



*A Union of Professionals*

AFT Health, Safety and Well-Being

**THRIVE**

# Student Health Matters

SIMPLE STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT CHILDREN'S  
PHYSICAL, MENTAL AND SOCIAL WELL-BEING,  
AND HELP STUDENTS THRIVE





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## OUR MISSION

The **American Federation of Teachers** is a union of professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.

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# Student Health Matters

Throughout our history, the AFT has maintained strong commitments to children’s health. That resolve is braided through work on community schools; access to a school nurse and other school health professionals; green building and green cleaning; rigorous nutrition standards and best practices in school meal programs; and more. To enhance and coordinate this work, AFT Secretary-Treasurer Lorretta Johnson advocated for a new Children’s Health, Safety and Well-Being program.

## Priority 1: Mental health

Mental illnesses affect more children than physical health problems—but schools are poorly staffed to address these needs. On a recent survey, less than 20 percent of AFT members reported that their school’s policies and programs adequately and appropriately address students’ mental health. Without adequate care coordination, kids with mental health disorders are more likely to drop out, use and abuse illicit substances, and engage in risky and self-injurious behaviors.<sup>1</sup> Many respondents felt “uncertain” in their abilities to handle “student behaviors that appear out of control and stem from what I assume may be mental illness,” in the words of a member in St. Paul, Minn. Beyond safe and responsive staffing, many respondents seek skills training to better understand how to handle students’ mental health needs and their impact on behavior.

## Priority 2: Equitable access to care

A record-high 92.9 percent of children have health insurance today, and nearly all children have a usual place where they receive care.<sup>2</sup> Still, too many children visit the emergency room with severe needs. Good health lays the foundation for school attendance and sustained academic success. Yet many children lack access to high-quality healthcare in schools.

Survey respondents stressed the value of *whole family* approaches, especially for mental health, that make sure children and their parents receive appropriate services. More than half of respondents want to expand the role of full-time, trained staff to address children’s diverse, complex and chronic health concerns.

## Priority 3: Food security

Food insecurity plagues too many children. Research links poor nutrition and hunger to poorer physical health, impaired social skills and mental health issues. In school, food insecurity manifests as delayed mental proficiency, higher likelihood of repeating a grade, and slower math and reading progress.

While the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 took a bold step forward in the fight for children’s nutrition and hunger, the nation must invest in 21st-century kitchen equipment as well as full-time positions and training for food service workers. In addition, survey respondents value nutrition education and access to healthful foods. AFT members also support structures that ensure all children have regular, nutritious meals.

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<sup>1</sup> Nguyen, T. (2014). “Parity or Disparity: The State of Mental Health in America 2015.” Alexandria, Va.: Mental Health America.

<sup>2</sup> Alker, J. and Chester, A. (2014, November). “Children’s Coverage at a Crossroads: Progress Slows.” Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Health Policy Institute, Center for Children and Families.

# Student Minds Matter

## The realities of youth mental health

Mental health disorders among children are defined as serious changes in ways they typically learn, behave or handle emotions. Mental illnesses can re-emerge throughout an individual's life.



## A strategy to help our students

Educators and school staff can help our children do more than survive. We can help them THRIVE!



Have questions? Want more info?

Visit [go.aft.org/ChildHealthMatters](http://go.aft.org/ChildHealthMatters) or email [childhealth@aft.org](mailto:childhealth@aft.org).

# Student Healthcare Access Matters

Good health can lead to good grades

Healthcare access goes to the heart of the achievement gap.

While school-based health centers offer physical, mental and social services, only

**12.5 percent** of school districts **have one.**

**One-fifth**

of educators are uncertain in their ability to handle children's health problems; few receive training in this area more than once a year.

**7 million** U.S. children are **uninsured.**

**5.2 million** of those children qualify for Medicaid but are **NOT enrolled.**

**1 in 3**

children is covered by Medicaid or the Children's Health Insurance Program.

Limited access to caregivers is linked to **lower childhood vaccination rates**, **increasing** students' **risk** of contracting and spreading diseases like **measles** and **whooping cough**.

About **30%**

of public schools have a **part-time** nurse.

**25%** have **no nurse** at all.

**Up to 9 in 10**

students in need of **special education services** for severe emotional disturbances **do not receive these services.**

**EACH YEAR** **5-7.5 million** students are **chronically absent** from school.

Schools can fill gaps in access to care

Wraparound services help students stay healthy and stay in school. We can help students THRIVE!

**T**

**Transform school capacity.**

With the help of a local pediatric hospital, health department or nongovernmental organization, a school-based health center can improve access to health services and prevent emergency room visits. Learn more about how to get started or expand current efforts with the School-Based Health Alliance Blueprint at [bit.ly/Blueprint\\_SBMA](https://bit.ly/Blueprint_SBMA).

**H**

**Honor school health staff.**

Fight for appropriate staffing to address all children's needs. Full-time positions and safe ratios are imperative for school nurses, counselors, social workers, behavioral therapists, psychologists and more.

**R**

**Repeal and replace.**

Your state and/or district may be using outdated language that restricts Medicaid reimbursement for school health services. Learn more at [go.aft.org/childhealth\\_fcr](https://go.aft.org/childhealth_fcr).

**I**

**Illuminate what is hidden.**

School funding formulas often rely on "average daily attendance" figures that obscure trends in chronic absenteeism. To better learn students' needs, ask who isn't in class and *why*.

**V**

**Vouch for the ACA.**

Thanks to the Affordable Care Act, many more children now have health insurance. Show support for this groundbreaking legislation and urge Congress to advocate for more progress. Find out if your school can be part of getting more kids covered at [InsureKidsNow.gov](https://InsureKidsNow.gov).

**E**

**Engage community partners.**

Adopt the community schools model. Providing wraparound services can lower hospitalization rates, improve immunization rates and reduce high-risk and disruptive behaviors. Learn more at [go.aft.org/commschools](https://go.aft.org/commschools).

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# Student Nutrition Matters

## Poor nutrition can equal poor performance

Many of our students come to school hungry for more than knowledge.

About **60%** of K-8 public school teachers regularly see students

come to school **HUNGRY**

More than **one-third**

of U.S. children are overweight or obese—because of poor nutrition.

On average, children who eat **breakfast** attend **1.5 more** days of school per year.

Healthy eating improves math test scores by

**17.5%**

Students who are **hungry** are more likely to have **behavioral problems**.

Nutrition standards for school meals increase vegetable consumption by **16%** and fruit intake by **23%**

On an average school day ...  
**21 million** low-income children rely on **free or reduced-price lunch** for their nutritional needs.

Participation in school meal programs has been linked to a **lower body mass index**.

U.S. children at risk of hunger:  
**1 in 5**  
African-American and Latino children at risk of hunger:  
**1 in 3**

## Combat food insecurity

School meal programs help fight hunger and improve nutrition. We can help students THRIVE!

**T**

**Teach the value of nutrition.**

Find resources for classrooms, cafeterias and gardens at [bit.ly/MyPlate\\_USDA](http://bit.ly/MyPlate_USDA) and [ShareMyLesson.com](http://ShareMyLesson.com). Nutrition education encourages students to select and eat more healthy options, and reduces consumption of calories and fats.

**H**

**Harvest the fruits of farm labor.**

Farm-to-School programs that unveil the farm-to-tray process for students boost consumption of healthy foods, drive local economic growth and establish lifelong habits.

**R**

**Redesign school cafeterias.**

Visit [SmarterLunchrooms.org](http://SmarterLunchrooms.org) to learn more about research-based low- and no-cost strategies to promote nutritious eating and reduce plate waste.

**I**

**Invest in modern school kitchens.**

Implement strategies to bring the new equipment, full-time positions and appropriate training that school food service workers need to implement ambitious goals to end child hunger and improve nutrition for all.

**V**

**Value national nutrition standards.**

The 2010 Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act set science-based dietary guidelines for meals and snacks in schools—a historic step forward for children's health. More than 90 percent of schools are meeting the standards. Tell your congressional representative about your success.

**E**

**Encourage robust meal participation.**

Boost the number of students eating breakfast! Also, find out if you work in one of the 50 percent of schools that can use the USDA's new Community Eligibility Provision to offer free, nutritious meals to all students.



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# Sources

## Student Minds Matter

“1 in 5 school-age children has a mental health disorder.”<sup>1</sup>

“Top 5 disorders: ADHD (8.5%), major depressive episode (8.1%), substance abuse (6.9%), behavioral/conduct disorder (4.6%), autism (1.1%).”<sup>2</sup>

“Average age of onset for mental disorders: Anxiety by 6 years, Behavior/conduct disorder by 11 years, Mood disorder by 13 years, Substance Abuse by 15 years. <sup>3</sup>

“10 percent of grieving children show sustained prolonged grief up to 3 years after the death of a parent.”<sup>4</sup>

“Half of high school students with a mental illness drop out of high school by age 14.”<sup>5</sup>

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## Student Healthcare Access Matters

“7 million children are uninsured, 5.2 million of whom are eligible for Medicaid but not enrolled.”<sup>1</sup>

“While school-based health centers offer physical, mental and social services, only 12.5 percent of districts have one.”<sup>2</sup>

“Up to 9 in 10 students in need of special education services for severe emotional disturbances do not receive these services.”<sup>3</sup>

“Each year, 5 - 7.5 million students are chronically absent from school.”<sup>4</sup>

“Limited access to caregivers is linked to lower childhood vaccination rates, increasing students’ risk of contracting and spreading diseases like measles and whooping cough.”<sup>5</sup>

“With the help of a local pediatric hospital, health department or nongovernmental organization, a school-based health center can improve access to health services and prevent emergency room visits.”<sup>6</sup>

“To better learn students’ needs, ask who isn’t in class and *why*.”<sup>7</sup>

“Providing wraparound services can lower hospitalization rates, improve immunization rates and reduce high-risk and disruptive behaviors.”<sup>8</sup>

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## Student Nutrition Matters

“1 in 5 children in the United States is at risk of hunger. Among African-American and Latino children, that ratio increases to 1 in 3.”<sup>1</sup>

“More than one-third of children and adolescents are overweight or obese in the United States.”<sup>2</sup>

“On an average school day, 21 million low-income children rely on free or reduced-price lunch for their nutritional needs.”<sup>3</sup>

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