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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

For questions or to discuss these recommendations, please contact Rochelle Davis at 312-546-3791 or rochelle@healthyschoolscampaign.org.
Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and calls for racial justice have highlighted the deep inequities that exist in our education system and our country. We need to make sure that schools can not only weather the current challenges but can build back better and ensure all students attend healthy schools.

The next President of the United States has an enormous responsibility—and opportunity—to improve health outcomes by supporting states and communities in creating schools where children can thrive. This document outlines our recommendations, which include evidence-based, specific actions that can be implemented immediately, without congressional approval.

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 problems that hinder their ability to learn.

Addressing school health is a proven way to address health inequities. We call on the next administration to encourage prevention, care coordination and community health, and we call on federal agencies to build upon programs and initiatives that can enhance the health and well-being of school-aged children. Investing in school health programs and services is a proven strategy for reducing healthcare costs, improving access to and quality of healthcare, and supporting children’s overall health, especially in underserved communities.

The current public health crises—and our responses to them—have the potential to affect educational outcomes for years to come. The next administration has the power to provide an equitable foundation for a new generation of learners.
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’s 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.** According to the 2020 report “School Districts Frequently Identified Multiple Building Systems Needing Updates or Replacement” issued by the U.S. Government Accountability Office, an estimated 54 percent of public school districts need to update or replace multiple building systems or features in their schools. 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 can take to maximize the impact schools can have in supporting children’s health.

Recommendations for Centers for Medicare and 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.

- **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.

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- **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.
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. It is critical that the program as it currently stands is upheld and that changes are not implemented 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 key 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.** As described on page 2, a 2020 GAO report found 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

By implementing the recommendations included in this report, the next administration can create a better future for our children and our nation by improving health in schools. The next President of the United States has the opportunity to support states, school districts and communities in creating the conditions of student health and wellness and giving all children a chance for a healthy, brighter tomorrow.

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, increasing rates of physical and mental health issues among children and the vast educational disparities that exist in our nation's schools, this work is more important than ever. 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 that support the current and future success of our nation's youth.

Stay connected!

For questions or to discuss these recommendations, please contact Rochelle Davis at 312-546-3791 or rochelle@healthyschoolscampaign.org.

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