

# Using Needs Assessments to Connect Learning + Health Opportunities in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

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**HEALTHY SCHOOLS  
CAMPAIGN**

## Introduction

This guide is intended to highlight the ways that school needs assessments required by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) can be a valuable tool in identifying, understanding and addressing health conditions that contribute to poor academic performance. It provides child advocates, community leaders, school personnel and other key stakeholder groups with the information that they need to convince their state and local education leaders to make health and wellness a significant component of the needs assessment and school improvement process.



# The Learning and Health Connection

The link between health and learning is clear: healthy, active and well-nourished children are more likely to attend school, arrive ready to learn and stay engaged in class.

Yet far too many students spend their days in schools that do not offer them adequate clean air and water, nutritious food, physical activity and the support of a school nurse. Many students come to school with one or more health problems that hinder their ability to learn. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the incidence of chronic diseases—including asthma, obesity and diabetes—has doubled among children over the past several decades. These conditions affect students' ability to learn and succeed at school, as well as their long-term health outcomes.

This challenge is especially critical in light of the nation's vast disparities in health and education. Low-income students and students of color are at increased risk for health problems that impede learning. These students are also more likely to attend schools with unhealthy environments that are unable to invest in evidence-based health promotion. Unless we address these disparities in health status and school environments, efforts to close the education achievement gap will fall short.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the education law passed in 2015, highlights the importance of equitable access to quality education and the conditions that support student learning. The law provides opportunities for schools to support student success by improving student health and wellbeing, and opportunities for public school advocates to support school practices that achieve and maintain better student health.

Last year, as states created their ESSA plans, advocates worked hard to make sure that they capitalized on the chance to incorporate key health and wellness measures, particularly chronic absenteeism, as part of their systems for measuring school quality and holding schools accountable.

Chronic absenteeism, most commonly defined as missing 10 percent or more of school days for any reason, is a proven early warning sign of academic risk and school dropout. While the causes of chronic absenteeism are multifold, research shows that student health and a school's health and wellness environment are key factors that can contribute to a student being chronically absent.

Now, with 36 states and Washington, D.C., utilizing some measure of chronic absenteeism as part of their school quality measure, advocates are turning their attention to the long-term work of ensuring that the implementation of ESSA fulfills its promise of supporting student health and wellness.

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## The Role of Needs Assessments

A needs assessment is a systematic process for identifying problems, gaps and opportunities so that an organization or entity can make meaningful improvements. Needs assessments are frequently required for federal and state education grant programs and for non-governmental funders, so it's a well accepted means of collecting data and guiding improvement efforts in education.

This document is primarily focused on needs assessments that are required by State Education Agencies (SEAs), often known as state departments of education, and conducted by Local Education Agencies (LEAs), often known as school districts, usually focused on a specific school.

The Health Impact Project, a collaboration of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and The Pew Charitable Trusts, conducted a [Health Impact Assessment \(HIA\)](#) in 2016. The report examined how needs assessments and school improvement plan strategies could be leveraged to improve achievement and related health outcomes across diverse student populations. The report concluded that LEAs could more effectively improve schools if they used their needs assessment process to examine factors outside of the classroom that affect academic achievement. It also recommended that LEAs and schools establish partnerships with social service agencies, public health departments, hospitals and other community organizations to address identified problems. Taking these steps could not only help schools meet higher performance standards, but could also lead to better educational and health outcomes for students.



# The Nuts and Bolts of Needs Assessments

## When does ESSA require a needs assessment?

ESSA requires each state to create an accountability system that is made up of a set of indicators that are used to determine school performance. Beginning with the 2017-2018 school year, and each three years thereafter, each state will determine how its schools have performed on its accountability system and then provide more intensive support to the lowest performers.

The lowest-performing 5 percent of Title I schools and any high school failing to graduate one-third or more of its students are identified as needing comprehensive support and improvement (CSI). Schools with consistently underperforming subgroups (such as economically disadvantaged students, students from racial and ethnic subgroups, students with disabilities and students learning English) may be designated as needing targeted support and improvement (TSI).

When a school is identified for CSI by their SEA due to their performance on the state's accountability system, the LEA must develop and implement a school improvement plan that is based on a school-level needs assessment. Schools identified for TSI may be required or strongly encouraged to complete a needs assessment. (Title I, Part A)

Needs assessments may be required under ESSA in several other situations, including:

- When Title I schools decide to use their Title I funds to operate a schoolwide program, a needs assessment must be conducted and used to inform the comprehensive schoolwide program. (Title I, Part A)

- When health, nutrition and other social services are not available to eligible children in a school operating a Title I targeted assistance program, the law requires a needs assessment in order to use a portion of the Title I funds as a last resort to provide these services. (Title I, Part A)
- LEAs that receive at least \$30,000 in funding from the Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grant (SSAEG) program must complete a needs assessment each year. (Title IV, Part A)

## What types of data are included in needs assessments?

Needs assessments gather data, feedback and insights at many levels, ranging from simple counts, such as the number of staff teaching certain topics, to more qualitative data, such as the perceptions and attitudes of teachers, parents and students. Topics can include curriculum and instructional practices, school climate, family and community engagement, physical infrastructure and health-related policies and practices.

Needs assessments may employ a variety of methodologies for gathering information, such as collecting data from the school or district human resources and attendance departments, and/or from related agencies such as a city or county health department. They may also utilize surveys and self-assessments by stakeholders including parents, teachers, principals and community members. Analyzing written policies as well as their practical implementation is also a key element of needs assessment. (A more detailed list of data sources can be found in Appendix 1.)

## What tools exist to support data collection and analysis?

Education leaders may be able to use a needs assessment process as an opportunity to collect new health and wellness data and engage community partners and stakeholders in the effort to do so. Available tools to support expanded data collection include the following:

- Alliance for a Healthier Generation [Healthy Schools Program Assessment](#), designed to help identify the strengths and weaknesses of your school's policies and programs to promote health and safety.
- [Center for Disease Control and Prevention's School Health Index](#), which includes self-assessment and planning tools that schools can use to improve their health and safety policies and programs.
- [Well SAT 2.0](#), which can be used to assess the quality of a school district's written wellness policy, as well as resources for making improvements based on the assessment.
- [U.S. Department of Education's School Climate Surveys](#), to assess school climate and safety.
- [ASCD's School Improvement Tool](#), which examines educationally-focused components, such as curriculum and instruction, as well as policies and programs to support children's developmental needs.
- [CASEL District Strength Inventory of Social Emotional Learning \(SEL\) Programs and Practices](#), an assessment of the components that contribute to effective SEL implementation.

## What considerations should guide data interpretation?

Important considerations when accessing these different data sources include:

- When was the data collected? Things change often in schools, and even data that is a few years old might reflect a time when the school had different leadership, or different policies in place.
- Is this school-level data? Schools within the same LEA can be very different, so it is important to focus on data specific to the school in question.
- Is this community or health system data? Data from non-education sources may not overlap completely with the school's actual population, so it is important to look carefully at how the data was collected when using these sources.
- Is it publicly available? Are there data privacy concerns? Documents related to the needs assessment and related plans are likely to be shared in a very transparent way. Appropriate precautions should be taken if they include data that is not publicly available, or could inadvertently share sensitive information, such as student health records.



# How You Can Influence Your State's Needs Assessment Process

## Process

Beginning in the 2017-2018 school year, states and school districts will begin implementing their [ESSA plans](#) (see sample timeline, below). This might require making changes to state laws or regulations, and will influence state education budget planning. To keep up with these changes, and to look for opportunities to weigh in, advocates should pay close attention to the education activities beginning in the 2018 state legislative session, and particularly to the agenda of the education committees. SEAs may also be issuing key regulations, or other types of guidance, and should also be monitored.

Not all states will be creating laws or regulations that provide detailed requirements for the needs assessment process. Instead, the SEA might create resources or provide professional development and peer networking opportunities to help schools and LEAs conduct needs assessments. In many states, SEA staff provide hands-on help, such as annual on-site reviews or hosting professional development events. Some states will also be contracting with organizations that will be responsible for the needs assessment and school improvement process, or helping schools find these providers.

Most states already offer some level of existing **guidance for needs assessments** (see next page), and education

leaders should consider adapting existing tools to meet the requirements of ESSA instead of creating new tools and systems to collect data. Examples of health and wellness questions and data sources that can be added to needs assessment guidance can be found in Appendix 1, on page 10.

Since needs assessments are required for many governmental programs and non-governmental funders, districts and state agencies might be simultaneously conducting multiple needs assessment processes. Advocates can capitalize on opportunities to coordinate data collection, but should also be aware of the barriers this can raise, due to the time and resources needed for multiple needs assessment processes. It is also important to make sure the intent and focus of each of the needs assessments remains intact.

## Role of Partners

LEAs are responsible for conducting the school needs assessments required by ESSA, and they may choose to impose additional requirements on individual schools beyond those given by the SEA. Some LEAs may be large enough to dedicate staff to assisting with needs assessments, and may have community partners and resources available to help schools, while others may provide less detailed support and expect more work to be done at the school level. It is important for advocates to identify key points of contact at the LEA level, even if they are in more of an administrative role.

*(continued on page 8)*

## Sample Timeline

Though each state will create their own process, a typical timeline for implementing the accountability systems required by ESSA might look like:

2017-18 school year: collect data used for initial accountability system ratings.

Fall 2018: publish a graded or ranked list of schools, based on their accountability system performance.

Winter 2019: work with schools to conduct needs assessments and a related school improvement plan.

2019-20 school year: work with schools to implement school improvement plan.

Fall 2021: publish the next graded or ranked list of schools, based on their accountability system performance.

2020-21 school year: state ESSA plans will be updated.



### ***SEA Needs Assessment Guidance***

SEAs often provide guidance or sample needs assessments to assist LEAs in their needs assessment process. Several states already have existing robust examples of needs assessments.

#### **Colorado**

The Colorado Department of Education developed [A Guide for Comprehensive Needs Assessment](#) related specifically to NCLB-required needs assessments. Tools and resources on their [website](#) include links to data systems, needs assessment tools and survey templates.

#### **Maine**

The Maine Department of Education created a guide and [comprehensive needs assessment tool](#) that provides background and guidance on the process for needs assessments, as well as sample probing questions for consideration. Topics covered include: demographics, student achievement, climate and culture, staff quality, recruitment and retention, curriculum and instruction, family and community involvement, school organization and technology.

#### **North Carolina**

The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction offers a [comprehensive needs assessment rubric](#) to help school districts understand their standing along a continuum of progress (Leading, Developing, Emerging or Lacking) across domains such as instructional alignment, support for student achievement (including social emotional support), leadership and professional capacity (including teacher recruitment and retention), resource allocation (including technology and facilities), planning and operational effectiveness, and family and community engagement. The rubric provides questions for consideration and guides districts to build action plans towards a high standard.



(continued from page 6)

While the school principal is likely the key point of contact at the school level, other staff members may ultimately do most of the work involved. School nurses, counselors, social workers, physical education and special education teachers and other staff may be important allies for ensuring that health factors are part of the ongoing discussion on ESSA implementation at a school. While these school stakeholders are strong advocates for health and wellness in the school, they may not have previously been involved in needs assessments or school improvement efforts. Helping them to understand ESSA and the role that they can play in the school improvement process is a powerful way for advocates to prioritize health and wellness in their states. Schools may also have existing groups, such as a **local wellness committee** (below), school improvement committee, parent organization or a student leadership committee, that might also be asked to help.

Community partnerships are also an important element of education needs assessments that incorporate a focus on health and wellness. Not only can community members and organizations provide valuable perspectives, they might also have access to resources that can help with implementation. School stakeholders can worry that identifying health needs will lead to massive new responsibilities that the school or LEA feels unequipped to handle; community partnerships can help alleviate this concern. Possible community partners include:

- Local hospitals, particularly children's hospitals. All non-profit hospitals are also required to do needs assessments to inform their community benefit programming.
- Managed care organizations and health plans responsible for providing coverage to students in your community.
- Community organizations dedicated to supporting children's health.
- Local public health agencies.
- Pediatricians and the local chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics.
- Teachers unions.
- Local PTA.
- Nontraditional messengers such as local businesses, law enforcement official or sports coaches.

At the state level, it is also important to consider additional departments, such as health and agriculture, that might be useful partners. In most states, these partnerships already exist in some way, but the SEA staff that are helping with the needs assessment process might not be familiar with how their state colleagues can contribute, such as with guidance on data collection, or offering additional programs and resources to schools. Advocates may be in a position to make these connections, and to make introductions and suggestions to state department staff about potential partnerships.

### **Local Wellness Committee**

LEAs that participate in the National School Lunch Program must have a local wellness policy, which is created and implemented by a local wellness committee. Assessing the school's compliance with the policy, using a tool such as the [Healthy Schools Program Assessment](#), can be an effective

way to assess how they are currently addressing school health. After the needs assessment has been completed, activities to improve compliance with the local wellness policy can be included in the school improvement plan.

## Conclusion

Needs assessments present an important opportunity to understand the root causes of poor academic performance and build effective solutions. Educators, parents, advocates, community members, health providers and other school and community stakeholders can play a key role in supporting the needs assessment process, and ensuring the resulting comprehensive support and improvement programming effectively addresses the critical importance of health and wellness.

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## Appendix 1

# Sample Health and Wellness Questions for Needs Assessments

These sample questions are designed to highlight key health and wellness needs that impact student learning, and to underscore best practices for addressing educationally relevant health disparities. SEAs can integrate questions like these into the guidance they develop for LEAs, and LEAs can incorporate these questions directly into their needs assessments.

The list of example questions below was developed by focusing on questions for which schools likely already have the data, or for which the data can easily be collected. This list is not exhaustive, and additional resources can be found in Appendix 2 and on page 5.

### School Health Services

Basic health issues, including chronic health conditions, acute illnesses and mental and emotional health are a major contributing factor to chronic absenteeism.

Sample Questions	Data Sources to Consider
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>· What are the two diagnosed health conditions with the highest prevalence among the student population (e.g. asthma, dental issues, diabetes, ADHD, depression, anxiety, obesity)?</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>· Student health information forms.</li><li>· Applicable data from the state or local health department about prevalence of diseases among youth.</li><li>· <a href="#">County Health Rankings and Roadmaps</a>.</li><li>· Applicable data from local hospitals about rates of chronic diseases, emergency room treatment or admissions and discharges for these conditions among youth.</li><li>· Quantitative and qualitative data from school nurses, including frequency of treatment for chronic conditions, number of students with prescriptions, chronic condition management action plans and other trends in care.</li><li>· Utilization data from school-based or school-linked health centers.</li><li>· Number of students with 504 plan accommodations related to chronic disease management.</li><li>· Office for Civil Rights' Civil Rights Data Collection.</li><li>· Staff records.</li><li>· Site-based surveys.</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>· Is there a school nurse on the school campus? How frequently?</li></ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>· Is there a school counselor on the school campus? How frequently?</li></ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>· Is there a school social worker on the school campus? How frequently?</li></ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>· Is there a school psychologist on the school campus? How frequently?</li></ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>· Is there a school-based or school-linked health center?</li></ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>· If the school is an elementary school, does the school offer early childhood education programming such as Head Start or state pre-K that includes health, vision and dental screenings?</li></ul>	

## School Climate and Culture

Feeling unsafe or unsupported in school can be a contributing factor to chronic absenteeism.

Sample Questions	Data Sources to Consider
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· What percentage of students have missed at least 10% of school days for any reason (excused, unexcused and/or suspension)?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Office for Civil Rights' Civil Rights Data Collection.</li> <li>· School internal data on rates of discipline referrals, in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions and expulsions.</li> <li>· School internal data on incidences of violence, including bullying and harassment.</li> <li>· Site-based surveys.</li> <li>· <a href="#">The Opportunity Index</a>.</li> <li>· <a href="#">YMCA's Community Healthy Living Index</a>.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· How many students reported that they had been bullied/harassed? Does the school have a clearly-communicated procedure for reporting bullying/harassment?</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· What percentage of students received one or more out-of-school suspensions?</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· What percentage of students were in a physical fight on school property during the past year?</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Is Social Emotional Learning incorporated into the school's curriculum?</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Does the school provide all students with after school opportunities and programs?</li> </ul>	

## School Health and Safety Policies

A healthy and safe school environment promotes health, learning and development.

Sample Questions	Data Sources to Consider
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Does the school monitor compliance with the local wellness policy? Is there a local wellness committee that includes parents/caregivers?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· School wellness policy.</li> <li>· Site-based surveys.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Do students have safe routes to get to school, free of crime or other threats, including safe biking or pedestrian routes?</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Does the school have a chemical management program in place which addresses purchasing, storage and training for safer chemical purchases and use?</li> </ul>	

## Nutrition

Providing access to healthy meals during the school day can ensure students are properly fueled to learn.

Sample Questions	Data Sources to Consider
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>· What is the free and reduced-price population's average daily participation in the school lunch and breakfast programs?</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>· Meal participation rates, ideally broken down into subgroups based on grade and type of student payment.</li><li>· A la carte offerings and sales.</li><li>· Local wellness committee meeting notes.</li><li>· Child and Adult Food Care Program data.</li><li>· USDA Summer Food Service Program data.</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>· Does the school offer alternate serving models such as breakfast in the classroom or grab and go carts?</li></ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>· Does the school have a policy limiting the use of unhealthy foods as rewards and in classroom celebrations and fundraisers?</li></ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>· Does the school provide meals/snacks to students before or after school, during school breaks or during the summer? Does it participate in federal nutrition programs, such as the Summer Food Service Program to provide these?</li></ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>· Does the school provide students with access to free, safe drinking water?</li></ul>	

## Physical Education and Activity

Participating in physical activity throughout the school day helps students be healthy and ready to learn.

Sample Questions	Data Sources to Consider
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>· How many minutes of physical education (PE) are students scheduled to receive per week?</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>· Documentation about amount of physical education and physical activity time provided to students.</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>· How many times in the previous semester were students excused from PE? How many times was PE canceled?</li></ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>· For elementary students, is daily recess offered? How many minutes/day? For secondary students, are physical activity breaks provided during the school day? How many minutes/day?</li></ul>	

## Family Engagement

Families have a powerful role in supporting children’s health and learning. Engaged families help guide their children successfully through school, advocate for their children, and can help shape a healthy school environment.

Sample Questions	Data Sources to Consider
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>· Do family members have access to indoor (e.g., gymnasium) and outdoor (e.g., track, sports field) school facilities outside school hours to participate in or conduct health promotion and education programs at low or no cost?</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>· Joint use agreements.</li><li>· Fliers, newsletters and other communication from the school to families about school issues and events.</li><li>· PTA meeting minutes.</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>· Does the school communicate with all families about school health activities in a culturally- and linguistically-appropriate way?</li></ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>· Does the school provide regular updates (e.g., school newsletter, school or district website, parent meetings) to families on issues related to all aspects of student health (i.e., nutrition, physical activity, chronic health condition management, social and emotional wellbeing)?</li></ul>	

## Staff Wellness

School personnel are better able to offer their best to students, colleagues and families when they feel safe, healthy and supported.

Sample Questions	Data Sources to Consider
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>· Does the weekly staff schedule include time explicitly and exclusively for collaboration with colleagues?</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>· School climate assessment.</li><li>· Local union contract or labor-management agreement.</li><li>· District new hire policy.</li><li>· <a href="#">Professional Quality of Life Assessment</a>.</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>· Are health promoting programs in place for school staff?</li></ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>· What proportion of staff report experiencing bullying in the last year?</li></ul>	

## Appendix 2

# Resources

### [State ESSA Plans to Support Student Health and Wellness: A Framework for Action](#)

Alliance for a Healthier Generation and Healthy Schools Campaign

- [Framework for Action: Addressing Chronic Absenteeism through ESSA Implementation](#)  
Alliance for a Healthier Generation, Attendance Works and Healthy Schools Campaign
- [Framework for Action: Addressing Nutrition and Physical Activity](#)  
Alliance for a Healthier Generation and Healthy Schools Campaign
- [Framework for Action: Addressing Mental Health and Wellness through ESSA Implementation](#)  
Alliance for Healthier Generation, Healthy Schools Campaign, Mental Health America and Trust for America's Health

### [Resources for School Stakeholders](#)

Alliance for a Healthier Generation

### [2017 Educator Quality of Work Life Survey](#)

American Federation of Teachers

### [Using Needs Assessments for School and District Improvement](#)

Council for Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and The Center on School Turnaround (WestEd)

### [The Every Student Succeeds Act Creates Opportunities to Improve Health and Education at Low-Performing Schools](#)

The Health Impact Project, a partnership of The Pew Charitable Trusts and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

### [A Guide to School Employee Well-being through Collaboration](#)

Kaiser Permanente and the Labor Management Partnership

### [A Guide for Incorporating Health and Wellness into School Improvement Plans](#)

National Association of Chronic Disease Directors

### [Leverage Points: Thirteen Opportunities for State Education Agencies to Use Their ESSA State Plans to Build and Use Evidence to Improve Student Outcomes](#)

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### Alliance for a Healthier Generation

The Alliance for a Healthier Generation empowers kids to develop lifelong healthy habits by ensuring the environments that surround them provide and promote good health. More than 25 million children have been helped by Healthier Generation's work with schools, communities and businesses across the country. Make a difference at [HealthierGeneration.org](http://HealthierGeneration.org) and join us on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).

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### Healthy Schools Campaign

Healthy Schools Campaign (HSC) engages stakeholders and advocates for policy changes at the local, state and national level to ensure that all students have access to healthy school environments, including nutritious food, physical activity and essential health services, so they can learn and thrive. To get involved, go to [healthyschoolscampaign.org](http://healthyschoolscampaign.org) and join us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).

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