

A young boy with short dark hair is shown in profile, looking down at an open book he is holding. He is wearing a light blue t-shirt. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with green foliage and a person walking in the distance. The overall scene is bright and sunny.

Recommendations for Chicago's Next Mayor

April 2019

**HEALTHY SCHOOLS
CAMPAIGN**

EVERY CHILD DESERVES TO LEARN + THRIVE

LETTER FROM THE CEO

Chicago is a city of neighborhoods, and when all neighborhoods thrive, so will Chicago. Investing in communities, families and children is key for Chicago to grow and be a strong, vibrant city. At the heart of these communities are schools, which is why we focus on ensuring schools support the health and wellness of their students. Access to a high-quality education and the opportunity to be healthy is key for all children to realize their full potential and contribute to a vibrant city.

Unfortunately, that's not the case for many students in Chicago today. Children face many issues growing up in Chicago, including violence, a lack of health and mental health services, disinvestment in neighborhood schools and more. According to the [Chicago Department of Public Health's Healthy Chicago 2.0](#), 48 percent of Chicago's children live in an area of low child opportunity, indicating they are less likely to have access to resources, such as healthy food, parks and healthcare, that impact health and development.

A healthy school environment is an important foundation for learning and academic success. A school setting should support students' well-being and student health as a foundation for learning. In this environment, good nutrition, physical activity, basic safety, clean air and water, and knowledge and skills that help students make healthy choices allow them to thrive.

While Chicago Public Schools has made progress, the district still has a long road ahead in its efforts to create school environments that allow all students to learn and thrive. There are major structural issues in Chicago and nationally that reinforce the profound inequities that are still the reality for schools serving low-income children of color.

Studies have consistently documented the powerful connection between health and academic achievement. A school environment that provides access to health services, healthy school food, opportunities for physical activity, and support for mental health and well-being ensures that its students can be engaged and ready to learn. The health of our city's students has a direct impact on academic performance, attendance, school dropout rates, school revenues and the ability to close the achievement gap.

In this context, Mayor Lightfoot will have the opportunity to address the current disparities by supporting communities and schools in creating the conditions for improved school wellness and student health.

I look forward to working closely with Mayor Lightfoot to give all of Chicago's children a chance for a healthier tomorrow.

Sincerely,



Rochelle Davis, President and CEO

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About HSC

Healthy Schools Campaign (HSC), an independent not-for-profit organization, is a leading authority on healthy school environments and an expert voice for people who care about the health and education of children. HSC has a long history of working with Chicago Public Schools around issues of health and wellness. HSC advocates for policies and practices that allow all students, staff and faculty to learn and work in a healthy school environment, including those related to school health services, healthy school food, physical activity, behavioral and mental health services, trauma, environmental health and staff training and wellness. HSC engages, organizes and mobilizes a diverse set of constituencies, including parents, to provide them with the necessary knowledge and skill to have a voice in health and wellness policy at the local, state, and national levels and works to ensure that schools have the capacity not only to support, but also to sustain, a healthy school environment.



Executive Summary

For Chicago to be a strong and vibrant city, it needs to invest in communities, families and children. Access to a high-quality education and the opportunity to be healthy is key for all children to realize their full potential and contribute to a vibrant city.

Unfortunately, that's not the case for many students in Chicago today, and proactively addressing the issues of equity in health and education opportunities for low-income children of color must be a top priority for the new administration. Chronic conditions that affect learning disproportionately affect low-income students of color. Mayor Lightfoot will have the opportunity to address the current disparities by supporting communities and schools in creating the conditions for improved school wellness and student health.

District Policy that Supports Student Health

A healthy school environment is an important foundation for learning and academic success. Strong and effective policy is key to ensuring that all Chicago Public Schools (CPS) students are attending schools that promote health and allow them to thrive.

1. Strengthen CPS' policy and practices so that all students receive the recommended amount of high quality physical education.
2. Integrate health and wellness into school planning and accountability programs including school improvement plans and School Quality Ratings to make sure schools get the resources they need.

3. Ensure that school facilities support student health and wellness by fully funding [Space to Grow](#), a partnership that redevelops schoolyards, and funding school building upgrades that provide adequate gym spaces, proper health service offices and kitchens that can cook or prepare healthy food.
4. Ensure that school facilities are properly maintained to promote student health including healthy indoor air and safe drinking water.
5. Improve Local School Council training to better prepare members to understand and support the district's health and wellness policies and practices.

Access to Physical and Mental Health Services

Increasing access to school health services—including mental and behavioral health—is a critical strategy to reach vulnerable and underserved children and support all children's health and academic achievement. Mayor Lightfoot should ensure that all students have access to quality physical, behavioral and mental health services each day in school, allowing them to be present, focused and ready to learn.

1. Ensure schools are adequately staffed with trained health and wellness service providers that meet the needs of each school's students.
2. Develop standard policies and processes for student health data sharing between CPS and health service providers that protect student privacy while improving student access to health services.
3. Develop a citywide strategy to improve collaboration between CPS, health service providers and community organizations to improve service coordination and data sharing to address unmet health needs of students.



4. Advocate for a State Medicaid Plan Amendment (SPA) to reverse the Free Care Rule, providing schools with the opportunity to receive reimbursement for services delivered to Medicaid enrolled students.

Schoolyards that Support Health and Wellness

The built environment at schools is critical to supporting student health and wellness. Mayor Lightfoot should prioritize capital investments that support improvement of outdoor spaces to encourage physical activity, nutrition education, outdoor learning and connection with nature—all of which support physical, mental and emotional well-being.

1. Support Space to Grow, a citywide partnership to transform Chicago schoolyards into places that support outdoor play and active learning while addressing the city's stormwater management challenges. Space to Grow aligns with the city's sustainability plans and is identified as an action in the recently released Resilient Chicago plan to address urban flooding.
2. Ensure the full funding of Chicago's portion of the capital costs of Space to Grow's initial commitment to build 34 schoolyards as well as the expansion of this program across Chicago.
3. Create an inter-agency citywide taskforce to oversee maintenance needs and preservation of public green infrastructure—and, specifically, green schoolyards—and other public green spaces that use green infrastructure elements.

4. Support open/shared use policies that promote active lifestyles and foster community connectedness by encouraging community access to schoolyards.

Access to Nutritious School Food

Providing students with access to healthy school food is important for supporting student health and wellbeing. Mayor Lightfoot should support CPS in continuing to be a leader in providing healthful, less processed, freshly prepared and locally sourced meals to all its students.

1. Continue the district's commitment to a school meal program that exceeds the goals of the [Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act](#) and that is in compliance with national dietary guidelines.
2. Continue to be a national leader around healthy school food by expanding CPS' supply chain for local and sustainable food and by serving less processed meals.
3. Continue to provide and expand transparency around the district's school food policy and program.
4. Continue to implement the Good Food Purchasing Policy at CPS and other city agencies to support and enhance existing innovative initiatives.





Recommendations for the Next Mayor

District Policy that Supports Student Health

Research demonstrates that a positive school environment that supports student growth across several areas of development—physical, psychological, cognitive, social and emotional—is critical to effective learning and student success. This research underscores the importance of catering to the whole child as an essential part of providing an effective learning environment.

Strong and effective policy is key to ensuring that all Chicago Public Schools (CPS) students are attending schools that promote health and allow them to thrive. One of the most effective tools in shaping healthy school environments is a strong wellness policy, the name given to policies addressing school food, physical activity and physical education in schools.

Research shows that physically active students are more likely to attend school, are better able to focus in class and ultimately perform better academically. Physical activity increases brain function, reduces disciplinary problems and increases test scores. While CPS adopted a new physical education policy in 2014 that requires high-quality daily PE for all students, the implementation of this policy has not been consistent across the district.

CPS has a long history of implementing policies that support health and wellness. In order to provide a stronger framework for supporting the whole child, the district can better integrate health and wellness into accountability metrics and systems, incorporate health and wellness considerations into facilities plans and strengthen several specific policies.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen CPS' policy and practices so that all students receive the recommended amount of high quality physical education by:
 - a. Amending the district's wellness policy so that the Board of Education retains full authority for setting the district's physical education policy.
 - b. Fully implementing the district's physical education policy, including transparent data collection and evaluation.
 - c. Ensuring that schools have the staffing, training and funding necessary to fully implement PE.
 - d. Incorporating physical education into district accountability systems.
2. Integrate health and wellness into school planning and accountability programs including school improvement plans and School Quality Rating Policy (SQRP).
3. Ensure that school facilities support student health and wellness by fully funding CPS' commitment to Space to Grow, a partnership co-managed by Openlands and Healthy Schools Campaign, to redevelop schoolyards, and funding school building upgrades that provide adequate gym spaces, proper health service offices and kitchens where healthy food can be cooked or prepared.
4. Ensure that school facilities are properly maintained to promote student health including healthy indoor air and safe drinking water.
5. Improve Local School Council training to better prepare members to understand and support the district's health and wellness policies and practices.

Access to Physical and Mental Health Services

Increasing access to school health services—including mental and behavioral health—is a critical strategy to reach vulnerable and underserved children and support all children’s health and academic achievement.

Today, one in four children has a health issue that affects their ability to succeed in the classroom, double the number just 30 years ago. In addition, one in five children experiences a mental or behavioral health disorder such as ADHD, anxiety, depression or drug use each year.

Many of the health issues that affect learning disproportionately impact low-income students of color. Any effort to close the academic achievement gap must include strategies to address these health disparities and create new opportunities to expand student access to critical health services.

School health services, including those addressing physical, mental, dental, vision and behavioral health, serve as powerful supports for education. School nurses, social workers, psychologists and other school health providers help to address student health problems, reduce absenteeism, improve academic achievement and enable principals and teachers to spend more time delivering instruction.

Currently, CPS does not have an adequate number of school health professionals to meet the needs of its students. CPS students have higher rates of chronic absenteeism than the state average; approximately one in five CPS students missed at least 17 days of school in 2017-2018, compared to one in six for Illinois. Many of the leading reasons students miss school are health-related and schools can play a critical role in addressing those issues.

CPS employs a variety of different health service models and strategies, and because of the diversity of the student population and the communities in which the schools are based, multiple approaches that meet

the specific needs of these students and communities are needed. However, the system as a whole would benefit from greater collaboration and coordination between the district and health service providers.

CPS should also pursue policies that better leverage Medicaid to support and expand school health services. One key opportunity is the reversal of the Free Care Rule, a change in federal policy that now allows schools to receive reimbursement of eligible services to any Medicaid-enrolled student. For many states, including Illinois, implementing this change requires amendments to state policies and practices around Medicaid billing. For districts such as CPS that serve a large population of low-income students, this gives Medicaid the potential to be a major funding source for school-based health services for the neediest children.

Mayor Lightfoot should ensure that all students have access to quality physical, behavioral and mental health services each day in school, allowing them to be present, focused and ready to learn.

Recommendations

1. Ensure schools are adequately staffed with trained health and wellness service providers that meet the needs of each school’s students.
2. Develop standard policies and processes for student health data sharing between CPS and health service providers that protect student privacy while improving student access to health services.
3. Develop a citywide strategy to improve collaboration between CPS, health service providers and community organizations to improve service coordination and data sharing to address unmet health needs of students.
4. Advocate for a Medicaid State Plan Amendment (SPA) to reverse the Free Care Rule, providing schools with the opportunity to receive additional reimbursement for expanded services delivered to all Medicaid enrolled students.

Schoolyards that Support Health and Wellness

A vast and growing body of research documents nature's benefits on human health. Access to nature promotes physical activity, which helps to make everyone, including children, healthier. Time spent in nature has also been linked with decreased stress, mitigated attention deficit disorders, better eyesight, less asthma and improved Body Mass Index.

The city's more than 650 public schools serve more than 360,000 students—of which 78 percent are low income and 90 percent are students of color—and contain hundreds of acres of impermeable surface area that could become green spaces through investment in large-scale green infrastructure. These schoolyards can address neighborhood flooding and provide much-needed green space in community areas that need it.

Schoolyards can provide healthy, engaging places for students to be physically active before, during and after school. A well-designed green schoolyard includes spaces for physical activity, such as turf fields, jogging tracks, basketball and tennis courts, and play equipment for all ages and abilities, as well as outdoor classrooms and gardens to support nutrition education and connection with nature. Green schoolyards provide space and equipment that provide school leaders with the tools to effectively implement wellness policies and practices—including recess, physical education and nutrition education.

Green schoolyards also serve as an outdoor extension of the classroom for lessons ranging from science experiments to poetry and writing to nutrition education. The grounds feature areas for learning and exploration, such as outdoor classrooms, native trees and plants and vegetable gardens. Plus, the boost in energy and focus that students get from running and playing outside helps improve behavior and academic performance in the classroom.

Mayor Lightfoot should prioritize capital investments that support improvement of outdoor spaces to encourage physical activity, nutrition education, outdoor learning and connection with nature—all of which support physical, mental and emotional well-being.

Recommendations

1. Support Space to Grow, a citywide partnership to transform Chicago schoolyards into places that support outdoor play and active learning while addressing the city's stormwater management challenges. Space to Grow aligns with the city's sustainability plans and is identified as an action in the recently released [Resilient Chicago](#) plan as a way to address urban flooding.
2. Ensure the full funding of Chicago's portion of the capital costs of Space to Grow's initial commitment to build 34 schoolyards as well as the expansion of this program across Chicago.
3. Create an inter-agency citywide taskforce to oversee maintenance needs and preservation of public green infrastructure—and, specifically, green schoolyards—and other public green spaces that use green infrastructure elements.
4. Support open/shared use policies that promote active lifestyles and foster community connectedness by encouraging community access to schoolyards.

Access to Nutritious School Food

Each meal presents the opportunity to support schools' core mission of education. Studies consistently document a powerful connection between health and academic achievement. Research shows that improved nutrition in schools can lead to increased focus and attention and improved test scores. Very simply, healthy, well-nourished students are more likely to attend school and to be engaged and ready to learn.

Nearly 80 percent of CPS students come from economically disadvantaged families. Many of these students rely on schools for most of their meals. At the same time, more than 40 percent of Chicago students are overweight or obese. In this context, it is especially critical that the meals students receive at school are healthy and help build habits that support students' long-term health and academic potential.

The CPS school meal program is the third largest K-12 food service operation in the nation, annually serving 75 million meals to over 360,000 students at more than 600 food campuses. Through its meal program, CPS offers breakfast, lunch, after school snacks, after school supper and Saturday meals to all students during the school year. CPS also serves breakfast and lunch to students during the summer months.

Over the last decade, CPS has taken significant steps to become a national leader in providing healthy school meals through the implementation of high nutrition standards, more scratch cooking, and other policies that regulate the sale and marketing of junk food to students. However, there is still more that can be done.

Nutrition standards authorized by the 2010 Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act went into effect in the fall of 2012. These standards brought significant progress, adding more fruits and vegetables and more whole grains, while trimming excess calories, fat and sodium. CPS has continually met or exceeded the nutrition guidelines outlined by HHFKA. Despite rollbacks at the federal level, CPS has maintained its commitment to these standards.

Mayor Lightfoot should support CPS in continuing to be a leader in providing healthful, less processed, freshly prepared and locally sourced meals to all its students.

Recommendations

1. Continue the district's commitment to a school meal program that exceeds the goals of the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act and that is in compliance with national dietary guidelines.
2. Continue to be a national leader around healthy school food by expanding CPS' supply chain for local and sustainable food and by serving less processed meals.
3. Continue to provide and expand transparency around the district's school food policy and program, including strengthening efforts to involve CPS students and parents in improving school meals.
4. Continue to implement the Good Food Purchasing Policy at CPS and other city agencies to support and enhance existing innovative initiatives, including sourcing local and sustainably produced items and offering foods that meet high standards for nutrition, while reducing salt, added sugars and saturated fats, and eliminating artificial additives.

Contact Us

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