds to operate a schoolwide program, and also when LEAs receive at least \$30,000 in funding from the Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants program (see “Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants” on page 9).

Well-Rounded Education

ESSA requires schools to provide a well-rounded education, which can include music and the arts, social studies and civics, science and technology, as well as health education, physical education, and any other subject the state or LEA determines will provide an enriching academic experience. ESSA funds can be used to support efforts to provide a well-rounded education, offering an opportunity to support the connection between education and health.

Professional Development

ESSA funds can support professional development for teachers, administrators, school health providers and other staff, including professional development on health- and wellness-related issues. For example, LEAs can tap ESSA funds to train school personnel on how to address school climate issues that create barriers to learning, including peer interaction and chronic absence. Schools can also provide training to classroom teachers on how to implement social and emotional learning and mental health promotion, including how to integrate these efforts into teaching core subjects.

Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants

ESSA created a new grant program called the Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grant (SSAEG). SEAs and LEAs can apply for 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 identified needs. ESSA highlights the following examples of health programs that can be implemented using this funding: safe and supportive learning environments; positive disciplinary practices; drug, violence and suicide prevention programs; trauma-informed classroom management; mental health services; chronic disease management; programs that support healthy, active lifestyles; and mentoring and school counseling for children at risk of academic failure, dropping out of school, or delinquency.⁴

Stakeholder Engagement

Stakeholder engagement is a critical component of ESSA. Under the law, states were required to engage specific stakeholders as they developed their state plan to submit to the U.S. Department of Education. States are also required to engage stakeholders prior to the submission of any revisions to the state’s ESSA plan. In addition to requiring the engagement of teachers, principals, school leaders, and administrators, ESSA requires the engagement of parents, specialized instructional support personnel (e.g. school nurses, school psychologists, and school social workers), and paraprofessionals.

⁴ Examples of additional allowable uses of SSAEG funding can be found on the [U.S. Department of Education’s website](#).

This requirement presents an important opportunity to ensure different perspectives are reflected in the state’s ESSA plan, including perspectives that represent the health and learning connection.⁵

How is Tennessee Leveraging the Every Student Succeeds Act to Support Student Health and Wellness?

Tennessee’s Department of Education (TDOE) submitted its ESSA plan to the U.S. Department of Education in spring 2017 and received approval in August 2017.⁶

The vision set forth in Tennessee’s ESSA plan calls for districts and schools to “exemplify excellence and equity such that all students are equipped with the knowledge and skills to successfully embark upon their chosen path in life.”⁷ Core to Tennessee’s vision for ESSA implementation is a recognition of the strong association between health and education and the need to foster health and well-being within the educational environment.

The vision of Tennessee’s ESSA plan aligns with Tennessee’s long-standing commitment to student health and school wellness. TDOE established an Office of Coordinated School Health in 2001 with the goal of improving student health outcomes and supporting the connection between good health practices, academic achievement, and lifetime wellness. Since 2007, the Office of Coordinated School Health has supported Coordinated School Health (CSH) coordinators in every Tennessee school district. CSH coordinators develop and sustain community/parent/student partnerships, strengthen school health policies, provide program evaluation, and conduct professional development to promote comprehensive health education, physical education/activity, nutrition, health services, mental health, staff wellness, and healthy school environments. CSH coordinators support ESSA implementation at the district- and school-levels and ensure that key stakeholders understand how ESSA funding can support health and wellness programs.

Key ways that Tennessee’s ESSA plan recognizes the connection between health and learning and supports the whole child include:

Inclusion of Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports Framework

Tennessee’s ESSA plan highlights the Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS) framework which includes practices and programs to provide students with the supports needed in both an individual classroom and across the school building. This is a core component of Tennessee’s approach to meeting its *All Means All* strategic priority which focuses on providing individualized supports and opportunities for all students with a focus on those who are furthest behind.⁸ While this was Tennessee’s strategic priority prior to ESSA, it is reinforced in the ESSA plan. The MTSS framework encompasses options for supporting students as well as guidance for making decisions based on the

⁵ Information about meaningful stakeholder engagement under ESSA is available in [this handbook](#) from the Council for Chief State School Officers and Partners for Each and Every Child.

⁶ Information about implementation of ESSA in Tennessee, including the current version of their state plan is available on the [Tennessee Department of Education’s website](#).

⁷ [Tennessee’s ESSA plan](#).

⁸ [Tennessee Department of Education’s strategic plan](#).

needs of individual students and a school community. This framework connects to a [suite of online resources](#) and plays a key role in supporting school districts and schools in making informed decisions about how best to utilize ESSA resources and implement evidence-based interventions.

Incorporation of Chronic Absence Rates in State Accountability System

TDOE includes “chronically out of school” as a measure in its state accountability system and defines it as missing 10 percent or more of school days.⁹ CSH coordinators are well-positioned to leverage their existing work, including data collection, to help schools understand the health factors that contribute to absenteeism. TDOE has also developed a [resource center](#) on chronic absence and best practices for addressing it.

Integration of Health and Wellness Metrics in Needs Assessments

TDOE developed a needs assessment tool to support school districts in conducting ESSA-required needs assessments. The tool includes the following health metrics: nurse visits resulting in return to class; students who were overweight or obese; students with chronic health conditions; schools providing universal breakfast program; and schools compliant with physical activity law. In addition, TDOE encourages all school districts to integrate additional school health data sources into their needs assessments. Examples of additional data sources include data collected by CSH coordinators via the [School Health Index](#), health services data collected by school nurses, and school health screening data. CSH coordinators also collect data annually on all CSH programmatic outcomes and select student health indicators which is then shared through the [Coordinated School Health Annual Report](#).

Focus on Student Supports in School Improvement Process

ESSA requires states to identify schools in need of improvement, and in particular the schools in the bottom 5 percent in performance in each state. Tennessee’s ESSA plan gives authority to local districts to develop improvement plans, and to decide how to use instructional time, resources, and staffing to positively impact student success. Schools identified for school improvement receive additional funding and technical assistance. Under ESSA, Tennessee schools in need of improvement were first identified in September 2018 and will be identified every three years thereafter.

Tennessee’s application process for school improvement focuses on three evidence-based levers that are foundational in comprehensive plans for improvement: strong leadership; effective instruction; and student supports. Student supports include: strong family engagement; safe and secure school and learning environments; student physical and mental health; and community support. ESSA funding can support evidence-based school health interventions, including those that provide students with the wrap-around supports needed to succeed.

Emphasis on Flexibility of Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants

Tennessee’s ESSA plan emphasizes the flexibility school districts and schools have in investing resources available through Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants. As a result, Tennessee

⁹ Students that serve in-school suspension are not classified as missing a school day, whereas students suspended out of school are considered absent.

school districts use these funds to implement a variety of programs that support student health and wellness, including: implementing data systems to track student health; hiring school health and mental health professionals; purchasing physical and health education curricula and supplies; and providing staff training on health- and wellness-related issues. TDOE is also assisting districts and schools in the data collection component of their needs assessments in order to make informed decisions about how best to utilize this funding.

Spotlight: Jackson-Madison County Schools

Tennessee's Jackson-Madison County School District serves 13,000 students in 23 schools in western Tennessee. The District is leveraging the Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grant program to implement a variety of school health programs. For example, the District purchased an electronic medical records system to document health information and to better understand the health-related causes of chronic absence. Chronic absenteeism data is integrated into the new system. The data system allows the District to get a more complete picture of chronic absence and the impact of chronic diseases and identify ways to address them. The District also used this funding to hire mental health staff, including school-based social workers, and a part-time, district-level physical education (PE)/health coordinator to assist PE and wellness/health teachers with the implementation of new programs and initiatives.

Lessons Learned from Tennessee's Implementation of ESSA

Tennessee's inclusion of health and wellness in its ESSA plan and the guidance developed to support district-level implementation provide best practices and offer lessons learned for states striving to support student health and wellness through education policy and practice. Key takeaways from Tennessee's efforts to implement ESSA include the following:

Adopt an Evidence-Based Framework that Includes All Levels of Intervention and Provides Flexibility

Tennessee's ESSA plan adopts an MTSS framework that provides evidence-based interventions that can be implemented at multiple levels -- for all students, for students most at-risk and/or for students who need intensive intervention. The MTSS framework incorporates a range of options for districts and schools to support student health and wellness, so local plans can be tailored to the needs identified in the assessment process.

Focus on Chronic Absence

Tennessee's ESSA plan included a strong focus on chronic absence. Including chronic absence in the state accountability system and highlighting chronic absence as a key issue for Tennessee's students help drive data-informed decision-making among district and school level leaders to address the root causes of chronic absence, including the health-related causes. For example, TDOE is able to layer [student health data](#) collected by CSH coordinators with [chronic absence data](#) to better understand the leading causes of chronic absence.

Development of State Needs Assessment Tool and Guidance

Tennessee's needs assessment tool to support school districts in integrating health and wellness into ESSA-required needs assessments is a key strategy for ensuring ESSA resources are leveraged to support the health and learning connection. Including health and wellness metrics in needs assessment

ensures that school districts are able to identify the leading health issues impacting their students and implement evidence-based interventions accordingly. [This guidance document](#) includes additional ideas for health-related metrics and data sources that can be integrated into state level needs assessment tools.

Broad Stakeholder Engagement

Tennessee engaged a broad range of stakeholders in the development and implementation of their ESSA plan. To develop the ESSA plan, TDOE engaged stakeholders through town hall meetings and focus groups, reaching over 2,000 stakeholders representing 87 counties (out of 95) and 135 districts (out of 146). These stakeholders included Tennessee State Board of Education members, legislators, school district leadership, school board members, regional staff, teachers and other school staff, parents, students, community organizations and advocates. In order to support effective implementation, TDOE continues to prioritize stakeholder engagement by informing stakeholders about the ongoing revisions to the ESSA plan and implementation. For example, TDOE Office of Family and Community Engagement works closely with the Office of Coordinated School Health to provide technical assistance and support to school districts, recognizing family engagement as a critical component of ESSA implementation and as ongoing support for student health and wellness initiatives.

Alignment with Existing Strategic Commitments

Tennessee leveraged ESSA as an opportunity to formalize many of the State's existing commitments to student health and school wellness. This includes lifting up the existing infrastructure of the Multi-tiered System of Supports framework and Coordinated School Health program. Aligning ESSA implementation with existing policies, programs and priorities is an important strategy to ensure effective implementation and coordination between multiple programs that support student health and school wellness.¹⁰

¹⁰ The National Association of State Boards of Education's [State School Health Policy Database](#) provides excellent information on the existing state school health policies in place in each state.