

Healthy and Ready to Learn: Recommendations for the Next Administration

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Change for Good Framework	2
Rebuilding America’s Schools	2
Reinvigorate School Health Services	2-3
Rethinking School Funding	3-4
Reimagining School Food	4
Recommendations for Executive Action	5
Recommendations for U.S. Department of Education	5
Recommendations for U.S. Department of Health and Human Services	6
Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services	6
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention	6
Recommendations for U.S. Department of Agriculture	6-7
Recommendations for Other Key Federal Agencies	7
Environmental Protection Agency	7
Occupational Safety and Health Administration	7
Department of Homeland Security	7
Conclusion	8



Introduction

The next President of the United States has an enormous responsibility—and opportunity—to provide an equitable foundation for a new generation of learners.

The magnitude of the coronavirus pandemic has demonstrated the importance of schools as community anchors that children and families rely on for much more than an education.

The pandemic and recent calls for racial justice have also exposed the vast inequities on which our educational and health systems are built—both in terms of health disparities that disproportionately affect communities of color, and the unequal educational resources schools and communities have on hand to meet the immediate needs brought on by the pandemic. We have created the perfect storm, and our children are suffering the consequences.

As a country, we have not invested equitably in school facilities and outdoor spaces, or in the number of school health providers—such as school nurses and social workers—needed to meet today’s challenges. School districts, many of which are under pressure to reopen, are trying to do the best for their students, but without support and resources, they are being set up for failure. In communities of color that have faced long-term disinvestment and the effects of structural racism, the situation is far worse.

This is a pivotal moment in our nation’s history. Amidst massive and simultaneous failings, we must rise to the challenge of rebuilding the infrastructure designed to support our children’s educational and health needs. And we must address the role that institutionalized racism plays in forging and perpetuating these failed systems.

This document outlines our recommendations for large-scale federal investment along with evidence-based, specific actions that can be implemented immediately, without congressional approval.

The recommendations build upon our Change for Good framework: a transformative effort to reimagine and rebuild the education system—including the services it provides beyond the essential task of teaching our children—with health and equity at the center.

There is no question that healthy students are better learners. Yet more than half of public schools do not have a full-time nurse or counselor, and far too many students spend their days in buildings with unhealthy air, limited opportunities for physical activity, and inadequate access to fresh water and nutritious food.

These same students often come to school suffering the impact of food insecurity and childhood trauma, and with one or more health issues that hinder their ability to learn. Investing in school health programs and services is a proven strategy for improving both health and education outcomes—especially in underserved communities—and for reducing healthcare costs, improving access to and quality of care, and supporting children’s overall health.

We therefore call on the next administration to encourage prevention, care coordination and community health, and we call on federal agencies to support increased investment and cross-sector solutions that accurately reflect the importance of our country’s public schools.

The current public health crises—and our responses to them—have the potential to affect educational and health outcomes for years to come. We need to ensure not only that schools can weather the current challenges but that our education system is redesigned to improve student health and equity for the long term.

This is our nation’s opportunity to change for good.

Change for Good Framework

An education system focused on prioritizing health and addressing the effects of institutionalized racism must include these four goals: rebuilding America's schools; expanding access to school health services; changing how schools are funded; and restructuring how we distribute school food.

This work requires a significant federal investment from the education, health care and public health sectors—an investment that would boost the national economic recovery effort, show that our country understands the value of public schools, and create lasting change in every community. This is our vision.

Rebuilding America's Schools

The federal government must recognize the massive inequities that exist in school facilities and prioritize investment, especially in underserved communities.

Strong federal investment in our nation's school facilities is critical to reopening public schools and providing students and educators with a safe place to learn and work. Significant investment can also create jobs in communities across the country.

Historically, there has been almost no federal funding for school facilities; it's time for that to change. Investment must include outdoor learning and play spaces that also are designed to improve the health of neighborhoods and the environment.

Why School Buildings Matter

- The average school building is roughly 44 years old. Students and educators are learning and working in crumbling buildings with asbestos, contaminated water, and mold.
- A [2020 report issued by the Government Accountability Office](#) (GAO) on the state of school infrastructure—the agency's first report on the subject since 1996—found that 54 percent of school districts must replace or update major heating, ventilation and air-conditioning (HVAC) systems in more than half their buildings.
- According to the GAO report, high-poverty schools were more likely to rely on state funding to cover the cost of building repairs compared to wealthier schools, which were more likely to fund projects through local property taxes.
- An aging and ineffective HVAC system can lead to poor indoor air quality in schools and exacerbate

illness. Even before the pandemic, more than 14 million school days were missed every year due to asthma. COVID-19 affects the respiratory system and asthma sufferers are considered high-risk for severe complications from the virus. That means indoor air quality is even more important as schools look to reopen.

- In a study of the federal role in school facilities, researchers found that between 2004 and 2010, the federal government provided less than .02 percent of school districts' total capital spending in direct grants for school facilities, mostly awarded through the Federal Emergency Management Agency for schools affected by natural disasters. By contrast, in 2014, the federal government funded a full 38 percent of the nation's capital investment in wastewater and transportation infrastructure.

Actions the administration can take on Day One:

- Develop a robust set of guidance for states and school districts on how to support student health and wellness through state education policy and practice. (Page 5)
- Support school districts in improving school facilities. (Page 5)
- Fund the EPA's work to support healthy school environments. (Page 7)
- Fund efforts to develop and maintain green infrastructure. (Page 7)
- Address building health and safety issues. (Page 7)

Reinvigorate School Health Services

The federal government should increase its Medicaid contribution to states to cover school health services.

School health services—including physical, behavioral and mental health services—help to ensure children are healthy and ready to learn.

Offering preventive and ongoing care at school can reduce health inequities and improve a child's ability to succeed in the classroom. Schools also are increasingly seen as places to deliver high-quality, cost-effective healthcare. Yet the burden of paying for these services has largely fallen on the education sector.

One mechanism for increasing the Medicaid contribution is the Federal Medicaid Assistance Percentage (FMAP), which has been used to increase access to preventive care and health promotion services, as well as community-based care for high-need populations.

Why School Health Services Matter

- One in four children in the United States has a chronic physical or mental health issue that affects their ability to succeed in the classroom, double the number just 30 years ago. Left untreated or undermanaged, health issues can adversely affect children’s attendance, their ability to see, hear and pay attention in the classroom, their ability and motivation to learn, and even their chances of graduating from high school.
- Students in underserved communities, particularly students of color, are at increased risk of chronic health problems such as diabetes and asthma that can hinder learning and have a significant impact on long-term health. Ignoring these health inequities undermines efforts to close the opportunity gap.
- One in five children between the ages of 13 and 16 experience mental health issues; less than 20 percent of these children receive the help they need. Of those receiving care, nearly 80 percent receive that care in a school setting.
- Research shows that access to school nurses and other health providers can improve both health and academic outcomes, particularly for students with chronic health issues. Increased access can lead to reductions in chronic absence, improvements in care coordination and reductions in healthcare costs (by reducing the number of emergency room visits).
- Despite the clear connection between school health services and student success, more than half of public schools do not have a full-time school nurse or school counselor and only 5 percent of students have access to a school-based health center. Significant disparities exist: Students in low-income schools are less likely to have regular access to a school nurse and other health providers compared to their peers in higher-income schools.

Actions the administration can take on Day One:

- Support state plan amendments to expand school Medicaid programs. (Page 6)
- Promote partnerships between community providers and schools to expand access to school health services. (Page 6)
- Issue guidance on strategies for expanding access to school health services. (Page 6)
- Ensure Medicaid remains an entitlement program. (Page 6)

Rethinking School Funding

The federal government must take a more active role in minimizing inequities in education funding and in supporting states in achieving this task by rethinking school finance formulas.

We must change the way schools are funded—at every level of government in a way that accounts for the impact of poverty and structural racism. In its [final report](#) released in 2013, the Department of Education’s Equity and Excellence Commission issued a clear and powerful charge: Efforts to improve our school system “must start with equity”—particularly equity of resources.

To achieve this goal, the commission instructed all levels of government to improve or redesign methods of school funding in order to adopt truly equitable funding systems. We must reconcile our failure to do so.

States, districts and schools also need guidance to access non-education sources of funding—such as health care, public health and green infrastructure funding—in order to deliver high-quality education with a strong focus on health and wellness.

Why School Funding Matters

- There can be no equity when, [as studies have found](#), school districts in wealthier areas and those that serve mainly White student populations receive thousands more per student (from state and local funding) than districts in low-income areas and those that serve mostly students of color.
- We need to think beyond simply “equal” funding: Students in poverty and from historically underinvested communities need more funding than those in wealthier communities.

- Core services that have a significant positive influence on instructional quality and student outcomes are systematically unavailable to students in low-income schools relative to students in higher-income schools.
- Research shows that increased spending on education leads to better student outcomes. When states invest in their public schools and create more equitable school finance systems, student achievement levels rise. The positive effects are even greater among students from low-income households.
- There has been real progress in states that have provided significant, additional resources for low-income students. Weighted student funding—which differentiates school budgeting based on the demographics that each school serves—can fund quality programs that have the greatest impact on the student population.
- At the same time, increases in childhood obesity have been well-documented. Obesity puts children and adolescents at risk for developing diseases and health conditions that hinder their quality of life and can follow them into adulthood.
- Schools play a critical role in addressing this dual challenge by providing regular access to healthy school breakfasts and lunches through the federal school meal program, with more than 30 million children participating in the USDA National School Lunch Program and 12 million participating in the USDA School Breakfast Program.

Actions the administration can take on Day One:

- Create a “COVID-19 Educational Equity Gap Challenge Grant” for states. (Page 5)
- Develop a robust set of guidance for states and school districts on how to support student health and wellness through state education policy and practice. (Page 5)
- Fund efforts to develop and maintain green infrastructure. (Page 7)

Actions the administration can take on Day One:

- Restore and uphold the nutrition standards included in the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act. (Page 6)
- Maximize the impact of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. (Page 7)
- Fund programs that connect schools with local, sustainable food systems. (Page 7)
- Provide funding and guidance to invest in professional development and training for school food service workers. (Page 7)

Reimagining School Food

Access to healthy school meals plays a critical role in supporting both student health and achievement—which is why federally funded school meals should be made available at no cost to all students.

The availability of free meals would ensure equitable access and reduce implementation barriers to national school lunch and breakfast programs.

Why School Food Matters

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 16.7 million children under age 18 live in households where they are unable to consistently access enough nutritious food necessary for a healthy life.

- Hunger impairs concentration and cognitive ability, thus interfering with students’ ability to learn, and results in physical symptoms such as headaches and stomachaches that cause children to miss class time.

Recommendations for Executive Action

As the next administration works to build broad support for major changes to our education, food and healthcare systems, many improvements can be implemented starting on Day One. Here are our recommendations for how federal agencies can support policies and offer guidance that improve health and education.

Recommendations for the U.S. Department of Education

Many policies and practices at the national, state and district level have made it challenging for schools to integrate emerging best practices for supporting students' healthy growth and development—and thus their learning—into the daily routine of school.

The following recommendations highlight actions the U.S. Department of Education (ED) can take to maximize the impact schools can have in ensuring students thrive.

- **Create a “COVID-19 Educational Equity Gap Challenge Grant” for states.** COVID-19 highlighted in a new way the significant education equity gap that exists in this country. The administration should launch a White House-led initiative to address gaps in learning, mental health, social and emotional wellbeing and systemic racial and socioeconomic disparities in education. This initiative would support funding to states to develop and implement plans to address the equity gap.
- **Increase ED’s capacity to support health and wellness.** Redefine and expand the role of the Office of Safe and Healthy Students (OSHS) and appoint a Deputy Assistant Secretary to lead the effort to fully integrate health and wellness into ED’s policy and practices. The Deputy Assistant’s responsibilities should include collaborating closely with other federal agencies addressing school health and wellness to implement joint efforts and ensure alignment across agencies. OSHS’ role should be redefined to provide interagency and intra-agency efforts in addition to supporting states, school districts and schools to fully integrate health and wellness into policy and practice.
- **Provide technical assistance to advance efforts to create healthy school environments.** ED should leverage discretionary funding available through national activities funding to support states and school districts in this work.
- **Develop a robust set of guidance for states and school districts on how to support student health and wellness through state education policy and practice.** Guidance should be available on such topics as school health services, school safety, school facilities, equitable school funding and braiding and blending education and non-education sources of funding to support student health and wellness. In addition, guidance should include sample language to include in Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) state plan amendments that advance state policies and programs to support student health and wellness.
- **Issue standards and guidance on how schools can promote school safety while creating a sense of belonging and school connectedness for all students.** The guidance should address how to minimize the use of policies, practices and procedures that exclude, segregate or physically harm students, and include strategies to ensure schools do not unfairly discipline students of color, who face suspensions and other consequences at rates higher than their white peers. Guidance should also address best practices for creating trauma-informed schools and promoting equitable access to mental health services and supports, including those that support staff wellness.
- **Restore protections for transgender students in public schools.** Guidance should be issued to public school districts clarifying that Title IX, a federal law banning sex discrimination in education programs and activities, protects students who are transgender. This should specifically address the right of transgender students to use restrooms and locker rooms that match their gender identities. Implementing such protections is a critical step to preventing discrimination, bullying and violence against transgender students.
- **Collaborate with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to support school districts in improving school facilities.** Issuing grant funding, guidance and technical assistance will help districts improve their facilities so all students and staff can learn and work in safe and healthy school environments.
- **Incorporate health and wellness into the Blue Ribbon Schools Program.** In addition to the existing question on school climate and culture, additional questions that reflect a school’s health and wellness environment should be integrated into the Blue Ribbon Schools Program application and related evaluation criteria.

Recommendations for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Leveraging the role that schools can play in prevention, care coordination and treatment is a key strategy to meeting the health sector's goals of improving access to quality healthcare, reducing healthcare costs and improving population health.

The following recommendations highlight actions the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) can take to maximize the impact schools can have in supporting children's health.

Recommendations for Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS)

- **Support state plan amendments to expand school Medicaid programs.** As of July 2020, 13 states have expanded their school Medicaid programs to include all eligible services delivered to all Medicaid-enrolled students. Building on this progress, CMS should approve pending state plan amendments (SPAs) and develop and disseminate a template SPA for states to use. In addition, since the last federal guidance on school Medicaid programs was issued in 2003, CMS should provide updated guidance and technical assistance to ensure effective implementation.
- **Promote partnerships between community providers—such as children's hospitals and federally qualified health centers—and schools to expand access to school health services.** CMS should issue guidance to encourage these partnerships through innovative payment strategies (via Medicaid 1115 waivers) and/or supporting innovative models through the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Innovation (CMMI).
- **Issue joint guidance with the U.S. Department of Education (ED) on strategies for expanding access to school health services.** CMS and ED should collaborate to issue joint guidance that highlights strategies for funding the delivery of school health services; training the school health workforce to deliver and bill for school health services; and addressing related policy and program issues such as data sharing, Medicaid enrollment and telehealth.
- **Ensure Medicaid remains an entitlement program.** For example, the administration should rescind the Healthy Adult Opportunity guidance introduced in January 2020 to protect the individuals, including children and their families, that rely on Medicaid for healthcare. Efforts to

restructure or cut Medicaid shift health care costs to the states, hurt local economies, and threaten care and coverage for millions.

Recommendations for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

- **Issue recommendations to states for addressing how to support school districts and schools during pandemics.** CDC and ED should collaborate to understand lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic and issue recommendations to state departments of education and public health on how to support school districts and schools in the event of future pandemics.
- **Restore the Prevention and Public Health Prevention Fund.** Full funding could spark the expansion of core public health programs and the development of new, innovative programs to respond to unique public health threats, such as COVID-19. Created under the Affordable Care Act to provide resources for vaccination programs, chronic disease prevention programs and health education programs, the Prevention Fund was supposed to be funded at \$2 billion annually—an amount never reached.
- **Integrate green schoolyard elements into the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) model.** To advance the CDC's framework for addressing health in schools, green schoolyards should be included as an evidence-based strategy for enhancing WSCC components: a school's physical environment, physical education and activity and community engagement. To further support the development of green schoolyards, the CDC should also integrate green schoolyards as a best practice in its School Health Index.

Recommendations for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)

Ensuring access to federal food assistance programs will be more important than ever in the coming year due to the economic impacts of COVID-19 and increasing rates of food insecurity in families across the country.

The following recommendations highlight actions the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) can take to ensure students and their families have access to the food they need.

- **Restore and uphold the nutrition standards included in the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act.** Science-based nutrition standards for school meals have a proven, positive impact on children's

consumption of healthy foods, including fruits and vegetables. Ensuring the standards included in the Act are upheld, and that key components of the law related to sodium and whole grain standards are restored, is critical to supporting continued access to healthy school meals during the school day.

- **Maximize the impact of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).** SNAP is not only used by families to buy food, but it also provides critical data that informs components of the school meal program, such as the community eligibility provision. The program must be upheld as it currently stands, without any changes that adversely affect eligibility and the amount of benefit families receive through SNAP. Any such changes will not only jeopardize the food security of low-income families, but also negatively impact the ability of school districts to implement school meal programs in a cost-efficient manner.
- **Fund programs that connect schools with local, sustainable food systems.** Supporting access to locally produced food can improve student health and wellness and boost local economic development. Funding for farm-to-school and other programs, coupled with incentivizing districts to increase local food purchasing and education practices, will enrich the connection communities have with fresh, healthy food.
- **Provide funding and guidance to invest in professional development and training for school food service workers.** With increased professional development and training, states and school districts can equip school food service workers with the knowledge and tools to prepare healthy, less-processed school meals that incorporate whole ingredients.

Recommendations for Other Key Federal Agencies

The following recommendations detail steps other federal agencies can take to advance the critical connection between health and learning and ensure all students and staff have access to safe and supportive school environments.

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)

- **Fund the EPA's work to support healthy school environments.** The EPA plays a critical role in developing and implementing programs, such as promoting healthy indoor air quality and developing guidance on issues ranging from school siting to lead abatement.

- **Fund efforts to develop and maintain green infrastructure.** Green schoolyards provide water quality benefits and opportunities for outdoor education and physical activity. Funding such efforts, and ensuring school districts and cities have the guidance needed to develop and maintain green infrastructure projects, can help schools leverage this innovative strategy to support the health of the environment and students and staff.
- **Collaborate with the Department of Education (ED) to address building health and safety issues.** School districts across the country are in need of significant funding and support to update or replace multiple building systems or features. The EPA, in collaboration with ED, can help school districts receive the funding, guidance and technical assistance needed to accomplish this.

Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA)

- **Develop standards for protecting student health and require schools to meet them.** While OSHA and the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) set regulations and establish guidance for workplace safety for adults, no such regulations and guidance have been developed to protect children in schools.

U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS)

- **Repeal the federal public charge rule.** The new rule that went into effect in 2020 is causing families to forego critical housing, healthcare and nutrition benefits out of fear that receiving them would jeopardize their ability to remain in the United States. Repealing the current public charge rule and reinstating the previous guidance is necessary to restore safe and supportive school environments for children in need.



Conclusion

The next President of the United States has the opportunity to support states, school districts and communities in creating equitable conditions to improve student health and academic outcomes.

We call on the next President to provide leadership to leverage federal resources and to use the power of the executive branch to spur agencies to take necessary action. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, increasing rates of physical and mental health issues among children, and the vast educational and health disparities that exist in our nation's schools due to systemic racism, this work is more important than ever—and long overdue.

It is critical we harness the role schools can play as community anchors and ensure they have the support needed to create safe and healthy learning environments for all children. Implementing the recommendations in this report is a step toward that future.

About Healthy Schools Campaign

Healthy Schools Campaign (HSC) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to making schools healthier places for all students. HSC believes that health and wellness should be incorporated into every aspect of the school experience. Founded in 2002, HSC advocates for children to have better access to nutritious school food, physical activity, school health resources and clean air to shape their lifelong learning and health. HSC facilitates collaboration between students, parents, teachers, administrators and policymakers to help prepare this diverse group of stakeholders to lead change for healthier schools at the school, district, state and national levels. For more information, visit healthyschoolscampaign.org.

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