

## SEEKING INPUT!

The School Health Committee of the PA Chapter, American Academy of Pediatrics convened several youth focus groups to learn about what they view as priorities to promote their health and well-being. This draft is based on similar projects organized in New York and other cities.

Feedback from school administrators, counselors, teachers, students, etc. is welcomed! Share your comments or request a brief meeting to provide your feedback by contacting [info@paaap.org](mailto:info@paaap.org). Thank you!

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## Fundamentals of Student Health and Well-Being

### INTRODUCTION:

Schools play a critical role in supporting the health and well-being of children and promoting overall student wellness. The structure and safety of a student's learning environment can have a tremendous impact on their present and lifelong health and well-being. Research has demonstrated a positive correlation between health and learning and that health and learning are mutually reinforcing. Unhealthy and unsupportive school environments can affect children's attendance, concentration and academic performance, and lead to expensive, time-consuming cleanup and remediation activities. A healthy and supportive school environment is essential to student success and effective learning, yet many schools lack the tools and resources needed to provide this type of environment for their students. The Pennsylvania Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics puts forth the following Fundamentals of Student Health and Well-being document to outline the benchmarks that schools should strive to meet to ensure a safe, healthy, and supportive learning environment for their students. Schools that lack the resources to meet any of these benchmarks should seek funding from state and local governments to help achieve these goals.

The Pennsylvania Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics puts forth the following Fundamentals of Student Health and Well-Being to outline the core components of student health that every school in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania should strive for.

### CONSIDERATIONS TO FACILITATE STUDENT SUCCESS:

- I. Schools should strive to create and foster a safe and healthy environment.**
  - a. Students should be able to access information on any precautions and plans that schools are taking to keep them safe.
  - b. Students should be able to attend school in a building that is free from environmental hazards like structural deficiencies, lead, and mold exposure. The learning environment should be free of environmental hazards including allergens, pollutants, chemicals, and classroom conditions (e.g., poor ventilation, lighting, acoustics, and temperature control.)
  - c. Schools should work to minimize, reduce, or eliminate exposure to health risks when possible.

- d. Students should be able to attend school with vaccinated staff and peers with appropriate infection prevention and control measures in place.
- e. Students should have access to safe, clean, accessible, and substance-free restrooms.
- f. Students should have access to gender-neutral bathrooms.
- g. Students should be able to learn in a comfortable environment conducive to learning.
- h. Students have the right to be in a school that is at a comfortable temperature, as excessive heat can make it difficult for children to learn. One [Harvard University study](#) showed a relationship between heat and AC access and test scores.
- i. Students have a right to receive their education in a substance-free environment, with policies in place to protect against substance use on school grounds.

## **II. The school environment should be free of bullying and harassment.**

- a. Students should learn in a setting free of bullying or harassment.
- b. Schools should work to foster an environment that encourages self-expression without fear of bullying or harassment.
- c. Schools should work to create an environment that encourages self-reporting of bullying and/or harassment without fear or concern for retaliation.
- d. Schools should work to create an environment that encourages open confidential discussion with teachers and or counselors should they feel bullied or harassed by fellow students or members of administration.

## **III. Schools should work toward creating an environment where students can freely express their religious beliefs, gender identity, and sexual orientation.**

- a. Students have the right to practice their religion and faith in school without interference. Schools should take reasonable measures to ensure that teachers, coaches, and other school officials do not pressure or encourage students to join in the private prayer of those officials or other students.
- b. Schools should strive to create an environment where students feel comfortable freely expressing their gender identity and sexual orientation.

## **IV. Students should be able to access appropriate mental health services and treatment.**

- a. Students should be able to seek and receive **timely access to** emotional and/or psychological support within the school, including unscheduled visits as indicated.
  - i. This may include access to counselors, psychologists, psychiatrists, and/or social workers.
  - ii. If higher or more specialized behavioral health care is indicated, school staff should provide resources to facilitate these referrals and evaluations.
  - iii. Students should be informed of all the school-based mental health services that are available to them.
- b. Students should not be punished for disclosing mental health concerns to school staff.
  - i. Limits of confidentiality should be reviewed with students in these settings.

- c. Behavioral health crisis services should be available to all students while they are on school property.
- d. Support services should be universally available to all students in the setting of an acute mental health crisis affecting the school (i.e. student death by suicide).
- e. Whenever possible, in the aftermath of a traumatic event affecting the student population, students should receive ongoing support after the acute period, either directly through the school or by referral, to promote longitudinal healing.
- f. Students should be able to attend behavioral health visits/programs outside of the school if needed, without fear of retribution or academic decline.
- g. School faculty should take immediate action & intervene appropriately when a student's mental health has been compromised by another student/teacher in the form of bullying, harassment, excessive discipline, aggression, or assault.
- h. School faculty should promote positive coping skills/strategies when able and allow for utilization of these coping skills/strategies in the school by any student, pending they do not create imminent disruptions or jeopardize health or safety of student or other peers.
- i. Students have the right to receive education regarding appropriate facts and knowledge about mental health by trained or experienced faculty.

**V. Nutritious and healthy food should be available to all students.**

- a. A child should never have to go hungry when at school.
- b. Schools should make healthy and nutritious food options available to all students, regardless of their ability to pay.
- c. Students should have access to lead-free, fluoridated drinking water.
- d. Students should have adequate time to eat their meals at school.
- e. [According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), students should have at least twenty minutes once they are seated (seat time) to enjoy their meal and socialize.

**VI. Schools should ensure that students have timely access to medically appropriate healthcare when on school grounds.**

- a. The nurse's office should not refuse any student who expresses that they feel that they might vomit, have a seizure, become unconscious, or any other function that may lead them to be a danger to themselves and other students in the classroom setting.
- b. Students should have access to menstrual products upon request.
- c. Schools should make reasonable efforts to accommodate virtual medical appointments during school hours.

**VII. Students should be able to advocate for their health in the school setting.**

- a. Schools should allow students to give feedback on any issues that affect their health while in the school setting.

- b. School policies such as zero tolerance should not punish students for having an educational tool, such as scissors or a compass, or a prescribed medication. Educational tools used unsafely may be confiscated by faculty and later returned to a student. If a student is found with a medication considered unfit to be on their person, a faculty member may take them to the nurse's office but cannot personally confiscate it.

**VIII. Students have a right to educational support and resources.**

- a. Schools should work to create an accessible environment that accommodates physical and developmental disabilities.
- b. Students with disabilities should be able to enjoy all the school benefits they have access to.
- c. Schools and school staff should protect information about students' disabilities and ensure, to the best of their ability, that this information remains confidential.
- d. Students and staff should have access to handbooks provided by the school outlining their respective rights and responsibilities.

**IX. Students should have access to quality, evidence-based health education.**

- a. Schools should provide a school health education curriculum that includes, but is not limited to, essential health literacy concepts and skills such as:
  - i. Reproductive and sexual health
  - ii. Healthy nutrition
  - iii. Healthy relationships and interpersonal connections
  - iv. Mental health
  - v. Understanding Health Care and Medical Insurance in the United States
- b. Students should receive education in life skills that will foster independence in adulthood, including career planning and financial literacy.

**CLOSING**

If you have comments, questions, concerns, resources, please reach out to PA AAP staff at [info@paaap.org](mailto:info@paaap.org).