A number of states have taken steps toward promoting student wellness, with many of their state boards of education in the middle of the action. Here are some examples of states leading on student wellness by addressing physical fitness, social and emotional learning (SEL), and mental health supports.

**Physical Fitness as ESSA Indicator**

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) gave states greater flexibility to deliver a more well-rounded education and to choose nonacademic measures of a school’s effectiveness in their accountability systems. Vermont seized that opportunity to elevate student health. The state included physical education in its measurement of the school quality or student success indicator under its ESSA plan, making “a commitment to education and evaluation that supports the whole child, knowing that healthier students perform better in every other aspect of school.”

Beginning with the 2018–19 academic year, all Vermont public school students in grades 4, 7, and 9 or 10 are taking the state’s physical education assessment, FitnessGram. Vermont aims to have 100 percent of students in all its schools aligned with measures of success under the Presidential Youth Fitness Program by 2025. The selection of this indicator follows the Vermont State Board of Education’s adoption of health and physical education standards in 2015. ESSA requires states to engage stakeholders when developing state plans. When state education policymakers in Vermont were developing their ESSA plan, they received significant stakeholder feedback calling for including a measure of student health.

**Social and Emotional Learning**

Connecticut, Illinois, Kansas, Michigan, and Washington are looking to SEL as a means for achieving student and schoolwide success. All five have adopted SEL grade-level competencies and have developed unique partnerships at the state and local levels to effectively move policy into practice.
SEL focuses on developing skills like collaboration, communication, problem solving, and resilience in an age-appropriate continuum through instruction, curriculum, and daily interactions, ideally with the involvement of all members of a school community. Research shows that developing these skills in school has a positive impact on absenteeism rates, school discipline, substance use, graduation rates, and academic achievement.5,6 This instructional approach also delivers significant economic benefit, with an $11 return for every $1 invested in SEL interventions.4

In 2012, Kansas took SEL a step further by becoming the first state in the nation to integrate SEL and character development. As described by the Kansas State Board of Education, their social, emotional, and character development standards are “about learning to be caring and civil, to make healthy decisions, to problem solve effectively, to value excellence, to be respectful and responsible, to be good citizens and to be empathetic and ethical individuals.”7 The board adopted updated standards in July 2018 to better address mental health, employability, civic engagement, and putting the skills into practice.

Mental Health

One in five adolescents has had a serious mental health disorder, such as depression or anxiety disorders, at one point in their life. Rates of attempted suicide and thoughts of suicides are also on the rise.6 However, many youth do not have access to mental health education and services to address these medical needs. Two states, New York and Virginia, are committed to changing that.

In 2016, New York became the first state to pass legislation requiring that mental health education be taught in all the state’s elementary, middle, and high schools (Education Law §804 as amended). The state education agency established, and the legislature funded, a School Mental Health Resource and Training Center to give districts and schools the training, expertise, and resources needed to comply with the law. Simultaneously, the Board of Regents engaged state education and health agencies, the Mental Health Association in New York State, and stakeholders on the Mental Health Education Advisory Council to inform its May 2018 adoption of amendments to the commissioner’s regulation §135.1 and §135.3 equipping schools for implementation of the law by its July 1, 2018, effective date.7

In 2018, the Virginia legislature amended law $22.1-207 to include mental health education as part of required physical and health education, which is prescribed under the state’s Standards of Learning for all public school students in grades 9 and 10. The Virginia Board of Education is revising these standards in consultation with mental and behavioral health experts in state agencies and partner organizations.

In addition to state-level action, many districts are leveraging Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants under ESSA’s Title IV, Part A to fund mental and behavioral health supports, including hiring additional school counselors, social workers, and psychologists, providing professional development for teachers around SEL, and implementing antibullying or school climate improvement strategies. By providing students with access to evidence-based supports, curriculum, and programming, states and districts are equipping students with the skills and knowledge they need to lead a healthy life well beyond their years in school.

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