



Integrating Substance Use Prevention into the Every Student Succeeds Act A Step-by-Step Guide for Advocates

The nation's overarching education law, the Every Student Succeed Act (ESSA), provides a major opportunity to prevent and address use of alcohol and illicit drugs among young people. Community Catalyst and partner organizations in three states – Georgia, New Jersey and California – worked together to begin leveraging ESSA to improve student health and academic performance. This guide describes key steps and strategies that can be used in communities across the nation to advance the following goal: permanently incorporating substance use prevention and early intervention services into ESSA's non-academic school improvement activities.

Step 1: Take time to understand what is happening in your state.

- *Read your state's [ESSA profile](#).* ESSA profiles highlight the key elements of each state's ESSA plan, including chosen priorities (called [indicators](#)) and the school ranking system. This will help you identify where substance use prevention can fit into the state plan and can inform your policy priorities, messaging and campaign strategy. Most states selected chronic absenteeism as one indicator. Given the link between chronic absenteeism and substance misuse, this presents advocates with an opportunity to make the case for substance use prevention services in ESSA implementation.
- *Research the prevalence and effects of youth substance use in your state.* To make a strong argument for expanding substance use prevention and early intervention services, you will need to highlight this information. Knowing how many youth are using in your state, what age they start using, risk factors that correlate with increased use, and associated problems such as low graduation rates, will help you make the case for a specific substance use intervention. State-level data on youth substance use is available in [SAMHSA's National Survey on Drug Use and Health](#) and in the [Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System](#).
- *Conduct a school equity analysis.* Many schools [suspend or expel students](#) for substance use-related issues, undermining the goals of substance use prevention and early intervention. Overall, zero tolerance and other punitive disciplinary policies disproportionately [harm students of color](#). This prevents students of color from receiving the services they need, disrupts their engagement in school, and in many cases leads to unnecessary, avoidable involvement in the juvenile justice system. Use data from the [Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights](#) to get a better sense of what is

happening in your state and incorporate racial equity into your policy goals. It is also critical to understand how school climate influences substance use disparities among students of other marginalized identities (e.g. LGBTQ+ students and students with disabilities) and to respond accordingly.

- *Identify key decision makers and their priorities.* This may include state policymakers, such as the ESSA coordinator within the state department of education, administrators involved in drug prevention at the state's public health or human services departments, legislators serving on education or health committees, and the governor's education or health staff/advisor. Key decision makers could also include school leaders such as superintendents and principals. Once you have identified these leaders, understand their priorities, how their priorities overlap with yours, and what strategies and messaging will get them on board with your proposal.
- *Identify sustainable funding sources.* Schools can tap ESSA funds for training and implementation to finance school-based substance use prevention and early intervention services. However, many other [funding streams](#) are available. Review these opportunities and how schools can leverage them for financial sustainability.
- *Be prepared to address common concerns and show examples of success.* Each stakeholder group will voice questions and concerns. Among school leaders, common concerns include not knowing how to connect students to needed services or where to make referrals to treatment if needed. Among parents and state officials, student confidentiality is often a concern. Engage legal experts on concerns about confidentiality, and work with local recovery organizations to map out community-based referral options for each school. Develop resources to support schools in implementing Screening, Brief Intervention and Referral to Treatment (SBIRT) or other evidence-based substance use prevention programming. This can include providing best practices, helping to identify the appropriate staff to implement the programming and services, sharing information about financing options, and offering step-by-step assistance on implementation and billing. Consider sharing [successful examples](#) of [school-based SBIRT](#) in meetings with leaders or at conferences.

Step 2: Draft a roadmap toward your policy goal based on opportunities in your state or school district. Once you understand what is happening in your state and who has the power to help you reach your goal, outline steps you can take to get there. Opportunities often differ from state to state and school district to school district. A roadmap should include engagement with key stakeholders and opportunities to broaden support and build an influential coalition.

Important note: As you start engaging different stakeholder groups, your goals and the roadmap may evolve. While it's important to make space for that, having the initial goals and roadmap gives stakeholders something to respond to and can help the people you are recruiting for your coalition realize that change is possible.

All Community Catalyst partners engaged in this project were working toward permanently incorporating prevention and early intervention for substance misuse into ESSA, but identified different steps to help them get there. This included:

- *Mobilizing for state recognition of SBIRT as a best practice in school ESSA activities.* Georgians for a Healthy Future's discussions with policymakers led to the state Senate issuing a [resolution](#). This sent a signal to other state policymakers, educational officials and school stakeholders that SBIRT is worth exploring. State recognition can open the door to additional meetings with influential lawmakers and school leaders needed to implement substance use prevention via ESSA.
- *Encouraging state dissemination of guidance on SBIRT implementation* and how to embed substance use prevention into ESSA activities. Even when schools are on board with SBIRT implementation, they often have questions about how to move forward. Having the state provide resources on best practices gives schools a place to turn for support and technical assistance.
- *Encouraging the state department of education to require or recommend that schools collect substance use data* as part of ESSA needs assessment or report cards. Data can help convince school leaders and other stakeholders that substance use prevention and early intervention needs to be a priority. Data collection should include demographic characteristics to identify disparities by race, ethnicity, immigration status, ability, sexual orientation, gender identity and other social factors that are known to correlate with higher risks for substance misuse.

Step 3: Engage stakeholders and build your coalition. Be sure to engage all groups who are directly affected by youth substance use. This includes school administrators, teachers, school nurses, parent associations, student groups and others. Broad stakeholder engagement ensures you have a full understanding of how the issue affects different groups, what the opportunities are, and where you can make the biggest impact. This process can also illuminate possible stakeholder alliances, broaden support, and inform messaging and strategy.

- *Talk directly to young people.* Young people are important stakeholders in advocating for substance use prevention services and will be helpful in identifying programs that will work for them. [Meaningful youth engagement](#) gives young people the opportunity to share their stories, get invested in the work, and influence priorities and messaging. It will also help them understand the purpose of the substance use programming and be more willing to participate. Youth engagement can be done through student groups, youth-serving organizations, school surveys and focus groups.
- *Create buy-in among school leaders.* Take time to educate school leaders on why substance use prevention should be a priority. Many school leaders are not experts on mental health and substance use disorders, and Community Catalyst partners have found it important to educate school stakeholders on why substance use prevention needs to be

a priority. This has included education on why young people use substances and how substance misuse correlates with the issues schools care about, such as chronic absenteeism, violence prevention and academic achievement.

- *Identify and engage other key alliances.* This can include community recovery organizations, health centers implementing youth SBIRT and other groups.

Step 4: Develop clear messaging and mobilize stakeholders. This is essential to generate local and statewide support for substance use prevention and early intervention in ESSA implementation. Bring together the key stakeholder groups you have identified to develop talking points for key decision makers and other audiences. Create opportunities for coalition members and young people who have struggled with substance misuse to share their stories. Spreading the word about the work you are trying to accomplish can take many forms, including organizing community forums, writing op-eds, door-knocking, phone banking, social media campaigns and tabling at community events.

Step 5: Meet with decision makers and respond to their concerns. Engage directly with the people who have the power to require that schools incorporate substance use prevention into their ESSA plans. Encourage state decision makers to take action toward your policy goal, but be prepared for a long process. Decision makers will have questions, and it is unlikely you will reach common ground during the first meeting. Listen to their concerns, take time to do additional research, and be sure to follow-up with solutions.

Step 6: Engage in ongoing evaluation of your strategy. As you engage new stakeholders and meet with decision makers, you will come across unforeseen obstacles as well as new opportunities. It is important to reflect on your strategy and make needed changes.

Step 7: Support implementation. Once you have secured support, work with school districts and state education officials to ensure schools across the state have the resources they need to move forward with implementation. This requires ongoing engagement with school leaders, teachers, nurses, counselors, students and community-based organizations involved in service referrals and other stakeholders engaged in the implementation process.

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