

2025-2026

Program description



Building Healthy Communities:

Reducing Health Disparities in Elementary Schools

More information can be found at bcbsm.com/buildhealth

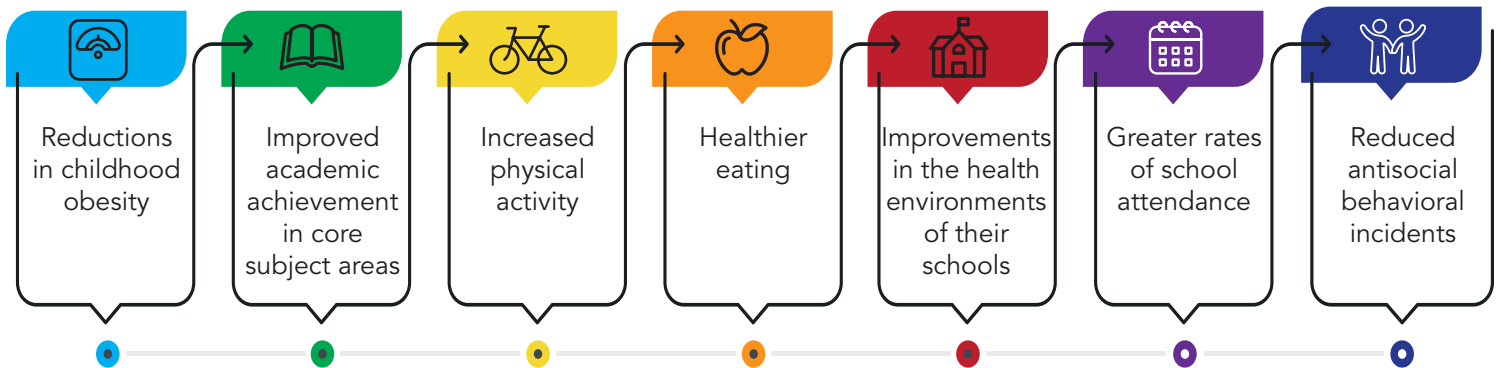


Introduction

Building Healthy Communities: Reducing Health Disparities in Elementary Schools is a school-based program focused on addressing the social determinants of health that have contributed to wide disparities in many communities across Michigan. The program offers necessary resources and professional development to:

- Facilitate a healthier school environment
- Improve the health and well-being of students
- Improve the mental health of children
- Increase school attendance and academic achievement
- Reduce the number of communities highlighted by state and national data that illustrates rampant disparities in health, education and the economy

The program has a history of improving the health of Michigan's children. Scientific evidence from program evaluation shows that children who attend schools that implement Building Healthy Communities demonstrate significant:



These results are achieved by:

- Teaching the importance of healthy lifestyles focused on physical activity and healthy eating
- Providing opportunities before, during and after school to be active and eat healthy
- Supporting educators with comprehensive professional development, curricula, equipment and mentoring to make implementation easy
- Supplying children, educators and families with education, resources and strategies to extend healthy lifestyle lessons into the home environment

2025-2026 Opportunity

The Building Healthy Communities program has over a decade of success in reducing social disparities for children in nearly 500 elementary schools and will continue to focus on supporting vulnerable communities across the state. In our effort to facilitate sustainable, systemwide changes focused on well-being, we will be recruiting schools and districts in regions that have demonstrated health, social and educational disparities.

The program has evolved to increase the quantity and quality of support to implement the program, including expanded equipment, curriculum and technologies that can be flexibly integrated at each school. Expert guidance and technical assistance will be provided, and schools and families will have access to at-school and at-home resources to make the program a success.

A focus on the interrelatedness of physical health, mental health, well-being and academic achievement in the school and home environments helps the program to address the unique experiences that children living in under-resourced communities often face. This approach provides the resources for schools to make a marked impact, but also acknowledges that families are a centerpiece of the school transformation process. This concurrent focus enables BHC to promote sustainable, long-term improvement to the social determinants of health for children, families and their school communities.



Program impact

Building Healthy Communities: Reducing Health Disparities in Elementary Schools is being made available to school districts through a collaboration between Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan, Michigan Fitness Foundation, United Dairy Industry of Michigan and Wayne State University Center for Health & Community Impact.

The program is committed to reducing disparities by addressing the social determinants of health of children and families across Michigan by transforming school district policies and elementary school environments. Since 2009, the program has been implemented in nearly 500 elementary schools, more than 10,000 educators, and improving the health outcomes for more than 179,000 children and their families.

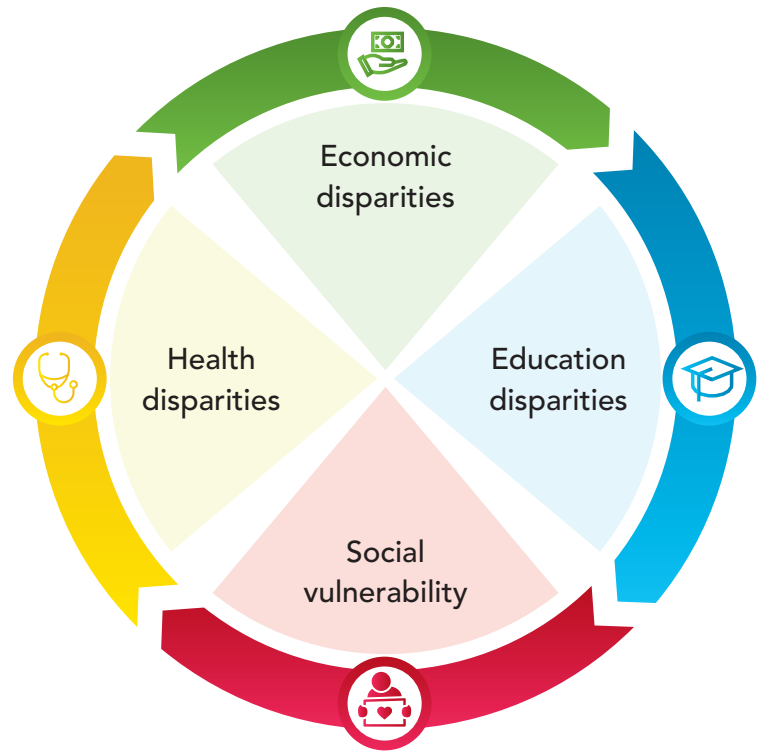
Disparities and inequalities

According to a number of factors, including the Social Vulnerability Index developed by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, there are vast disparities across different Michigan communities on an array of health metrics, including elevated rates of obesity, preventable chronic diseases, early morbidity and mortality, and mental health challenges.

Significant educational disparities also negatively impact vulnerable communities across nearly all measures of school success, including academic achievement, classroom performance, behavioral issues and school attendance. These educational disparities significantly compound and contribute to all factors related to health disparities, especially in vulnerable communities and underserved families.

In addition, many of these disparities are directly tied to similar economic disparities that inhibit equitable opportunities available to community members.

These indicators demonstrate that residents in under-resourced communities are more likely to be less healthy and have lower rates of school achievement. The interconnected nature of these four disparities and the significant influences they have in underserved communities forms the foundation for their social determinants of health and exemplifies the dire need for programs, such as Building Healthy Communities.



Regional approach

The program is designed to transform the health of entire communities by implementing the program in elementary schools throughout a geographic region, which could include Intermediate School Districts, entire districts or group of individual schools in areas where neighboring schools had previously participated in the program.

The primary goal of the program is to transform the health status, educational achievement and school health environments in the schools and school districts across an entire Michigan region. The goal of achieving regionwide impact is viewed as multidimensional and encompassing of all of the diverse geographic and population contexts across Michigan. In some cases, a region may refer to the full geographic footprint of an entire Intermediate School District. In other contexts, such as more rural areas of the state, a regional approach might focus on an entire county, or also include its adjacent counties. In more highly populated areas, a region might include a single large school district serving a high population of students and families throughout an entire large community.

Regardless of the methodology used to define a “region” to target the program’s impact, the primary focus is facilitating the greatest possible impact at the individual school level. Irrespective of the definition of “regional impact” that is used across the state based on population density, distances between schools and districts, or school and district affiliations with larger networks (for example ISDs), the program endeavors to have the widest and most thorough impact across the largest geographic or populated regions. However, one of the central criteria in determining the definition of any particular “regional approach” is the degree to which the schools and communities within that region meet the program’s overarching focus on investing opportunities, supports and services to schools, children and families located in areas that have the greatest “need,” whether that need reflects significant health, education or economic disparities, and ideally in areas where disparities are highest across multiple disparities.



Eligibility and program requirements

Using state and national data documenting health, education and economic disparities throughout Michigan communities, we are recruiting schools to join the Building Healthy Communities program where these disparities affect residents the most. We're presenting the opportunity to Intermediate School Districts, local school district administrators, individual school administrators and various school stakeholders (for example, principals, assistant principals, PE teachers, school board members, etc.) in an effort to gain support from all of the key stakeholders, which we know is vital to the program's success.

Participation in Building Healthy Communities: Reducing Health Disparities in Elementary Schools requires a school district to:

- Complete a Memorandum of Understanding between the participating school's administrators and the program's leadership to ensure from the outset that all key personnel within the schools who request to implement the program are completely aware and committed to its full and successful integration.
- Commit to implementing the entire program. When all school stakeholders commit to implementing the program, thorough discussions are held to discuss each school's unique context, operations, personnel, etc. to define the optimal ways in which to implement all five core program components, and also to identify as many supplemental opportunities to integrate to further magnify and optimize the impact that has been proven to result from the successful implementation of the program's core components.



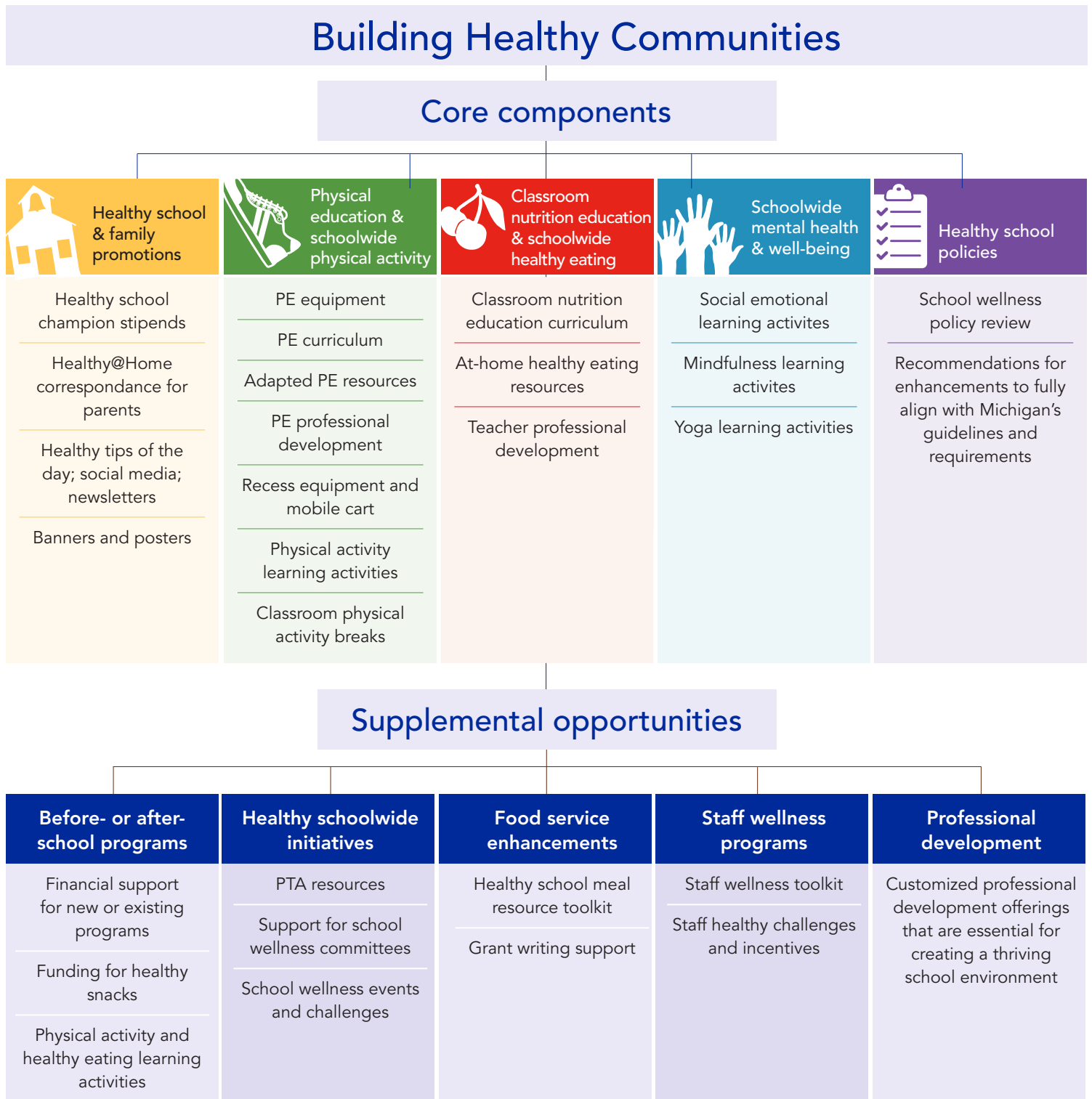
Support schools will receive:

- First, each elementary school will be assigned a **healthy school coordinator** from Wayne State University to provide on-site and virtual support, training and resources to ensure the entire program integrates with the unique context of each school and is successfully implemented throughout the year.
- Second, the healthy school coordinator will collaborate with building administrators to identify and train a paid, on-site **healthy school champion** who will assist all building personnel with implementing the program and navigating challenges that may arise.
- Third, all school personnel will have access to the Building Healthy Communities website portal that contains all program training, curricula and resources in a virtual, convenient and easy-to-use format.

The elementary school model

Building Healthy Communities integrates five core components that are proven to enhance the school health environment and surround children with inclusive education, resources and opportunities to live healthy lives and achieve better health and education outcomes. Because different regions, local communities, and individual districts/schools have unique needs and contexts, schools can also select from an array of supplemental opportunities that accelerate and magnify the impact of the program's core components.

Each core program component description outlines the school's commitment, as well as the professional development, mentoring, equipment, curricula and resources the school will receive.





Healthy school and family promotion

Consistently promoting healthy living information, strategies and tips are essential for fostering a healthy school and home environments. By reinforcing healthy messages both at school and at home, children receive consistent messaging and support to develop lifelong habits that benefit their health, school success and overall well-being. The program empowers students to make positive choices and strengthens the impact of the program's focus on health lifestyles.

The program provides:

- Financial stipends for an on-site healthy school champion who serves as the school's liaison with one of our program's healthy school coordinators who is fully dedicated to facilitating the program's success in each school's unique context
- Virtual program orientations tailored to each school stakeholder
- An array of healthy school and lifestyle promotions — healthy tips of the day, newsletters, social media content, etc.
- In-school signage, including program banners and posters
- Healthy@Home correspondence for families that can be distributed in a variety of formats depending on how schools best communicate with their families
- At-home healthy living tip sheets and activities to complement students' learning experiences at school





Physical education and schoolwide physical activity

Quality physical education is a key component of healthy schools and is guided by Michigan Department of Education and national education standards. PE teaches the knowledge, attitudes and skills for students to be active for life. The program provides vast resources to ensure that physical educators have access to quality curriculum appropriate for all types of students, access to a library of diverse professional development options and a generous equipment package to facilitate high-quality instruction.

However, physical activity isn't limited to the gymnasium. The program ensures that students have access to opportunities to be physically active throughout the school day by implementing classroom physical activity breaks, facilitating physical activity at recess time through equipment and games and providing support for physical activity during after-school programs.

The program provides:

- A large package of lifetime-guaranteed physical education equipment appropriate for students of all abilities
- Comprehensive PE curriculum aligned with state and national standards
- Curricular resources to support adapted physical education for students with disabilities
- Virtual or on-site professional development trainings covering many topics related to quality physical education, active recess, and classroom physical activity
- A fully stocked mobile recess cart containing physical activity equipment and an activity deck to spark fun and inclusive games and activities
- Fun and easily accessible virtual physical activity breaks for use in classrooms and any other contexts throughout the school environment





Classroom nutrition education and schoolwide healthy eating

A focus on healthy eating and nutrition education in elementary classrooms helps students build a strong foundation for lifelong health and well-being. Also, when children are well-nourished, they have the energy, focus and mental clarity needed for optimal learning. The nutrition education is directly aligned with Michigan Department of Education and national nutrition education standards, as well as education for parents to integrate at home nutrition education that students learn at school.

The program provides:

- Comprehensive nutrition education lessons, aligned with state and national standards that are designed to be inclusive of all types of learners
- Healthy@Home virtual healthy living resources to share with parents and caregivers to complement lessons learned at school
- Resources and guidance to encourage healthier classroom and schoolwide policies, snacks and parties
- On-site or virtual professional development for educators on the benefits of nutrition education and fostering healthy classroom and whole-school environments



Schoolwide mental health and well-being

Children living in under-resourced communities disproportionately experience daily stressors that can influence their mental health and well-being, socialization with other children and adults, quality of life and educational performance. Therefore, we provide a range of resources that support school personnel to recognize and address instances of trauma, facilitate positive social interactions, and help students manage stress and anxiety successfully.

The program provides:

- Social emotional learning activities that can be implemented in various contexts throughout school environments
- Short, virtual professional development modules on trauma-sensitive school practices, and how to help all students succeed socially and emotionally
- Mindfulness learning activities designed to help elementary students develop self-confidence, self-awareness and self-regulation skills
- Classroom Yoga Ed videos and resources for integrating calming yoga activities
- Resources for integrating restorative educational practices
- In-person or virtual professional development on social emotional learning, mindfulness or yoga instruction



Healthy school policies

The Michigan State Board of Education recognizes and acknowledges that “schools cannot achieve their primary mission of education if students and staff are not physically, mentally and socially healthy.” Building Healthy Communities fully aligns with the Michigan Department of Education Model Local School Wellness Policy. Successful implementation of the healthy school policy core component will assist your geographic region, entire district or individual school with ensuring that administrators, teachers, staff and students know about and value the importance of healthy learning environments that are the hallmark of model local school wellness policies.

The program provides:

- Support from our healthy school coordinators to work with schools to locate the most recent versions of their local school wellness policies and determine when they were last reviewed or revised.
- Using the State of Michigan’s™ Healthy School Action Tool as a guide, our coordinators work with school stakeholders to review their existing local school wellness policies and determine the degree to which they align with the Michigan Department of Education’s guidelines and requirements, support Michigan School Meals, and facilitate policies that effectively promote students’ health, well-being and optimal learning.
- Based on the local school wellness policy reviews, our coordinators offer schools recommendations for enhancements to even better align the Michigan Department of Education’s guidelines and requirements, Michigan School Meals, and facilitate healthier and higher achieving learners.



Supplemental opportunities

Building Healthy Communities integrates five core components that are proven to enhance the school health environment and surround children with inclusive education, resources and opportunities to live healthy lives and achieve better health and education outcomes. Schools or entire school districts that wish to implement the program must commit to implementing all five core components. However, because different regions, local communities and individual schools or districts have unique needs and contexts, schools can also request to receive any of the program's supplemental opportunities to further enhance the impact of the program. Schools are encouraged to take advantage of as many of the program's supplemental opportunities as possible based on their unique contexts and stakeholders' desires to accelerate and magnify the impact of the core components.

Food service enhancements

Increasing the food quality, school meal participation and efficient delivery of school meals is critical to supporting children's health, especially in under-resourced communities with increased food insecurity. The program provides access to the following resources:

- Healthy school meal resource toolkit with strategies for optimizing food service systems and healthy food promotions
- Support with grant applications to provide equipment and resources as enhancements to the school food system

Before- or after-school programs

Before- and after-school opportunities for physical activity and nutrition education give students even further opportunities to practice making healthy choices, which is especially important in under-resourced communities that often lack opportunities outside of the school day. By working with after-school programs (for example, childcare programs), existing clubs or program, or establishing new before- or after-school opportunities, the program provides an array of resources and supports to promote physical activity and healthy eating during out-of-school time, including:

- Access to a clearinghouse of fun walking activities, fun and inclusive games and nutrition education activities
- Financial resources to support existing before- or after-school programs to enhance the activities they are able to offer students including creating a new stand-alone club if other opportunities are not available
- Funding to provide healthy snacks during before- and after-school programs
- Funding to support a mileage club or special interest physical activity program (for example, Girls on the Run)

Schoolwide health initiatives

Schoolwide health initiatives are excellent ways to meet the needs of students and families, and play an important role in creating a supportive healthy school environment. The program provides support for schoolwide wellness events and challenges that encourage collective action toward healthy environments, including:

- Support for PTA/PTO initiatives, such as family health fairs or family yoga nights
- Support in forming and maintaining school wellness committees
- Funding for wellness events and schoolwide challenges to help build a culture of health that extends beyond classrooms. These initiatives foster collaboration among families, staff and the community, encouraging lasting engagement and collective action toward health

Launch or enhance staff wellness programs

In schools, staff wellness is often overlooked and not always viewed as essential to a school's overall health environment. Prioritizing staff wellness is crucial for promoting healthy, engaged teachers that set powerful examples for their students. The program offers funding and tools to help schools prioritize staff well-being by making it an integral part of their overall wellness culture, including:

- A robust staff wellness toolkit
- A menu of diverse staff wellness challenges and incentive structures

Customized professional development

Professional development for school staff on topics such as classroom physical activity, social-emotional learning, mindfulness practices, nutrition education, trauma-sensitive teaching, inclusive education and self-care are essential for creating a thriving school environment. Highly educated and empowered teachers are better prepared to integrate health-focused practices that enhance student learning and overall school success. The program offers a tailored menu of professional development options — offered virtually or on-site — that can help equip educators with the knowledge and strategies to support students' physical, emotional, and academic well-being while fostering their own resilience and effectiveness.



Evaluating the healthy school transformation

A small degree of process and outcome evaluation is critical to understanding the success of the Building Healthy Communities program in each school.

The program uses two levels of evaluation:

- First, we determine the unique ways in which each school implements the program through monthly correspondence between the program's Healthy School Coordinator and the school's on-site healthy school champion.
- Program outcomes are measured by asking school stakeholders (for example, principals, teachers, support staff, parents, etc.) to complete a brief online survey at the end of the school year to share information about their roles and activities in the program and their perceptions about how the program helped to facilitate healthier schools, homes, students, and families.

At the conclusion of the school year, schools and districts receive a program report that highlights how the program was implemented in their unique context and its impact according to the perspectives of diverse school stakeholders.

For more information

For more information on Building Healthy Communities: Reducing Health Disparities in Elementary Schools please visit the program website at bhcwsu.org/.

To have your region, school district, or individual school considered for participation in the program for the 2025-2026 school year, you are encouraged to submit a preliminary application at bhcwsu.org/our-program/application-procedures/ by May 30, 2025.



A collaboration between



Supporters

GOPHER