

# STUDENT HEALTH & WELL-BEING

ARE VITAL TO ACADEMIC RESULTS

New research shows that the health of California's students has a direct impact on dropout rates, attendance, academic performance and school revenues. The stakes are high, and current health indicators raise serious concerns. Student health issues stand in the way of our ability to reach achievement goals set by the state—and limit California's economic and cultural prosperity.

**California achieves when its students do.** Our ability to thrive and compete in a global economy depends on how well we prepare each new generation. But research shows that many California students lack the healthy basics needed for academic achievement.

**Health and learning are linked.** When students are healthy—physically and emotionally, with good nutrition, safety and a sense of personal belonging—they are more likely to attend school and be ready to learn. The opposite is also true. Research documents the powerful connection between poor health and academic failure, and it shows that health issues and inadequate school environments affect students' attendance, grades and ability to learn.

**Health is missing from education reform.** Education reform initiatives have focused intently on increasing academic rigor and relevance. And while these efforts lead to increased student achievement, the absolute academic performance and graduation rates of California students remain unacceptably low. Statewide, nearly 19 percent of 9th-graders will not complete high school. What's missing from the education reform equation is a focus on student well-being—absent health, safety and a sense of belonging, many students aren't able to achieve in school.

**Health issues deepen inequity.** A disproportionate number of low-income students and students of color live without basic health and safety supports, disadvantaging them for learning and life. African American and Hispanic students are concentrated in low-income, poorly performing schools. Environmental conditions for academic achievement—including safety, supportive relationships, high expectations and meaningful participation—decrease in proportion to the percentage of students at a school who are living in poverty. Across California today, dropout rates are more pronounced for Latino (24 percent) and African American students (33 percent) than Asian (8 percent) and White students (12 percent).

**New research points to several no-cost and low-cost solutions.** The good news is that California leaders can take immediate steps—working largely with current budgets at the state, local, district and school levels—for gains in student health and academic achievement. Solutions involve improving school environments and the systems that deliver student support services.

## BEING WELL. LEARNING WELL.

**The California Healthy Students Research Project** is devoted to understanding and addressing health-related barriers to student achievement. By researching health and education issues in the state, the project provides evidence-based policy and practice recommendations to foster the school culture, environment, supports and services needed to give all youth the opportunity to be successful learners.

Research was conducted by WestEd and the Philip R. Lee Institute for Health Policy Studies, University of California San Francisco, and funded by The James Irvine Foundation, The California Endowment and The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

This project is guided by an advisory committee made up of dozens of leaders within California's health and education sectors.

**Find resources at [\[website\]](#).**

the James Irvine foundation

The  
California  
Endowment

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HEWLETT  
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# HEALTHY STEPS

## TOWARD GREATER ACHIEVEMENT

*Following are three broad approaches and ten initial recommendations for treating health as an important part of the student achievement equation.*

### MAKE BETTER USE OF EXISTING PUBLIC FUNDS

*The state spends well over half its General Fund budget on education and health services for children and youth. The system governing how state and federal money is spent is fragmented and often duplicative—with significant opportunity to improve efficiency and effectiveness.*

**1 Create a state-level Children’s Cabinet.** The state should improve delivery of services, collaboration, information-sharing and efficiency among and within government agencies and departments serving children by establishing a cabinet charged with this responsibility. The Children’s Cabinet would comprise the head of each child-serving entity, as well as the superintendent of public instruction.

**2 Make best practice common practice.** The state should promote and support adoption of best practices across the health, education, juvenile justice and welfare sectors to improve academic achievement and whole child development and to reduce health and educational disparities.

### INVOLVE EVERYONE TO IMPROVE SCHOOL CLIMATE

*Achievement is highly correlated with students’ sense of connection and a caring, stable school environment, which research tells us are lacking for a majority of California students, particularly low-income students and students of color. The foundation for a positive school climate rests on the integration of academic and behavior approaches that address the student as a whole person and respond to the needs of a diverse student population.*

**3 Define and support school climate.** The state should define school climate in education code and include strategies for improving school climate within school site and corrective action plans, state policies affecting student personalization, standards and curricula for socio-emotional learning, and before/after school offerings.

**4 Measure progress.** The state should promote regular measurement of school climate and student health indicators from the perspective of students, teachers and parents. And this data should be used to inform policy and practice.

**5 Prepare educators to participate.** Teacher and school administrator education programs should emphasize the relationship between school climate, student health and achievement; practical methods for improving the situation; and how and why to employ student learning supports.

**6 Engage students and families locally.** The state should promote best practices in student and family engagement across a continuum of supports for students. Examples include an early warning and response system for students vulnerable to wellness barriers, youth peer and leadership programs, parent-teacher home visits, after-school programs, and physical activities within and outside of school hours.

**7 Include student voice in agency decisions.** The state and state agencies should include student voice to inform the allocation of funds, program design, policy and program evaluation.

## INTEGRATE HEALTH AND EDUCATION SUPPORTS

*From physical and mental health to safety and personal connection—the dimensions of student well-being are many, and all affect achievement. Professionals addressing these needs work in different fields, with different funding streams and with different, often inequitable access to students. We can help integrate and align their work for greater results and efficiency.*

**8** **Create an accessible continuum of care.** Support services should be easy to access via a continuum of care that is based on standardized eligibility and enrollment requirements that cut across all income-based children's programs. Schools would become integrated access points for a range of health and wellness services. Physical activity would be enhanced by improving school facilities and community centers, particularly those serving poorer communities.

**9** **Support school-based health.** School-based health services should be integrated into healthcare delivery systems. Supportive policies would include school-based providers in the Health Information Exchange and in definitions of "medical home; encourage school-based health centers to adopt electronic health records; maximize revenue that local education agencies can generate from the LEA Medi-Cal direct billing program as permitted by the Department of Health Care Services; protect funding streams that increase children's access to healthcare; and support the staffing and development of school nurses and school health office assistants.

**10** **Encourage healthy lifestyles.** Student nutrition and physical activity should be improved to address childhood obesity and its effects on student health and academic achievement. All school districts should comply with existing state physical education requirements and new federal rules for school lunch nutrition, and should adopt best practices for physical activity during and after school, enrollment in free/reduced-price lunch programs, and healthy eating.

### We can MAKE THINGS BETTER

**Ensuring all students have healthy basics—safe schools, physical activity, access to care, nutritious food and meaningful relationships—is everyone's business. Policymakers, educators, health providers, parents and students must all play a role. Healthy solutions are already boosting achievement in California communities from Anderson and Alameda to Sherman and San Diego. It's time to make things better:**

**FOR STUDENTS.** Their future depends on being ready and able to learn. When health, wellness and safety aren't issues, young people can focus on reaching their potential in school and life beyond.

**FOR SCHOOLS.** When more students attend, cash-strapped school districts benefit from increased revenues. And when students are ready and able to learn, schools can make better use of class time in order to meet rigorous federal standards and achieve state goals.

**FOR CALIFORNIA.** The time is right to give students a healthy chance to succeed. We can't afford not to—for students and for what they contribute to our communities and economy when health isn't a barrier. When professionals serving students across the education, health and social services fields coordinate their work, the billions of dollars Californians invest in education and health each year can be spent more efficiently and effectively.

*We can give students a* **HEALTHY CHANCE TO SUCCEED**

**The student health issues hurting academic achievement are serious—and largely preventable.**

**I CANNOT LEARN WELL IF...**

**NEW RESEARCH TELLS US...**

*I am sick.*

**PHYSICAL HEALTH MATTERS.**

Students who miss school or attend while ill don't achieve as well as others. Diabetes, obesity, tooth decay and asthma are prevalent among California students. Two to 18 school days a year are missed by students with asthma, a condition also correlated with lower test scores and poorer academic performance.

Read the full research at [\[web address to come\]](#)

*Californians can make a difference by coordinating services between schools and local health providers and by offering appropriate physical activity.*

*I am hungry.*

**GOOD NUTRITION MATTERS.**

Students who haven't eaten nutritious meals regularly or recently have trouble concentrating in class. Nearly two million children in California come from homes that experience food insecurity. Children who regularly ate school breakfast had 50 percent higher scores on standardized math tests and nearly half the absentee rates compared with others who rarely ate school breakfast.

Read the full research at [\[web address to come\]](#)

*Californians can make a difference by expanding access to healthy foods and increasing the number of students who have access to free and reduced-price meals in the summer and after school.*

*I am troubled.*

**EMOTIONAL HEALTH MATTERS.**

Students who suffer from untreated emotional and mental health issues or who are stressed by life circumstances can act out in ways that hinder their development and disrupt the learning of their classmates. In one city, students given access to school-based mental health centers showed a 30 percent decrease in absences and failures, and a 95 percent decrease in disciplinary referrals.

Read the full research at [\[web address to come\]](#)

*Californians can make a difference by counseling troubled students and linking them with peers who can listen and share their own coping techniques.*

*I am afraid of getting hurt.*

**SAFETY MATTERS.**

Students who are afraid to be in school may not show up for class, physically or mentally. Victims and witnesses of violence, bullying or harassment are at risk. Thirty-seven percent of secondary students in California report experiencing some form of harassment or bullying at school in the past 12 months. Many students exposed to violence experience symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, leading to loss of hope, depression and reduced motivation to learn.

Read the full research at [\[web address to come\]](#)

*Californians can make a difference by strengthening relationships between schools, families, social service agencies, community organizations and law enforcement.*

*I feel alone.*

**PERSONAL CONNECTION MATTERS.**

Students who feel isolated and uninvolved at school are less motivated to achieve and more likely to engage in risky behaviors. Research reveals that a majority of California students—particularly those in low-performing schools—lack caring relationships with adults and a sense of connection to their school.

Read the full research at [\[web address to come\]](#)

*Californians can make a difference by ensuring all children and youth have access to caring adults, community resources and opportunities.*