COUNCIL FOR A
STRONG AMERICA

REPORT

Investing in Student Wellness and Success in Ohio

State support for wellness initiatives will grow Ohio's economy, improve public safety, and strengthen national security.



Acknowledgements

Council for a Strong America is a national, bipartisan nonprofit that unites five organizations comprised of law enforcement leaders, retired admirals and generals, business executives, pastors, and prominent coaches and athletes who promote solutions that ensure our next generation of Americans will be successful, productive members of society.

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In Ohio, parents, educators, and community leaders understand that student learning and success depend on more than academics alone. Raising a generation of successful, well-adjusted adults means supporting each child's physical, mental, and emotional health and development. Protecting and expanding the Ohio Student Wellness and Success Fund will ensure school districts have the resources to address these foundational needs.

Investing in student wellness means investing in a generation. Schools, in partnership with organizations in their communities, are uniquely positioned to support student mental and physical health and build healthy environments for students to learn and grow. In the end, these efforts can make for a safer society, and also result in more young people graduating from high school ready to embrace the next stage of their life, whether that path includes higher education, a skilled trade, or a military career.

"Our youth are dealing with many hurdles in today's environment. Investing in student wellness will help children graduate with the social and emotional skills needed for success in the rest of their lives."



Will Roberts
President/CEO, Vandalia Butler Chamber of Commerce

How the Student Wellness and Success Fund Works

In 2019, Governor Mike DeWine signed legislation that established Ohio's Student Wellness and Success Fund, a steady source of funding for school districts to invest in student wellbeing. This innovative approach rests on three key ideas:[1]

- For students to learn and succeed, their mental, physical, and emotional needs must be met.
- School district leaders are best situated to recognize and address the unique needs of their students.
- The most effective and efficient way for districts to invest in student wellbeing is to partner with community-based organizations.

To spend Student Wellness and Success funds, districts select from a list of acceptable activities and partner with reputable organizations in their communities to establish their initiatives. Allowable uses of funding include mental health services, physical health services, mentoring programs, family engagement and support services, afterschool programs, and services for homeless and child welfare-involved youth.[2]

This menu of options, consisting of evidence-based strategies for meeting a range of student needs, allows districts to make spending decisions based on whom they serve and how they can have the greatest impact. Furthermore, by partnering with local organizations, school districts gain access to professionals with the relevant expertise and avoid duplication of existing community services.

Mental health has always been a smart investment

Mental and emotional health have always been a critical component of student success. In the words of experts at the Learning Policy Institute, "learning is social, emotional, and academic."[3] Each student's ability to learn depends on both the quality of instruction available to them and also their ability to navigate the school environment, form positive relationships with adults and peers, and manage the stressors that may exist in their homes.[4]

Decades of research provide strong evidence that student outcomes improve when schools focus on both academic and nonacademic needs. A comprehensive analysis of 213 studies of school-based social and emotional learning initiatives found that these programs improved social skills, attitudes, and behaviors, and produced dramatic improvements in academic achievement.[5]

Beyond promoting learning, efforts that help students develop social skills and emotional regulation strengthen the overall health and safety of our society. Children exposed to violence or other traumatic experiences demonstrate greater resilience when they have the social-emotional processing skills needed to recover. For children at risk for engaging in violence or crime in adolescence or early adulthood, healthy psychological development can help them stay on the right track. As one expert explains, "any sustainable approach to the prevention of violence may require us to [...] focus on the conditions that create kind and responsible individuals that care equally about self and others."[6]

Children in crisis

Youth mental health has been trending in the wrong direction for years. Between 2007 and 2018, the suicide rate of Ohioans aged 10-24 increased 64 percent, making it the second leading cause of death among young people in the state.[7] Some evidence suggests that child mental health may have

declined even more since the onset of the pandemic, with facilities like Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center frequently operating at or beyond their capacity for providing youths with psychiatric treatment.[8]

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected students in many ways—isolating them from their peers, severing relationships with the caring adults in their schools, decreasing access to regular meals, and limiting opportunities for personal development. In summer 2020, public health researchers conducted a comprehensive analysis of research that might help us understand how social isolation could impact children's mental health and wellbeing. This analysis of 63 studies found that children who experienced loneliness were more likely to struggle with depression or anxiety for up to nine years later. Longer periods of loneliness, in particular, predicted future struggles with mental health.[9]

Parents know that their children are struggling. In response to a family wellbeing survey administered last fall, 59 percent of parents reported that they had a child who was currently or had recently experienced mental or emotional health challenges, such as loneliness, difficulty handling emotions, or difficulty coping with stress.[10]

Addressing physical health on campus

Like mental health, well-managed physical health is a basic necessity for students who are trying to learn and navigate complex social environments. School-based healthcare centers, which districts can establish using Student Success and Wellness funding, can resolve a number of common barriers to accessing healthcare and can result in superior care. Experts have noted improvements in healthcare access in rural areas (given the relative ease and convenience of campus-based services), better compliance with follow-up visits to healthcare professionals, reduced time out of school for doctor's visits, and more specialized care for adolescents.[11]

The impact can be substantial. A review of 46 studies of school-based health centers found improvements in grades, graduation rates, behavior, emergency room visits, and illegal substance abuse.[12] Students living in poverty,

Student Wellness and Success Funds in Action

Since 2019, Ohio school districts have used Student Wellness and Success funding to support students in many ways. The Ohio Department of Education shares stories of innovative practices to help district leaders learn about the funding-eligible initiatives implemented across the state. For example:

- **Alexander Local Schools in Athens County has partnered with six local organizations to provide year-round mental health counseling and healthcare services during the school day, before and after school, and at sporting events. The district reports improvements in attendance and behavior as a result of these services.**
- **Fort Frye Local Schools in Washington County partnered with three local organizations to establish multiple programs aimed at promoting "healthy minds, healthy bodies, and healthy relationships." By offering counseling services to students early, the district has seen a reduction in the number of students at risk of self-harm.**
- **Rock Hill Local School District partnered with the Ironton-Lawrence County Community Action Organization to build an on-campus health center open to students, staff, and families in the community. The center provides primary, mental, and dental health services regardless of ability to pay.**

Source: education.ohio.gov/Topics/Student-Supports/Student-Wellness-and-Success

Support for Afterschool

Many districts use Student Success and Wellness funding to invest in afterschool programs that improve students' social development and physical health.

Since long before the pandemic, afterschool programs have played a crucial role in providing the children of Ohio with the opportunity to learn and grow in a safe environment. High-quality programs provide youth with a safe and stable environment that can help keep them from engaging in dangerous behavior or becoming the victim of a crime, and contribute to positive outcomes such as better attendance, improved classroom behavior, better academic outcomes, increased physical activity, and increased graduation rates.

Source: afterschoolalliance.org/AA3PM/

or who have endured an adverse childhood experience, such as abuse, neglect, or exposure to violence, often feel the greatest benefits from having a safe, stable place to access basic health services.[13] For this reason, the Student Wellness and Success fund permits districts to deploy resources specifically to support homeless students and students involved in the child welfare system.

Strengthening wellness to strengthen the nation

Support for children's mental and physical health can impact public safety, the future workforce, and national security.

Many mental health disorders, particularly when left untreated, increase risk of aggression and the likelihood that a young person will commit a crime. Experts estimate that between 50 and 75 percent of juveniles involved in the criminal justice system have a mental health disorder.[14] Law enforcement leaders also recognize the positive impact that good health has on graduation rates, because they know that six in 10 inmates nationwide do not have a high school diploma.[15]

Business leaders know that improving child wellness will grow the economy by increasing the number of workers with a high school diploma and postsecondary education and training needed to fill increasingly demanding jobs.[16] Alternatively, untreated mental health disorders (such as depression and conduct disorders)[17] and untreated physical conditions (such as asthma and poor vision)[18] tend to limit educational attainment.

The strength of the military, likewise, depends on our ability to recruit healthy high school graduates into the armed forces. In Ohio, however, 71 percent of youth between the ages of 17 and 24 cannot serve in the military due to issues such as lack of education, a record of crime or substance abuse, or lack of physical fitness.[19] These are solvable barriers that we can address through wellness programs.

Conclusion

In the long term, Ohio's recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic will be reflected in how the state supports students who struggled through social isolation, suboptimal learning conditions, and unprecedented life stressors. While student wellness is in the spotlight, now is the time to make a lasting investment in student mental health, physical health, and lifelong success. Our safety, military readiness, and economic strength depend on it.

Endnotes

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