

# Background





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## Why provide access to drinking water in schools?

Drinking water can contribute to good health, and schools are in a unique position to promote healthy, dietary behaviors, including drinking water. More than 95% of children and adolescents are enrolled in schools, and students typically spend at least 6 hours at school each day.<sup>1</sup> Ensuring that students have access to safe, free drinking water throughout the school environment gives them a healthy alternative to sugar-sweetened beverages before, during, and after school. Access to safe, free drinking water helps to increase students' overall water consumption, maintain hydration, and reduce energy intake, if substituted for sugar-sweetened beverages.<sup>2-4</sup> In addition, adequate hydration may improve cognitive function among children and adolescents, which is important for learning.<sup>5-9</sup> Drinking water, if fluoridated, also plays a role in preventing dental caries (cavities).<sup>10</sup>

## Are schools required to provide access to drinking water?

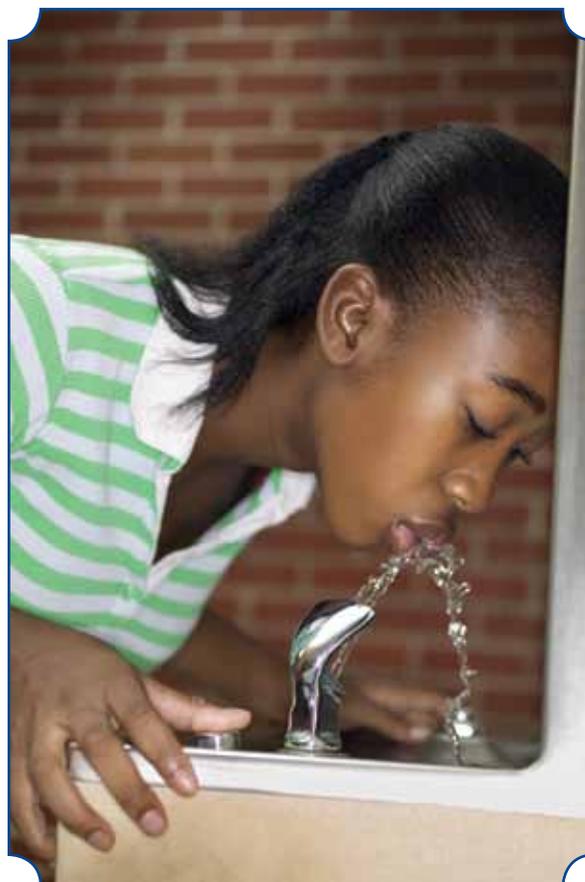
The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) requires that schools participating in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) make plain (i.e., no flavoring, additives, or carbonation) drinking water available to students at no cost during the lunch meal periods at the locations where meals are served.<sup>11</sup> Schools must also make drinking water available during the School Breakfast Program (SBP), when breakfast is served in the cafeteria. Food served during the afterschool snack service falls under the National School Lunch Program. Therefore, potable water is required to be available during the afterschool snack meal service. Water is not considered part of the reimbursable meal, and there is no separate funding for providing drinking water. Funds from the nonprofit food service account may be used to pay for some costs of providing the water, including cups and pitchers. The USDA has issued guidance on this requirement, including information on determining allowable costs.<sup>12,13</sup> Schools can consult their state education or agriculture agencies with additional questions about meeting these requirements. States, school districts, and individual schools may have additional policies and regulations requiring drinking water in schools.

## Are there recommendations for schools on providing drinking water to students?

In addition to federal requirements for providing students with access to drinking water, there are other recommendations related to water access in schools. The Institute of Medicine and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommend that plain drinking water be available throughout the school day at no cost to students, and if other beverages are available or sold during the school day, they should only include plain water (i.e., no flavoring, additives, or carbonation), fat-free or low-fat milk, and 100% fruit juice in specified portions.<sup>14,15</sup> Similar recommendations are promoted in several voluntary school recognition programs, including the Alliance for a Healthier Generation's Healthy Schools Program and USDA's Healthier US School Challenge (HUSC).<sup>16,17</sup> The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) also recommends the following: (a) Children and adolescents should be taught to drink water routinely as an initial beverage of choice as long as daily dietary caloric and other nutrient (e.g., calcium, vitamins) needs are being met; (b) Water is also generally the appropriate first choice for hydration before, during, and after most exercise regimens, and (c) Children should have free access to water, particularly during school hours.<sup>18</sup>

## The Water Access in Schools Tool Kit contains the following three major components —

1. A description of key steps schools can take to meet federal requirements for drinking water during the meal periods, as well as to make drinking water available and accessible across the school campus, including the following:
  - [Conducting a needs assessment of current drinking water policies and practices.](#)
  - [Developing a school water access plan.](#)
  - [Implementing the school water access plan.](#)
  - [Evaluating the success of the water access plan.](#)
2. [A School Drinking Water Needs Assessment Checklist and Planning Guide \(Appendix 1\)](#) to guide schools through the process of assessing current policies and practices related to water, developing and prioritizing actions to increase access to drinking water, and evaluating changes.
3. Key resources for promoting water consumption and making water more available and accessible among school settings.



## Who should use this tool kit?

This tool kit can be used by school health councils, nutrition services providers, principals, teachers, parents, and other school staff who are interested in increasing access to drinking water. In addition, other stakeholders may choose to use the tool kit, such as public health partners, community members, and university staff, to support the implementation and evaluation of these efforts among schools.