



PreK-12 Education Priorities

Psychological science offers insights into human behavior and learning, the development of effective teaching methods and strategies, and how to address the social, emotional, and developmental needs of all students to foster better educational outcomes. APA is committed to working with policymakers to ensure equitable access to a high-quality education, irrespective of a student's socioeconomic status; train and retain a diverse educator workforce; provide critically needed mental and behavioral health services to support students' social and emotional well-being and development; and ensure that schools are safe environments for all students and educators, irrespective of race, ethnicity, or gender identity.

Application of Psychological Science to Teaching and Learning

Strengthen teacher preparation. Psychological science is critical to the pre-service education and training of our nation's teachers and must be a pillar of any teacher preparation program.ⁱ This will help ensure that students receive a well-rounded education that incorporates all aspects of learning into academic achievement.ⁱⁱ All efforts must also be made to have an educator workforce that is diverse and representative. Teacher preparation curricula should be based on the psychology of learning and ensure the incorporation of evidence-based practices into teaching. Currently certified teachers must have access to professional development opportunities to improve their skills, including incorporating social and emotional instruction into curricula and employing effective strategies for classroom management. Increased funding for programs such as the Teacher Quality Partnership program, the August F. Hawkins Centers for Excellence program, the Title II-A, the Supporting Effective Instruction State Grant, and the Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) program can help accomplish these goals.

Address learning needs. Research has shown that applying principles and strategies of cognitive science to classrooms can significantly impact rates of learning and retention.ⁱⁱⁱ Translating findings from cognitive science and educational psychology into classroom practice has improved students' motivation, engagement, and behavior by developing skills such as relationship building, problem-solving, and emotional management. Educating faculty and staff on psychological and cognitive science must be a top priority and can help close achievement gaps and raise academic success.

School-Based Mental and Behavioral Health

Increase school-based mental health services. Schools play a critical role in providing mental health care to many children, particularly prevention and early intervention services. Yet, the U.S. has persistent shortages of school-based mental and behavioral health professionals.^{iv} APA Services strongly supports efforts to increase school psychologists, counselors, and other critical mental health professionals. Schools, especially those that are under-resourced, in rural communities, and those serving high numbers of low-income students and students of color, must receive more support to increase and retain diverse, culturally competent providers. This can be accomplished through strengthening Medicaid-funded services in schools; increasing funding for Project AWARE and Title IV-A, the Student Support and Academic Enrichment Program; and training and retaining more qualified professionals through support for programs such as the Mental Health Service Professional Demonstration Grant and the School-Based Mental Health Services Grant.

Students with Disabilities

Support students with disabilities. Students with disabilities often face barriers to academic, social, and emotional progress and have unique educational and support needs. Congress must commit to fully funding the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and invest in growing the workforce of special education teachers and Specialized Instructional Support Personnel. Additionally, to ease the transition of students with disabilities into higher education settings, policies should clarify that these students can submit previous documentation (IEP, Sec. 504 Plan) of a disability to receive proper accommodations and provide additional testing and diagnostics for appropriate accommodations and supports. Data collection efforts should also be bolstered, along with the monitoring and oversight of IDEA, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, and other federal laws that provide access to education.

Testing and Assessment

Improve assessment to better serve students. To be useful tools for measuring academic achievement, standardized tests must be reliable, valid, fair, and cover all dynamics of learning.^{xix} Assessments must be designed and conducted in an equitable manner that accounts for disparities in race and socioeconomic status, as well as accommodate the needs of students with disabilities and English-language learners. Student evaluation must consider the conditions for learning, students' social and emotional needs, and student participation and attendance. Psychological scientists are leaders in providing expertise related to student assessment protocols and identification of various learning abilities.

Learning-Related Infrastructure and Technology

Promote Evidence-Based Educational Technology and AI in Schools. Educational technology and AI tools should be adopted only when they advance clear learning goals, are grounded in rigorous evidence, and include developmentally appropriate guardrails. Digital tools are not inherently beneficial or harmful; their effects depend on what the tool asks students to do, how adults integrate it, the age and needs of the learner, and what technology use replaces.^v Engagement, time-on-task, or improved performance within a tool should not be mistaken for learning. Generative AI may help students produce stronger work while reducing independent knowledge and skill if students rely on it to do the thinking for them. Policymakers should support EdTech and AI implementation that protects privacy, strengthens—not replaces—educator and family involvement, and ensures tools are tested across different learner needs and levels of access. Because this work depends on reliable connectivity and devices, closing the homework gap remains essential, including through sustained support for broadband access in schools and libraries through the FCC's E-Rate program.

Invest in physical learning spaces. On average, U.S. school buildings are 49 years old, and 53 percent have never undergone any major renovations.^{vi} Poor school infrastructure can negatively impact students' physical health and academic success. Exposure to dilapidated physical spaces impacts mental health, increasing depression, anxiety, and stress.^{vii} These effects are experienced unevenly across groups, with underfunded schools and those serving students of color facing greater challenges. Federal investment in modern school infrastructure, including for improved ventilation, access to natural light, functioning heating and cooling systems, and quality classroom acoustics, will pay dividends by improving students' health, well-being, and educational attainment.^{viii}

Invest in climate-resilient school infrastructure. School closures due to heat and other climate-related events, such as wildfires, droughts, and flooding, are becoming more frequent.^{ix} Children are among the populations facing the greatest impacts of climate change, including stress and trauma, disruptions in routines, separation from caregivers due to evacuations or displacement, and parental stress after a disaster.^x Extreme temperatures can negatively affect attention, memory, decision-making, behavior, and academic performance, making a comfortable and healthy school environment critical to educational success.^{xi} Investing in climate-resilient infrastructure and adding clean energy to schools can mitigate harms from climate-exacerbated events.

School Climate

Promote inclusive educational environments. A positive school climate is critical to ensuring that students of all backgrounds, including those from marginalized groups such as LGBTQ+ students, students of color, or those with a disability, can receive a high-quality education. Unsafe and unwelcoming conditions in school settings can negatively impact students' psychological well-being, social and emotional development, and academic success. These effects can have long-term ramifications for growth and advancement. Federal policies must protect the civil rights of all students and ensure that schools are safe, healthy, and inclusive environments. They should be rooted in principles of psychological science with the aim of ending bullying, ensuring that LGBTQ+ students have equal protection under Title IX, restoring and strengthening protections against gender-based and disability-based harassment and sexual misconduct, and eradicating the school-to-prison pipeline by replacing exclusionary discipline practices with non-punitive approaches.

Support afterschool and out-of-school programs. High-quality afterschool and out-of-school-time programs are a key component to children's education and development. They are complementary to students' academic experiences and have a track record of improving academic outcomes and school engagement.^{xviii} In addition, these programs help address students' mental health and well-being, and develop their social and emotional skills, improving interpersonal abilities and strengthening peer-to-peer and peer-to-adult relationships.

Basic Needs Insecurity

Expand access to nutritious school meals. For many kids, school meals are their most nutritious meals of the day. Proper nutrition is critical for children's physical, cognitive, psychological, and overall well-being, helping to support their growth and development.^{xii} Universal school meal programs are an important tool to alleviating food insecurity among children, leading to fewer cases of obesity, reducing associated costs for families, and decreasing stigma around poverty and social safety net programs.^{xiii, xiv} High-quality, nutritious universal school meals also improve learning outcomes, boost attendance, and support many of the factors associated with a positive school climate, such as lower discipline rates, reduced suspensions, and less bullying.^{xv, xvi} These programs must be sustained during summer months, for students to have access to nutritious meals while schools are on break.

Address homelessness among students. Federal data shows about 1.5 million school-age children experience homelessness. These numbers are likely an undercount.^{xvii} Homeless children are more likely to experience violence, food insecurity, chronic absence from school, dropping out, and health conditions, including related to their mental health. This has profound consequences for their educational attainment and overall development. Continued investments are needed in federal policies such as the Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program, which helps school districts identify children experiencing homelessness, ensure school access and stability, provide direct services, and coordinate with community agencies to meet basic needs.

Early Childhood Education

Support early childhood education. Research shows that early childhood education lays the foundation for a child's entire education by developing their cognitive, social, and emotional skills.^{xx} Furthermore, early childhood education programs improve long-term educational success, as well as economic, health, and social outcomes.^{xxi} However, too many children and families, especially those from low-income populations, rural communities, and communities of color, still lack access to high quality childcare, pre-school, and early childhood education. More federal investment in programs such as Head Start, Early Head Start, the Child Care & Development Block Grant, and Preschool Development Grants, as well as policies such as universal Pre-K, would help close these gaps.^{xxii}

Educator Mental Health and Well-Being

Support the mental health of educators and school personnel. Educators continue to face unique challenges and pressures due to the ever-changing landscape of the current educational system. Stress, burnout, and increased physical and verbal aggression from both students and parents, is leading many to consider leaving the profession.^{xxiii, xxiv} Educator well-being is intrinsically linked to that of their students, thus supporting educator mental health not only benefits them, but also positively impacts students and school communities. Schools with teachers and administrators who have strong personal social and emotional skills have better school climates and increased social, emotional, and academic development of their students.^{xxv, xxvi}

Equitable Investment in Public Education

Increase funding for Title I. Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act provides federal financial assistance to schools and districts with large numbers of low-income students. To help close academic achievement gaps, Congress must fully fund Title I to ensure that all children, including some of the most vulnerable, receive equitable access to public education. To maintain long-term sustainability, any increase in funding for Title I must also be made permanent and indexed to inflation. Additionally, federal policies must hold states and school districts to the “supplement not supplant” standard to avoid further local disinvestment in schools serving low-income students.

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