

# Building Safe and Healthy Schools



Introduction .....3

Section 1: What Defines a Safe, Healthy School? .....3

    What is a safe, supportive, and healthy school? .....3

    What are the benefits of establishing a safe and supportive school environment? .....4

    Why is focusing on school health initiatives so important? .....4

    What are the specific, accomplishable components of safe and healthy schools? .....5

    How does a healthy school climate enhance learning? .....8

    What did the COVID-19 pandemic teach us about the state of school health and safety—and the necessity of investing further in these types of aims? .....10

    Section 1 Key Points .....12

    Section 1 Discussion Questions .....12

    Section 1 Summary .....13

Section 2: Keeping Children Safe: A Shared Responsibility .....13

    What is the current state of school safety in America? .....13

    What are the specific aspects of the school setting and experience that teachers can prioritize to create warm, nurturing, welcoming (and safe!) classroom environments?  
14

    What are specific steps that parents can make to do their part toward creating a safe, secure, and welcoming school environment? .....16

    What are specific actions that administrators can take? .....17

    What is a school safety plan? .....17

    What is a student threat assessment program? .....19

    What types of avenues are needed to help students report threats? .....20

    How can we promote school security for our remote or online students? .....21

    Section 2 Key Points .....21

Section 2 Discussion Questions .....	22
Section 2 Summary.....	22
Section 3: How to Work Towards a Healthier School Environment .....	22
How do you measure, create, improve, and sustain a positive and supportive school climate? .....	23
Strategies for promoting student SEL, per the CDC, include (CDC, 2021) .....	27
Strategies for promoting student nutrition, per the CDC, include (CDC, 2021).....	28
Strategies for promoting student physical activity, per the CDC, include (CDC, 2021)	29
Are there other health-related factors that have an impact on academic achievement? .....	30
How to introduce healthier options into the cafeteria.....	32
How to prioritize health for remote students.....	34
Section 3 Key Points .....	36
Section 3 Discussion Questions .....	37
Course Conclusion .....	37
Resources.....	37

## Introduction

In order for students to learn, they need to feel safe. Safety is a necessity for focus, basic brain function, and any type of emotional growth. Placing a priority on health outcomes, too, has been shown to be correlated with higher grades and other success markers for students at schools who completed health and exercise initiatives.

If we focus on helping our students learn social and emotional skills and create the secure, welcoming environment that they need in order to grow, children will exhibit higher engagement, learn better, and ultimately have a higher chance of growing into the people we need them to be.

## Section 1: What Defines a Safe, Healthy School?

In order to know how to build a safe and healthy school, it's important to start with a good understanding of what a healthy and safe school is—and why it's important to create that type of support for students in their formative years.

### What is a safe, supportive, and healthy school?

Safe and supportive school environments are those that surround students with an atmosphere of protected encouragement—which is important because it's that type of environment that best helps children engage fully in their community and in their studies. In other words, it's the type of environment best suited to help students get the most out of their schooling and grow in the most productive and healthy way possible so they can aspire to be truly productive members of society (CDC, 2020).

Supportive, safe, and healthy schools connect children to one another and their families. These schools educate children about healthy physical, nutritional, emotional, and mental practices. In schools that prioritize supportive safety measures, researchers believe that students enjoy protective factors that can reduce the risk of sickness and unintended social consequences for young people (CDC, 2020).

Safe schools tend to employ adults that are empathetic, educated, and motivated to provide an atmosphere of comprehensive care for students. Safe schools may have associations to help students going through particularly turbulent periods or counselors trained in trauma recovery to help young people cope with stressors. While safe and

supportive school environments have been demonstrated to be integral for the formation of all students, these types of nurturing environments are expressly helpful for young students of the LGBTQ community or students in other demographics that tend to be the victims of bullying and discrimination (CDC, 2020).

## **What are the benefits of establishing a safe and supportive school environment?**

As researchers have delved further into the reasons why supportive school environments are conducive to productive, effective learning styles, they have learned that there are many benefits of safe environments for students. These benefits include:

- Fewer occurrences of risky health behaviors (e.g., safe sex practices)
- Reduced stressors for students, which can assist with positive mental health behaviors
- Less inter-student violence on school campuses
- Lessened use of drugs and alcohol by the student population
- Higher class attendance
- Higher likelihood that more of the student body will attend and graduate college (CDC, 2020)

Clearly, there are direct safety benefits of increasing school security, promoting safe habits, and reducing occurrences of risky behaviors. A renewed focus on school health initiatives may be less obviously necessary; which leads us to wonder about the true importance of school health in addition to school safety measures (CDC, 2020).

## **Why is focusing on school health initiatives so important?**

According to recent surveys and census data, approximately 133,000 schools and campuses across the United States of America provide shelter, education, activities and safety to almost sixty million children. These students attend school to learn traditional school subjects en route to their higher education or career goals, of course—but these schools, as a primary environment for children during some of their most formative

years, can also provide a setting in which children can learn and practice healthy behaviors that will set them up for a lifetime of success (CDC, 2019).

Because more and more children are suffering from obesity and related illnesses (the percentages of young people with obesity have skyrocketed over the past several decades), many researchers are turning to schools to help children target and unlearn unhealthy behaviors. While this is good for general health, it's also good for educational initiatives. Children who are overweight or who have other unhealthy behaviors or illnesses tend to miss school more often. This can lead to lower standards of achievement, less confidence with educational projects or aims, and even result in fewer opportunities as these children graduate from school and begin to navigate adulthood (CDC, 2019).

## **What are the specific, accomplishable components of safe and healthy schools?**

According to the CDC's Healthy Schools initiative, there are several different components that go into a safe, healthy school. These components include (CDC, 2021):

- **A structured, formal system of health education.** In order to help students, teachers, and your entire academic community prioritize healthfulness, it's key to ensure they all know what being healthy means and the different tools they have available to them to complete their wellness goals. For young students, it can be very helpful to simply add this to their daily or weekly lesson plans. However, any planned educational experience that helps students make high-quality, safe, and effective health decisions can go a long way toward a healthy culture at your school. It's important to ensure that these programs are taught by trained teachers who are qualified to provide this instruction.
- **An environment focused on nutrition information and services.** It's easy for students to understand the concept of nutrition in theory without understanding that their daily choices constitute ways to practice healthy eating. If a school is able to invest in healthy choices in its cafeteria as well as fun, bright, and attractive messaging throughout common eating areas about exactly how to make good food choices, the entire community will benefit. Examples of this type of messaging and resources might include nutrition posters on the wall, vending machines and kiosks that offer relatively healthy food, meals that feature foods that meet best practices for nutrition standards, and rules about the types of

foods and beverages that can be sold on or just off school campuses. There should also be a focus on ensuring that all school health teachers and nutritional personnel have ongoing professional development and the resources to ensure that they're providing the most recent, updated knowledge for their students. Additionally, all members of the academic community - including teachers and administrators - should practice modeling healthy behaviors, and all students should be able to access free water for drinking during the school day .

- **An emphasis on teacher and administrator wellness.** There are many reasons that it's important to ensure that the staff at your school practice healthy behaviors. For one: Students are more likely to follow their teacher's nutritional advice if they see that the adults at their school are also performing healthy activities. More importantly, however, are the more overarching effects of employee wellness initiatives on the health and happiness of the employees themselves. If school employees eat and move healthily, they will be far more likely to be excited, enthusiastic, and proactive about their jobs as educators. Therefore, for both their own personal success as well as that of their students, it's key for employees to eat healthily, exhibit an active lifestyle, manage their stress levels, and avoid practices that could lead to injury. Programs that help instill wellness behaviors in staff, as well as students, could include policies, benefit programs, and supports around campus that help raise awareness of health and provide easy, actionable, and low-cost or free resources to help the staff members meet their personal health and happiness goals. (As a final benefit, it should be noted that employee wellness initiatives tend to pay for themselves by reducing teacher turnover and cutting the costs associated with substitute teachers).
- **An understanding of the importance of a healthy emotional and social climate for the entire school campus.** While it can be difficult to understand the practical benefits of investing in an improved social or emotional school climate, it's becoming clear through current advances in childhood psychology research that nothing is more important than the invisible stressors and aspects of a school that can negatively or positively influence a child's development. The specific emotional and social climate of a school can impact everything from the way that students choose to participate in activities at their school, form relationships with their peers, and invest in their own academic importance. These factors will make or break a child's chances of success.



- **Continual investments in the physical environment of a school.** The physical surroundings in which students learn, play, and communicate may have a significant effect on their mental health. To this end, it's important that schools take steps to keep their campuses in good physical condition. This may require renovations to ensure that buildings are well-ventilated, fences to ensure that buildings and recess areas are safe, and regular inspections of school property to ensure that the campus is environmentally safe (e.g., not full of mold or pesticides).
- **Updated, accessible, and helpful health services.** In addition to providing resources to children when they need emergency care or first aid, schools should provide regular assessments and management information for more subtle or chronic conditions—from diabetes to depression. Schools should go one step further than this and provide health services that concentrate on wellness promotion and the prevention of chronic or acute health conditions. It's important to remember that for some students, their school hours may be the only time that they come into contact with qualified healthcare providers; so it's a great idea to have professionals on staff from school nurses and educators to even physician assistants or visiting dentists. Ensuring that your health services department also covers the types of mental health occurrences that a student might routinely face—such as anxiety and stress—will also go a long way toward promoting a healthy environment at your school.
- **Available and accessible counseling and psychological services.** Elementary, middle, and high school all constitute periods of time in which young children and teenagers are vulnerable and experiencing many formative situations during their most volatile growth periods. In order to ensure that these students have all of the support and resources available to become the people they need to be, schools should have staff psychologists and other professionals who can help with mentoring, counseling, assessing, and more. However, schools should go beyond this, even, and offer regular group counseling sessions, community support services, ongoing assessments for students and staff, and prevention and intervention programs to help identify mental or physical health issues and provide support before the issues escalate and cause harm to an individual or the entire academic community.
- **Systemic community involvement by all academic persons.** In order for a school to be truly healthy, it should engage in partnerships with local organizations and



businesses. This has a win-win effect for all involved: The businesses should receive more name recognition in the community, the students will gain an idea of what it's like working in the real world, and the staff at your school can help delegate responsibilities to other responsible adults in the area. To accomplish many of the health aims suggested in this course, it may indeed be necessary for a school to partner with local fitness, health, social service, or faith-based organizations.

- **Engagement from all of the families who are part of your academic community.** In order to support students in the most comprehensive, effective manner possible, it's vital to ensure that the families of all students are as involved as possible. This helps teachers experience a shared responsibility for student wellness and results in better outcomes for the children. In order to help ensure that parents feel that they can support their child's development, school staff members should do everything in their power to help parents feel welcome. Schools should create free, engaging, and accessible resources and prioritize open lines of convenient communication. This may take a lot of work but will result in ongoing family engagement that will provide many benefits over the course of a child's life.
- **A focus on physical activity and education.** On the face of it, a regular school day is filled with sedentary activity. While, to some extent, this may be necessary, schools should work to ensure that students have the opportunity to experience physical activity several times throughout their day—and create an interest (e.g., supplying programs or resources) in extracurricular forms of physical activity. Whether your school decides to reflect national standards in physical education, staff involvement, and community engagement in terms of physical activity or your school opts to create its own standards, it's important to invest in this area. Why? Strong levels of physical activity help cognitive function and assist students as they grow in knowledge, healthy behaviors, fine motor skills, emotional intelligence, self-efficacy, sportsmanship, and more. Schools should seek to provide resources on an informal, amateur level as well as provide support from certified, licensed, and endorsed physical education specialists.

## How does a healthy school climate enhance learning?

The benefits of a healthy school climate are plentiful, and it cannot be emphasized enough how nutrition, physical fitness, and overall wellness impacts students in a

positive way. While schools are often thought of as places where students must spend their time learning, it is also well documented that healthier students learn more efficiently and are happier overall.

Most people can see how establishing a healthy school environment or climate may benefit young students in forming healthy habits that will help them avoid risky behaviors or even chronic conditions. In addition to this, it is also crucial to realize that healthier students absorb and retain information better and that investing in your school's health climate will help your community reach its education goals. This may be particularly important when it comes to getting all of the members of a school community—e.g., administrators, investors, parents—interested in and committed to healthy school practices (Revile, 2018).

Teachers who are involved with educating and supporting children from disadvantaged backgrounds or communities report that their students exhibit myriad health issues, from asthma to poor eyesight and teeth that hurt. It's impossible not to acknowledge that students who have issues with their eyesight or who are experiencing pain may have a difficult time keeping up with the rest of class. A teacher faced with helping an entire classroom learn despite differing obstacles of varying severity is faced with a nearly impossible task (Revile, 2018).

Many schools are seeking to tackle these issues by setting up clinics and free or low-cost basic health care opportunities for their students. However, not all schools have the time, money, or other means to make this happen. Unfortunately, this results in a lack of equity and reliable access to resources between children who come from disadvantaged backgrounds and those from higher socio-economic situations. When we extrapolate the healthcare advantages that well-connected children often have and the associated educational benefits, we're forced to face the fact that many children simply won't have the energy, information, or resources to succeed (Revile, 2018).

As members of school staff tasked with making sure that students succeed, we need to help establish reliable access to safety and health information and resources for each member of our academic communities. One team working toward this initiative at Harvard has theorized that the best way to do so is to consider the school as merely a part of the wider community when it comes to the availability of resources. For example, in order to get students the healthcare resources they need, it's likely going to be necessary to partner with local businesses such as hospitals and exercise studios, instead of managing all of the necessary logistics and expertise in a more insular way. It's also of vital importance to create more 'connective tissue' between students and parents and

between families. Simply by leveraging the wisdom inherent in each family, a school may be able to tap into resources that it already has at its disposal (Reville, 2018).

In one case study illustrating this point, a community created a nonprofit partnership between its primary school system and local dental and vision care facilities. Among other activities, all students immediately received both vision and dental screenings. The majority of students were found to require vision or dental interventions. As a result, 60% of the student body received discounted glasses; 85% received necessary dental work (Reville, 2018).

This is obviously not a simple or inexpensive undertaking, but schools can widely benefit from these practices. This Illinois school district immediately saw a huge advantage of this healthcare initiative: The number of misbehavior referrals that their school offices received decreased by 72 percent. In addition, the students at the schools in the district started to score higher on both their math and English grades (Reville, 2018).

Along the same lines, a school in California started to implement school wellness measures in 2012. Staff members decided to focus on spreading knowledge and facilitating health-and-exercise practices throughout their campus, and really investing in parental engagement in both their students' academic and wellness aims. When Stanford University researchers looked into the progress of these schools, they found that the students benefiting from these programs were more involved in community and extracurricular events, which was shown to have a positive effect on student productivity and mental health. In addition, the researchers believed that the access to increased numbers of health centers on elementary school campuses was associated with a boost in the overall behavioral health of the entire academic community (Reville, 2018).

These studies illustrate that a whole-person, whole-family, holistic approach to health, exercise, wellness and academia will be worth it. The entire community will be happier, more productive, and more successful with their educational aims (Reville, 2018).

## **What did the COVID-19 pandemic teach us about the state of school health and safety—and the necessity of investing further in these types of aims?**

To start, students did not need another reason to be anxious about going to school. There are already myriad social, academic, and personal stressors that young people

suffer on a day-to-day basis regarding their education and school community (Mortice, 2020).

Across the United States, students' experience of the pandemic varied widely. Some younger students going through more impressionable years may forever be traumatized by the events of the year. Others may take what happened more in stride. The basic overarching experience of knowing—very suddenly— that going to school and being in close proximity with others was likely unsafe will infiltrate the daily experiences of millions of children going forward (Mortice, 2020).

This will only make it more crucial that we work to alleviate children's stressors and enhance obvious safety efforts in order to ensure that no children feel actively in danger as they go about their school days. However, it's also key to recognize that for many students, this pervasive sense of danger is not necessarily new (Mortice, 2020).

The COVID-19 crisis exposed the many weaknesses that have existed in our educational infrastructure for a long time. As far back as 2011, the EPA speculated that approximately 46% of public schools in the United States exhibited conditions that could lead to poor, even sickness-inducing interior environmental conditions. These conditions could include lead paint, asbestos, unsafe sources of water, poor heating and cooling systems, and more. Another report found that some 36,000 schools across the nation are in need of an upgraded HVAC system simply for safety, not to mention comfort. A 2017 assessment performed by the American Society of Civil Engineers rated United States schools at a D+. For a long time now, it's been known that investment in our schools is much lower than it needs to be (Mortice, 2020).

Unfortunately, one of the reasons that we as a country have not taken more decisive action is rooted in our historical pattern of under-serving the marginalized. While middle-class, white parents might be shocked to hear of the poor conditions in many American schools, these are hardly new pieces of information for many lower-class families and people of color. The fact that many of the schools in the United States that receive fewer resources and exhibit worse conditions are the ones that tend to serve students of color only goes further to worsen the performance disparity and lack of equal opportunity we see between races (Mortice, 2020).

For example, schools that serve students of color tend to be in areas that have high levels of air pollution, fewer nutrient-rich options for lunches, and reduced resources for healthcare. Even before the pandemic, this meant that students attending these schools got sick more quickly and went far longer before their conditions received any attention.

In some cases, this has had devastating results: On at least one occasion, extremely poor (moldy and unventilated) conditions at school have led to exacerbation of symptoms, triggered symptoms (e.g., asthma), and resulted in students being sent home suffering. In turn, students were forced to miss school without attention or care (Mortice, 2020).

When COVID-19 hit, schools that had the resources and infrastructure in place to send students home with significant support systems in place often did; or, alternatively, more affluent schools were able to figure out how to keep children on campus in some kind of at least slightly protected way. For many students in lower-income, more poorly-maintained schools, they were either left to struggle with how to navigate remote learning on their own or asked to face the danger of attending school in-person every day (Mortice, 2020).

## Section 1 Key Points

- The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted issues with the health and safety systems of our schools, but those issues had likely already been there for a long time.
- Students need to be safe in order to be able to concentrate on their studies.
- Healthy students learn better, so it's worth it for all of our schools' stakeholders to make overall health a priority.
- The importance of safe and healthy schools has come into focus on a national level recently—leading to many states initiating legislative action to prioritize healthy schools.

## Section 1 Discussion Questions

- How safe do you think your school campus is? How healthy are your students, on average?
- What do you think COVID-19 did to expose the strengths or weaknesses of your system?
- Think back to the last time you were sick. How much did you feel like getting done? Were you able to function at your best?

## Section 1 Summary

We can all focus on making it easier to be healthy at school—and all start taking responsibility for ways to make students feel welcomed and safe whether they're on campus or learning remotely. Teachers, parents, and administrators have specific responsibilities and strengths when it comes to overall student health and happiness. In the second section of this course, we will turn our attention to the discrete ways that differing educational professionals can increase the safety of our schools.

## Section 2: Keeping Children Safe: A Shared Responsibility

Keeping our campuses and our students safe is a responsibility that must be owned by all school staff, all families, and, indeed, every member of our communities. In this section of the course, we'll summarize the actions that teachers, administrators, and parents can take in order to increase school safety and security.

First, however, we'll take a look at where we are.

### What is the current state of school safety in America?

In 2018, a survey of public schools in the United States reported that the vast majority (95%) had implemented at least one of the following security measures (NCES, 2020):

- Monitoring or locking doors to ensure controlled access to the campus or to school buildings
- Installing security cameras around the school campus
- Requiring that school staff and faculty wear picture IDs
- Enforcing a strict dress code of their students (or requiring uniforms)
- Randomly searching or sweeping student storage for illicit objects and substances

This increased attention to security matters was a response to increasingly worrisome national trends. For example (NCSL, 2019):

- In 2018 alone, 23 school shooting events took place in the United States which caused death or severe injuries.

- Between 2016 and 2018, violent school incidents increased by almost 115%.
- Researchers have not yet been able to establish one universal, reliable profile of a school shooter

In spite of these unsettling facts, researchers do believe that there are specific and effective ways that schools can mitigate or entirely prevent violent acts in schools. Governmental policymakers have begun to implement many of these strategies, particularly over the past decade; and individual school districts have opted to increase school security measures as well (NCSL, 2019).

For example, recent action has included (NCSL, 2019):

- **Legislative motions at the state level.** In 2018, 43 states proposed almost 400 bills or resolutions aimed at increasing school safety. These proposals focused on many different aspects of school security, from infrastructure upgrades to the hiring of protective staff. Many states have considered making safety and well-being training for school personnel mandatory, such as training on racial biases, school climates, suicide prevention, and mental and physical disability awareness.
- **Investigative motions at the federal level.** Previous presidential administrations have led investigations into school violence with the goal of recommending and implementing specific policies to reduce, mitigate, or prevent school violence. Under these initiatives, various commissions have studied the efficacy of providing on-campus mental health services, school coordination with local law enforcement, and the net result of positive behavioral intervention for students who need help.

## **What are the specific aspects of the school setting and experience that teachers can prioritize to create warm, nurturing, welcoming (and safe!) classroom environments?**

Above and beyond the steps that are needed to ensure that the entire academic community values health and wellness, it's important to take steps to create a warm, welcoming, and safe atmosphere in each individual classroom. Why?

When students feel safe in their academic environments, they are much more likely to take the types of beneficial risks that are often needed for personal growth - both



intellectual and emotional. The safer they feel, the higher potential they have for academic success (Robbin, 2019).

In order to create this type of nurturing environment, schools and teachers need to consider the following elements (Robbin, 2019):

1. **Safety.** Children cannot learn effectively if they do not feel safe. This is clearly demonstrated in Maslow's Hierarchy of needs. To make children feel safe in a classroom, they need to both be convinced that no physical harm will come to them while they're at school and feel that they are accepted as they are at all times. This can take significant emotional growth and strength, which is why it's important that your school has a culture of mental wellness throughout its entire campus. To maintain a safe classroom, school staff should focus on creating a clean classroom environment, keeping the school at a comfortable temperature, and ensuring that students have access to all of the materials they might need for success at any time. In addition, students should practice protocols and routines for less-than-ideal or dangerous circumstances on a regular basis, so they feel prepared should something occur that requires a specific response
2. **Inclusivity.** Once all students in your classroom feel safe, it is crucial that they feel included. If a students don't feel like they are accepted as part of a peer group, they're going to have a hard time learning; at least subconsciously, they're going to be wondering why they don't fit in, and they will struggle to enjoy the same levels of support that other (perhaps more included) students will enjoy. As a result, it's vital that teachers, students, and administrative staff make targeted efforts to include all members of the academic community, regardless of their specific race, gender, sexual orientation or preferences, socio-economic status, ethnicity, or religious backgrounds. While schools should start with reducing more obvious displays of aggressive non-inclusion, it's important to go beyond that to ensure that there are no traces of discrimination and the school community is in fact welcoming of everyone who wishes to learn. In an individual classroom environment, a teacher can work to help students understand others and the different backgrounds they present with as well as what walks of life they have gone through.
3. **Cultural relevance.** One step in particular that teachers can take in order to create a welcoming, inclusive, and universal environment is to invest in lessons that are culturally relevant. Above and beyond helping your students en masse open their minds to people who may be different from them in specific ways, this will allow

students who may have experienced marginalization to see themselves in the lessons and texts you present. If students identify with elements within your curricula, they'll attribute more meaning to your content - which will make it easier for them to have enthusiasm for learning.

4. **Value for the choices students make.** If students are as involved as is appropriate with the various decisions that go into their education, they will be more interested and able to take charge of their learning experience - which will set them up for a lifetime of being able and excited to prioritize education and growth. Why? People - including students - are more invested in the choices that they personally make. If you as a teacher are able to provide more shared ownership through small decisions throughout a student's day (or week, or semester), your classroom overall will be more enthusiastic about your learning journey.

## **What are specific steps that parents can make to do their part toward creating a safe, secure, and welcoming school environment?**

While parents are not school staff, what they do has an impact on more than just their own child—so they have a responsibility to the entire academic community to make reasoned choices about the way that they engage with their child's academics. Share these strategies with the parents at your school to increase safety from every angle of your community. Such actions include (Bradford, 2021):

1. Request that parents actually read emails, follow your school's social media, and/or pick up when a school representative calls.
2. Ensure that parents at your school have access to your school's written policies and that they have some kind of incentive to review these policies from time to time so they are familiar with how your school works.
3. Schedule and follow through with regular conversations between parents and both teachers, administrators, and other parents.
4. Encourage parents to speak openly with their child or children about the stressors they may be experiencing at school. Encourage the parents, also, to keep a close eye for any shifts in behavior that they may notice in their child. That way, both school staff and parents can anticipate and provide support for students during difficult times.

5. Finally, ask that parents keep the school apprised of all medical, behavioral, or significant life events that occur that could affect their child's health. This should happen shortly after any such event occurs, and should also include a full review and update of each child's official records on a yearly basis.

## **What are specific actions that administrators can take?**

Administrators may have a different relationship with students, as compared to the teachers, and may (as a result) also be able to use their time for different types of priorities—such as taking more responsibility for the organization of school-wide health and safety initiatives, concentrating on research and fundraising, and coordinating with the larger community to ensure that students have all of the resources that they need. Administrators of schools can help incorporate routine safety checks and assessments of and for all students, meet with parents, conduct surveys of the academic community, and initiate and participate in task forces to learn from and act upon the results of these surveys (Texas A&M, 2019).

In order to work toward a comprehensive sense of safety and security in schools, many schools will work together to form a school-wide safety plan.

## **What is a school safety plan?**

The safety of the school environment is crucial both for maximum efficiency of student learning and growth, but also for teacher retention. Therefore, to support students in the best way possible and to help ensure that teachers feel appreciated and their well-being is a priority, it's vital to conceive of and execute school safety initiatives (McGrath, 2020).

One study that sought to probe into the most effective types of organizational and safety initiatives a school can implement found that there are four specific aims that schools should consider in order to prioritize school safety and wellness, including the following (McGrath, 2020):

- A concerted investment in personal and professional development for all staff members
- An emphasis on the formation of friendly, productive relationships and collaborations among school staff

- High and realistic expectations for the health, happiness, wellness, and academic outcomes for all students
- A safe learning environment

The researchers concluded that each of these aims supports overall student success in their own way, yet we tend to place most of our focus on student expectations. Recent years have shone a light, in particular, upon the necessity of school safety. Issues such as unfortunately-increasing numbers of shooter incidents, natural disasters ramping up in intensity, and the recent worldwide pandemic have only exacerbated these issues and shown us precisely where we aren't doing too well in terms of school safety (McGrath, 2020).

The Pew Research Center conducted a study concluding in early 2018 that found that some 57% of students (and teachers, and administrators) were afraid that a mass shooting event could occur at their school. Almost one in four students described themselves as 'very worried' that this could happen. When parents were surveyed, researchers found that 63% were concerned about the same thing. This type of anxiety can preclude students from paying attention to their studies—and the health benefits of being under chronic stress can result in physiological symptoms that can destroy a young person from the inside out. Less dramatically, heightened anxiety that danger will befall them at school also leads to students skipping class more frequently (McGrath, 2020).

These conclusions have been corroborated by other studies. 2017's National Youth Risk Behavior Survey reported that almost 7% of students said that they had skipped school at least once because they felt unsafe. This data shows us that amping up our schools' safety efforts can help students feel safer and reduce both stress-based health concerns and the likelihood that a student will opt to stay at home for safety (McGrath, 2020).

The types of school efforts needed may include (McGrath, 2020):

- Hiring professionals, such as counselors, nurses, and psychologists, to be on staff full- or part-time
- Ensuring that students have equitable and convenient access to their services
- Installing and maintaining systems geared toward increasing school security
- Implementing and practicing emergency communications and practices

In short, every school needs a school safety plan (McGrath, 2020).

Pew Research Center conducted another 2018 study aimed at student perception of school safety measures. Teenagers at schools across the nation confirmed that they saw the following school safety initiatives as the most effective (and, therefore, the most efficient at reducing student stress, at the very least) (McGrath, 2020):

- The expansion of mental health resources for all students
- Measures aimed at eliminating or controlling gun use
- The use of functioning metal detectors

When developing a specific school's safety plan, policymakers should start by seeking out what the community most fears, what would most alleviate those fears, and ways to help students overcome or dismiss those fears (McGrath, 2020).

Other elements of a school safety plan should include (McGrath, 2020):

- Ongoing anonymous surveys and assessments.
- The implementation of threat assessment programs
- Equitable access to mental health professionals

## **What is a student threat assessment program?**

One of the hallmarks of a school that is both healthy and safe is one that prioritizes a clear path to help students, school staff, and families realize that they need help (and when they need help). Taking time to assess each student's mental and physical health and provide any needed interventions may be a precautionary measure for many students; however, for others, this type of forward-thinking approach may signify the difference between productive and disadvantageous or even harmful formative years (McGrath, 2020).

A student threat assessment program is one that is staffed by many professionally-trained people from several different disciplines (e.g., a doctor, a therapist, a nutritionist, etc). When students go through this program and exhibit signs of potential illness or proclivities toward harmful behavior as noted by the professional multidisciplinary team, the program will include and provide resources for interventions. These interventions should not be punitive; instead, the focus should be on reorientation, growth, and education. If a student is in or approaching a crisis state, a threat assessment program

can go a long way toward preventing any unfortunate events that could occur if that student had not received timely and appropriate care (McGrath, 2020).

## **What types of avenues are needed to help students report threats?**

A safe school environment must include some way for students to report any suspicious or dangerous behavior that they observe. After all, you can train school staff to monitor student behavior or even invest in a state-of-the-art CCTV system, but some students will learn to elude observation. Very often, the best or only source of information regarding unhealthy or harmful behaviors of students is other students (McGrath, 2020).

Recently, the United States Secret Service conducted a study that sought to learn as much as possible about what occurred during the lead-up to mass school shooting events. The Secret Service discovered that before an incident, perpetrators generally tell at least one other person about their plan. In fact, in over 75% of the cases that the Secret Service examined, attackers had confided in a sibling, friend, or schoolmate regarding their plans for a school attack. Unfortunately, since the attacker generally confided in a peer (e.g., a young student), the researchers found that even if the confidant did file a student report, the administration generally didn't take it seriously or take any resultant action (McGrath, 2020).

One threat reporting tool that can help students feel safe telling school officials about any suspicious behaviors or statements is an anonymous two-way tip submission system—preferably, a texting submission system. This will ensure that students always have a very practical, simple, on-the-go, and reliable way to send information to their school and that the student can be confident that they will not experience any adverse consequences of “telling on” a potentially violent or suffering peer. In the past, these types of systems have been very effective for helping researchers and schools identify harmful patterns of online violence or dangerous internet activity. Of course, school personnel have to decide that reading and responding to all submitted tips is worth their time. It will be important to make sure that there are staff resources allocated for reviewing tip submissions and investigating anything that requires action (McGrath, 2020).

These types of discreet, accessible tip submission programs can be used to prevent attacks as well as to alert school staff of a situation where a student needs help but does not know where to turn.

## How can we promote school security for our remote or online students?

An increasing number of students rely on the internet and remote instruction programs for their education. Our duty to keep these children safe and welcome them into our larger learning communities is not lessened because they are not physically on campus. Yet it can feel somehow less intuitive to give these children the care they need (Starr, 2021).

In order to extend a critical sense of safety to students learning remotely, establish the following practices (Starr, 2021):

- Students should never share personal information, photos, or their location with anyone online—particularly a stranger. This includes passwords.
- Students should be told that if they receive messages that make them feel uncomfortable, they do not need to respond to those messages—and they should immediately alert a trusted adult.
- Students should always ask parents before downloading new software to their devices.
- If possible, parents should always be nearby when children are using the internet or completing online learning (at least during the earlier years).
- Teachers should debrief parents about which types of software students will be using, as well as the basic capabilities of the software.
- If possible, schools should help students that don't have Wi-Fi install Wi-Fi in their homes.

### Section 2 Key Points

- Parents need to be aware of everything their students are doing in school—online or otherwise.
- Teachers, administrators, and parents all need to take responsibility for school safety.
- Elements such as a threat assessment system and an accessible tip hotline can go a long way towards keeping schools safe.



## Section 2 Discussion Questions

- If students feel uneasy about something they see at your school, what are the current practices in place for them to find safety?
- How open have your school officials been with your students' parents regarding the planned response to any threats?
- Do you feel like your school is serving your remote students with specific, supportive safety plans?

## Section 2 Summary

From effective threat assessment systems to tip systems and more, there are ways that we can increase school security. This should be an initiative that schools take on to increase student safety, of course—but it should also be acknowledged that an investment in a safe school is an investment in community peace of mind and associated higher rates of success.

## Section 3: How to Work Towards a Healthier School Environment

Now that we've discussed the nuts and bolts of what makes a school climate safe, it's time to talk about how we can provide a healthier environment for our students. As we discussed in Section One, the link between healthy students, higher engagement and academic success is becoming impossible to ignore.

There are many steps we can take to help our students make healthier choices. Some may be obvious, such as revamping the school's cafeteria offerings, but others may be more subtle. While it may not be possible to make all the needed changes immediately, there will always be steps that can be taken in a positive direction. During the planning and implementation phases of long-term strategies, there are many practical ways we can educate our students about nutrition, exercise, energy, and more.

One important first step for schools is to collect baseline health data from the school community and then create a plan for improvement catered to specific school needs.

## How do you measure, create, improve, and sustain a positive and supportive school climate?

Before school officials will be able to implement practices and policies to work toward a healthier environment, they must know where they are starting from. Moreover, they must have some idea of how to complete continued assessments of the school climate and culture, so they can know if they are improving in this area. This will also enable schools to recognize what strategies are working and need to be continued, as well as those that need to be revised.

One way to determine a good baseline (or further improvements) for school climate and culture is to gather data from the various members of the school community. Asking for feedback and data from key groups such as parents, students, administrators, and teachers on an ongoing basis will help give school personnel the information they need to continue working in the right direction (Newman, 2021).

Interested in assessing your school's culture and climate? Here are five steps to consider implementing that will help you do just that (Newman, 2021).

- 1. Identify the people who have the most leadership and authority at your school.** This may seem obvious since in theory this would likely be school administrators or teachers who have seniority and experience. However, in actuality, those most invested in the school community need to identify the individuals with the greatest capacity to make helpful change when it comes to creating a healthy school environment. From this point of view, perhaps it will become clear that administrators and teachers aren't the best choices for this role, as each group of people will have many other responsibilities (e.g., teaching, running the campus) that cannot be disregarded or minimized in order to concentrate more fully on community health. Instead, hiring a professional or providing professional development for a specific subset of school staff who can work together as the leaders of your school's health initiative may be more successful. For example, you may identify the go-to counselor, psychologist, and/or other health specialist to take the lead. That person (or persons) can coordinate assessments, introduce new health-oriented strategies and initiatives, and be responsible for ongoing improvements to the school's culture in cooperation with the rest of the school staff.
- 2. Identify the key data points that your school wishes to collect and focus on for initial improvements.** Improving your school's culture will require focusing on

many different areas, but it's impossible to cover everything at once if improvements are to be successful and sustainable. Especially in the beginning, it's a good idea for school leaders to determine the areas of focus that they wish to prioritize in the first phase, which may include family involvement, school diversity, or school-wide procedures and regulations. The team that's planning your school's experiences in this arena should decide on the metrics that they need to collect and share this information with the students, families, and staff of the school.

- 3. Determine which tools and resources you have at your disposal to work toward your stated aims.** In order to accurately measure your school's climate and culture, you could use several strategies. For example, you could use an already-existing survey - there are many widely available on the internet - to assess how well your school is doing according to several health metrics. You could also assemble a focus group of students, parents, and staff to help you assess the efficacy of upcoming projects or strategies. Additionally, more observational data, such as attendance and any available health information, can be evaluated to draw a more simple baseline regarding how you're doing.
- 4. Analyze your baseline data and come up with a plan for success.** The data you're able to pull from your surveys, observations, or focus groups is only as good as what you're able to learn from this data! It's important to schedule and take as much time as you need to learn from the data that you find and to put together strategies based on that specific data. Get the data, organize it, analyze it, and then come up with a strategy; it's essential that the steps go in that order! Use your data to figure out where your efforts will go the furthest in terms of building towards health success for every member of your school's community.
- 5. Implement measures to help you work toward your goals and keep every member of your community accountable for incremental growth.** After you have developed specific goals that will help you work toward a healthier school environment, you'll need to brainstorm specific practices and realistic measures that will help your community work toward those goals. The people in charge of this effort will need to prioritize your efforts, figure out which resources your school needs in order to succeed, and come up with an accountability system in order to ensure that everyone knows what needs to happen at all times.

While these elements can take work to implement and sustain, creating a healthy environment in your classroom will reduce worry and anxiety in your students (and, as

an invaluable side effect, in other teachers and staff members as well). Working to include all students, value their opinions, and create a physically and emotionally safe environment in your classroom will transform your students from passive learners to active ones.

It should be noted that in order to promote a holistic sense of health for school children, we need to start by giving them a healthy environment—not just increasing the number of available nutrients and fiber at the school cafeteria or expanding physical fitness. While these components of overall health are very important, it's also key to build our student's confidence, ensure the rooms they study in are inviting and the relationships they build are favorable, and give our students the room to grow and learn about positive choices. Only then will our students be able to take ownership of their own health (Robbin, 2019).

Next, we'll go over some practical ways to make this happen. Consider implementing one or more of the following in your classroom, and watch your students as they become happier and healthier! (Robbin, 2019)

1. **Write, observe, and maintain very clear and enforceable classroom expectations and rules.** While this might not sound like the most fun or freedom-allowing action, doing this early simply helps students know what to expect throughout their days - which is a hugely important facet of helping students feel safe. Not only will students worry less about what they will do, but they'll also have an idea regarding the ways that the rest of their community will behave. This will further allow students to trust that they will be okay and that it is safe for them to concentrate on their studies instead of waiting for the unexpected to occur. In order to feel like this is less of a dictatorial action and to help your students feel respected and involved, it may be a good idea to involve them, very early in the year, as you create class rules and expectations together. Since people invest more in their own decisions, allowing the creation of class expectations to be a group activity will make it more likely that your students will abide by the rules you all create. Finally, consider phrasing your rules and guidelines in the positive, not the negative. This makes for a more encouraging atmosphere and will emphasize the intended behavior instead of the rule-breaking activity. (For example, instead of making 'don't disrupt the class during quiet time' a rule, consider writing 'focus on your work until you're completely done, then ask the teacher for more information' or something like that!)

2. **Establish clear procedures to help students understand the norms of your classroom.** In addition to establishing predictability and expectations for your students, it's a good idea to help students follow routines as they move throughout their day. This will help them know exactly how to request feedback, submit work, understand how you award grades, and more. As a result, your students won't have to expend valuable mental energy trying to figure out how to complete routine classroom behaviors on a regular basis; and, when they do need to do something that is outside of their personal realm of experience (e.g., contact you for further help), they will know exactly how to do so. Where coming up with class expectations and rules could be a fun and valuable group activity, listing concise class procedures will more likely be an action you complete on your own, make available to the class, and update throughout the year as it becomes clear that students need enriched procedures
3. **Invest time and effort into Social-Emotional Learning.** Social-emotional learning (SEL) refers to a student's ability to understand the specific ways in which our emotions influence and impact our development, our growth, our ability to make good decisions, and the ways we interact with each other. As a teacher, this means that it's definitely worthwhile for you to focus classroom time on helping students identify, acknowledge, and work through their feelings. You can also include instructions on processing stress and clearing one's mind when frustrating emotions can cloud judgment. Some of this can be done through group work, especially when safe spaces and boundaries have been established in the classroom.
4. **Making room for student choice.** This, too, is a historically underemphasized piece of healthy learning. Allowing students to make certain choices when appropriate invites them to be more enthusiastic and comfortable in their learning environment. However, you do have to work to strike a balance between overly-permissive teaching behaviors and environments in which students have too little ownership over their activities. Ways to strike this balance will depend on your teaching style, but may include allowing students to decide how they will present or showcase information they've learned (e.g., an oral presentation versus an art project), the type of content within a certain subject they wish to study (e.g., a specific historical figure versus a more general historical event), or even which problems they must solve (e.g., give them a 20-question set, tell them they need to pick 15).

5. **Building some element of flexibility into the day.** This may seem counterintuitive, particularly after the emphasis that we've placed on building routines and procedures into your students' day. However, while repetition may build a student's sense of safety, it can also get boring after a while! To combat this effect, plan on a few more spontaneous or flexible occurrences at least every once in a while. This will also help your students put lesser-used practices in motion and grow to understand that life is unpredictable, setting them more at ease when unplanned things happen in their life outside of school.

One of the foundations for making healthy choices is having a strong foundation of social-emotional learning. SEL is a key part of both human development and modern education. It's also a process by which young people learn to glean and apply new information, learn to manage emotions, and learn to accomplish their goals and connect with others (CDC, 2021).

If you think about it, many of the underlying factors that can contribute to an unhealthy lifestyle are driven by unfavorable relationships, poor mental health, unmet goals or difficult emotional times. While the practical logistics of getting children good food and exercise resources are important (and we will touch on them soon), enhancing a student's comfort level with SEL is also vastly important as they navigate their present and future circumstances (CDC, 2021).

Schools can implement measures that promote SEL and work in congruence with SEL strategies to build toward an overarching sense of student wellness and safety. The CDC has developed recommendations for supporting student SEL (which provides a good foundation for student nutrition and physical activity), supporting student nutrition (which in turn promotes SEL), and supporting student physical activity (which also promotes SEL). As you can see, these various strengths and practices all form a positive feedback loop—which can make healthy growth easier to continue once begun (CDC, 2021).

We'll look at each set of recommendations in turn.

### **Strategies for promoting student SEL, per the CDC, include (CDC, 2021)**

- Developing a curriculum that goes out of its way to emphasize the types of competencies that promote SEL. This includes ensuring that lessons are appropriate on a developmental level for each age bracket of students - and that

all lessons exhibit cultural relevance to help build each student's worldview and to ensure everyone feels welcome and represented.

- Making sure that SEL aims are featured in all academic areas, through each aspect of each academic area—e.g., in practice and in assessment. Teachers can work to create these opportunities by ensuring that each lesson includes time for developing relationships and understanding the perspectives of others.
- Understanding the need for teacher and administrator professional development—and understanding the link between professional development and the level of support a teaching staff is able to provide for a school's student body. Specific SEL-appropriate training might include strategies to help teachers and other school staff members be effective role models and to teach them how to apply helpful emotional strategies while working to support students who may be going through a rough time.
- Prioritizing the formation of a safe and inclusive campus for every single young person on campus. This will require building empathetic relationships, communicating effectively, and respecting diversity.
- Reaching out to form positive relationships with the local community and with all of the families of the students at your school. This will help each student feel welcome and help build a more comprehensive support system to ensure that all students have what they need to succeed.

### **Strategies for promoting student nutrition, per the CDC, include (CDC, 2021)**

Since nutrition impacts a student's energy, attention, and thinking processes, a school's food and nutrition policy can have direct effects on how a student might be able to experience the benefits of social-emotional learning. Since this is the case, the CDC recommends the following practices in order to harness the potential benefits of nutrition for SEL:

- Make sure that your students have enough time to eat—e.g., no 15-minute lunch windows! This will ensure that your students have the opportunity to pick high-quality food options, rest, socialize with their peers, and actually digest their food.



- Provide high-quality nutrition education for your students, including information about the link between emotion and eating habits. Students need to know how to recognize when they're hungry and when they are full—these are not pieces of knowledge that everyone innately has.
- Allow teachers to eat meals with their students. This can help teachers build and strengthen healthy relationships with students, and can help teachers model healthy eating habits for the young people in their care.
- Make it easy, subtle, and private for students to access the subsidized food plans at your school. The students who benefit most from reduced-price or free meals are often the most aware of the possible stigmas that arise from accessing these options. Don't make it easy for other students to pinpoint people who are receiving additional help and care.

### **Strategies for promoting student physical activity, per the CDC, include (CDC, 2021)**

Researchers have performed study after study showing that the physical activity we routinely perform has a strong link to our health and happiness. Leveraging physical activity awareness, resources, and support in your school will help your students have a better experience with social and emotional learning aims.

In order to accomplish this, school leaders should work toward the following (CDC, 2021):

- Fully realizing the value of physical education. In recent decades, PE and gym classes have fallen to a lower priority level. In reality, having the opportunity to move our bodies on a regular basis increases our ability to express ourselves, challenge ourselves, enjoy ourselves, and form healthy relationships with our peers.
- Integrating physical activity throughout a student's day, rather than for one class period only. Students of all ages need opportunities for free and guided play, exercise or sports instruction, as well as the socialization that comes with these activities.

- Giving teachers space and support to model a physically active lifestyle for their students by ensuring that they have the time to walk and lightly exercise throughout their day.
- Ensuring that all students and community members are aware of the ease and accessibility of fun and healthy movement. This can be accomplished through constant communication about free or low-cost events or activities that promote healthy movement.
- Prohibiting any form of physical activity as a punishment or withholding physical activity as a punishment - e.g., running laps as a form of discipline, or not being able to participate in a recess period because of punishment.

## Are there other health-related factors that have an impact on academic achievement?

Now that we've discussed general strategies for laying a foundation for good student health, we can delve further into effective strategies for high-quality physical fitness.

Aside from proper nutrition and all-encompassing safety, there are other ways to help ensure that your students have an engaging and nurturing educational experience. For example (Clark, 2017):

- **Incorporate physical fitness into your lesson planning.** Over the past two decades, researchers have seen more and more that a high aptitude for fitness or simple practice of physical fitness correlates strongly with high levels of academic achievement. For example, in one 2013 study, a group of middle school students exhibited higher scores in fitness—and also in both social studies and math. A New York Times article probing the same phenomenon found that children who have higher levels of daily physical activity are able to focus better, can perform simple tasks more efficiently, have higher retention of new ideas, and can solve problems more quickly. Moreover, students with higher levels of physical activity also scored higher on standardized tests. More recently, other studies have shown that there's a connection between regular exercise and better blood flow to vital organs, including the brain.

Specific ways to make this happen include:

- Seeing how creative you can get with replacing stationary desk work with (literal) mobile learning. Students can go on walks as they discuss texts instead of sitting in a circle; you can take field trips and explore local historical sites instead of watching a video presentation about an event.
- Incorporating practical exercise information and concepts into other subjects that your students are learning. For example, in science, you can discuss metabolism, basic nutrition and physiology, and calorie breakdowns. In math, you can discuss the rates at which Olympians run, or the distances people have biked in famous races.
- Being a positive role model for your students simply by mentioning physical activities you have incorporated into your lifestyle can help impact how your students choose to spend their time. For example, bringing up your favorite sport from time to time or visibly spending your lunch break going on a walk can reinforce physical activity reminders in a very real way.
- **Be strategic about how you schedule your students' days, insofar as you're able.** A reliable routine reduces stress in humans, so keeping your students' days relatively similar from day to day can help them remain calm and know precisely what to expect. Researchers have even noted that regular changes in the organization or flow of a student's day can correlate with negative trends in academic performance. Overall, students seem to do better when there is consistency. We can take a step further, even, and schedule specific periods of didactic activity versus solo study versus periods of movement and conversation at the times of days when young children and teens are likely to have the most energy. For example, researchers have found that students who attended math class first thing in the morning, as opposed to later in the afternoon, tended to have higher grades. Surveying your students, paying attention to the energy that they have, and allowing them natural time to rest and recharge throughout the day will have benefits if you use this information to strategically plan your schedule.

Specific ways to make this happen include:

- Sticking to a routine
- Introducing more rigorous or complex subjects earlier in the day
- Avoiding over-scheduled days for young children and teens

- Allowing consistent, reliable breaks for rest and community-building activities throughout the day.

Of course, food will always be a factor as well. Researchers have hypothesized that consistently healthy meals could boost student achievement by approximately four percentile points. Although we understand the benefits of good nutrition, it is not always easy to provide healthy meals because of the expense and the logistics involved in delivering them. However, there are steps that can be taken.

Some quick practical tips may include (Clark, 2017):

- Ensuring that tutors and teachers have a budget for healthy snacks during smaller group or individual learning sessions
- Launching social media campaigns targeted toward prioritizing healthy food options
- Reducing the difficulty and cost associated with healthy food options—e.g., finding ways to offer subsidized fruit, perhaps by partnering with a local grocery store, instead of or in addition to more processed dessert and snack options
- Incorporating practical nutrition information into a student’s curriculum—the biology of micro and macronutrients, for example, or the fascinating history of avoidable nutrition-based diseases (e.g., rickets, anemia, and scurvy)

## How to introduce healthier options into the cafeteria

The nutritional value of choices available in your school cafeteria is likely already a hot-button issue at your school. Parents want healthier choices for their children, children need to have good reasons to choose healthier food, and food needs to be as affordable as possible to ensure true accessibility for every student on campus.

This may seem like a tall order. It is! However, it doesn’t have to be impossible—and there are certainly many ways to gradually improve if a full cafeteria overhaul isn’t immediately in your school’s budget.

Here’s how to incrementally strategize to ensure that healthy meals are provided at your school (Vanco Education, 2021):

1. **Ask for feedback from the staff, students, and families.** Send out regular surveys to students who eat in the cafeteria as well as those who don’t—and to every

member of the school community. Ask what they like about your school's options. Ask what they'd like to see. Ask what they'd be comfortable paying, or why they don't eat in the cafeteria. Your school community can only make the cafeteria a truly valuable resource if you know what your specific population of students most requires, so learning that information is a necessary starting point.

- 2. Start optimizing common stressors and services.** While it's key to prioritize the specific cafeteria practices that your population mentions, there are likely universal frustrations and issues that most school attendees experience in the school lunchroom. As you're waiting to get survey responses (or if you receive unhelpful or mixed data), concentrate on figuring out ways to speed up service in the lunchroom, to create a database of allergens, a simple way to manage student monetary balances for lunch programs, and gradually notching up the quality and nutritional balance of the offerings your school has.
- 3. Make sure that every member of the school staff—from teachers to administrators—has information about the subsidized lunch programs that your school may offer.** Often, the people who would most benefit from these types of programs are the ones least likely to ask for this help. Parents may only feel comfortable asking a specific, trusted member of school staff for assistance; or a teacher who has invested in a relationship with a struggling student and family may need to broach the subject. In any case, it's key that any staff member that a parent is able to approach will be able to provide all of the information needed.
- 4. Make it worthwhile for every student to sign up for the school lunch program at some level.** There are many reasons why students and their families may prefer to pack lunches from home. Your goal should be to make a school lunch cost-efficient and valuable (e.g., tasty and genuinely nutritious) enough to make opting for a school lunch a no-brainer for most families. Try spreading the word among your families that there are communal and nutritive benefits (in addition to basic convenience) for students when they eat at school. For example, if a large amount of the academic population regularly eats a school lunch, it will be easier for your school to keep associated costs very low. Try offering inexpensive, nutritious, and culturally varied foods that you can tie in with social studies lessons, or connecting home economics aims with cafeteria initiatives. Tapping into government programs, partnering with local food-based businesses, and otherwise making it very easy, affordable, and attractive for students to get

reliably good food in the cafeteria will be well worth the time spent to accomplish such goals.

5. **Make the cafeteria an integral part of the school community.** Invite teachers, school administrators, and even parents to eat with students on a regular basis. Give tours of the cafeteria, place posters around the school hyping fun, unique, and novel cafeteria items, and more. Anything you can do to spark interest in sharing good meals together will strengthen your community and make it easier for your school to continue prioritizing high-quality food for your students.
6. **Invest in a very good salad and soup bar.** Providing a salad bar will not only give students exposure to fruits, vegetables, vitamins, and other nutrients, but also offer an opportunity for them to try new things and be creative in their food choices. Schools can partner with a local farm to provide inexpensive, high quality produce. By offering unique combinations of greens, fruits, cheeses, and vegetables students can learn to think outside of the box when it comes to interesting ways to build balanced salads. Providing soups, chili, or stews can also be a very efficient and effective way to offer a filling and nutritious meal. Pairing rich, well-flavored, unique soups with bread and fruit can be a strategic, healthy, and cost-effective way to feed a large group of students.
7. **Make healthy snacks available between classes.** If your cafeteria is open between meals as a study hall or community area, keep nutritious and relatively shelf-stable options out for easy, low-cost (or free) access during the day. Having fruits, vegetables, or healthy dips available can reduce reliance on expensive, sugary vending machine snacks and fuel children's growing bodies throughout long, work-intensive mornings and afternoons.

## How to prioritize health for remote students

Increasingly—and particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 upheaval—more and more students are opting to study at home (or they are experiencing situations that may make this necessary). Our schools need to find ways to support their health, too, even though it will be from a distance.

Schools vary in their ability to offer resources to students and families during remote learning. They may provide technology sources, school supplies, student meals, or other needed items or services, or such offerings may be extremely limited.

Regardless of the resources provided, it's key that our remote students still feel supported as they grow in health and happiness.

Here are a few tips that you can echo throughout their coursework, in any materials you send home, and when talking with students and their parents (LJWorks, 2020):

1. **Getting sleep is more important than they think.** It can be difficult for at-home students to create healthy boundaries around school time and the rest of their daily lives. It can be easy to procrastinate on online coursework until later and later into the evening, resulting in excessive late-night blue light exposure and correspondingly weaker sleep. Remind your students that it's important to shut down the computer at a reasonable time: Failing to get enough sleep can impair brain function, lower a child's ability to focus, and make it more difficult to make good decisions the next day.
2. **Don't just study from the couch, if at all possible.** It's true that one of the perks of an at-home education is the ability to complete work and take calls from anywhere, and it's important to take advantage of that! However, for many reasons, it's a good idea to have a specific spot for your students to do the bulk of their schoolwork. This can help students create and maintain school/life boundaries, can help them manage screen time, and even help them improve their posture and spine health (e.g., if they're sitting at a chair instead of slumped over on the couch).
3. **Tell your students to drink water throughout the day.** If possible, sending them a school-branded water bottle could be a fun way to help them feel connected to the school and each other—and, that way, you can set goals with a universal measurement. Even if school personnel know they will have a hard time helping remote students with specific nutrition goals, it is easy to encourage students to drink more water. Drinking water is important for virtually every bodily function—and this simple healthy act can help influence a child or a family to make other healthy choices throughout their day.
4. **Help give remote students an active way to be social.** If your students are already sitting through numerous video chat meetings for school presentations, groups, and more, adding on video calls to chat with their friends as well results in excessive screen time (and a lot of sitting time). While there's nothing inherently wrong with that—and, in many cases, this may be somewhat unavoidable—if you can help your students figure out ways to have fun and safely



get their bodies moving, this will help with their overall health and happiness. Setting group fitness challenges, helping them navigate group calls that they can tune into while walking, brainstorming local, safe, and accessible activities that students can complete together (e.g., visiting an outdoor park, or similar), and other such outside-of-the-box activities can make a big difference.

5. **Practice physical activity together, over Zoom.** If it works with your schedule, an easy way to help your kids be more active is to see it happen! Finding ways to stretch over Zoom, use hula hoops or jump ropes, or exercising as a class to class a fun, accessible Youtube workout can help increase community and promote physical activity in a remote setting.
6. **Remind your students that taking breaks and reducing stress are positive, productive activities.** Whether the underlying reasons for a student's remote education are themselves stressful or more routine, it's key to remember that an at-home education does not necessarily translate to an easier experience. And, as discussed above, it can be difficult for a student or an entire family to feel that it's okay to set down the books and do other activities, especially if their school space and living space are the same. Chronic stress is very detrimental to young bodies, and all stress counts—not just dramatic or acute stressors. Make sure that your students take breaks often. Setting up some kind of classroom break accountability tracker could help your students appreciate that taking time to recover at the end of a long day—or to take a minute or two to breathe in the middle of a long one—are not only healthy but necessary strategies.

### Section 3 Key Points

- Effective assessment is important. Asking your community for feedback, and setting up ways to analyze the data and work with what you've learned is far more important than jumping into action uninformed.
- Social-emotional learning is a process by which young people learn to glean and apply new information, learn to manage emotions, and learn to accomplish their goals and connect with others, and it is critical in ensuring overall student health.
- Starting simple can be wildly efficient: Ensuring your students are getting good sleep and good snacks can jumpstart more than you probably think!

## Section 3 Discussion Questions

- Is your school serving its remote students as well as it is possible to do so?
- Do you ever eat in your school's cafeteria? What do you know about the school's nutrition options? Would you want to eat there?
- Do you think you have the freedom to tweak your students' schedules to incorporate movement and avoid stress? Why or why not?
- Does your school seem well set up for efficient social-emotional learning?

## Course Conclusion

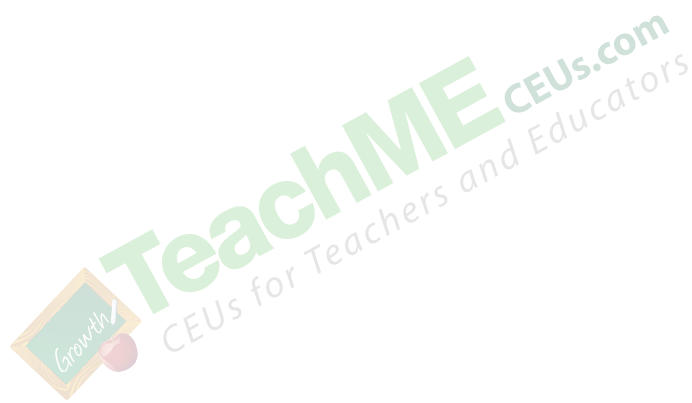
When it comes to ways to increase the efficacy of our school initiatives, there's nothing quite like the positive feedback effect of investing in safety and healthiness first. Start by listening to and learning from your school community members about their health needs, and try brainstorming ways to meet as many of those requests as possible. Before you know it, your entire academic community will benefit from working and studying on a safer, more healthy campus.

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