

Physical Environment

The **Physical Environment** of schools encompasses the physical conditions students experience, including both conditions of the school building and policies and procedures related to threats of physical harm. A healthy school environment protects students from contaminants, physical threats, and hazardous materials.

This analysis explores the extent to which a sample of local education agency (LEA) policies from the 2017-2018 school year, representative at the state level, addressed the physical environment. The LEAs studied are a sample of 432 agencies, spanning 19 states and the District of Columbia (hereafter “selected states”; see maps below and [Methods Appendix](#) for more details on the state selection), and include both public school districts (“districts”; n = 368) and charter LEAs (n = 64).¹

Within the Physical Environment domain, we assessed 12 topics (see [Coding Appendix](#)) for the districts and charter schools in each of the 20 states. In this brief, we present data separately for public school districts and charter LEAs.

Public School District Policies

The district sample included 368 LEAs in 20 selected states, weighted to be representative of districts at the state level. For these data, we determined the percentage of the topics addressed, on average, across the districts within each state and across all districts studied. To support easy comparisons in the comprehensiveness of district policy across states, percentages were given one of four designations: none (0%), low (< 39%), moderate (39% to < 72%), or comprehensive (\geq 72%).

Notably, this assessment does not speak to the prescriptiveness of LEA policies; policies that included firm mandates and policies that merely encouraged activity counted equally in this measure of comprehensiveness. (See [Methods Appendix](#) for more information on our coding process.)

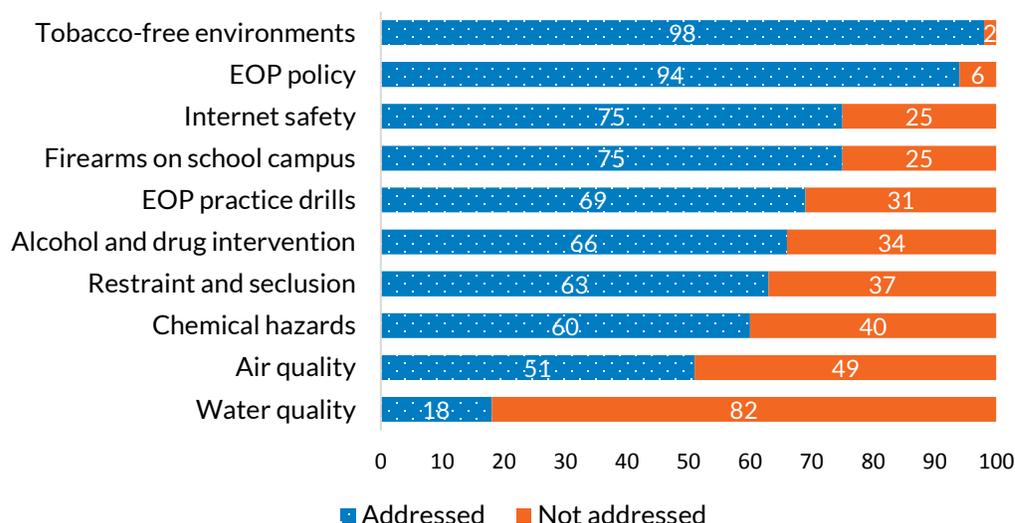
For each of the 20 states, we also present a comparison between district data and state statutes and regulations for the same 12 physical environment topics. The same categorizations of none, low, moderate, and comprehensive are used to present the state data. Note that the state data presented herein only represent a subset of the state law data compiled and presented in our companion [state law report](#) and the state law data included in the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) [State Policy Database on School Health](#).

Across the 20 states, district policies had, on average, moderate coverage of physical environment topics.

- **Districts in four states had comprehensive coverage of physical environment topics** (DC, IN, MI, NJ; range: 76% to 86%; average: 80%). Districts in 16 states had moderate coverage (range: 39% to 70%; average: 57%).
- **Although nearly all districts studied had policies addressing tobacco-free environments (98%), only 12 percent included all federally recommended components of tobacco-free schools** (see Figure 1). Federal guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention include providing for smoking cessation programs for students, among other recommendations.²

- **Nearly all districts studied required schools to adopt an emergency operations plan (94%).** An emergency operations plan establishes how a school will respond to a crisis situation. Fifty percent of districts both required a plan and included provisions for regular updates to procedures and policies.
- **Two-thirds of districts analyzed (69%) had policies detailing multi-hazard practice drills such as fire, lockdown, active shooter, and/or evacuation drills.** Two in five districts (38%) further required coordination with first responders as part of their drills.
- **Over half (54%) of districts studied required implementation of an alcohol and drug referral, intervention, or treatment program for students with an identified substance abuse disorder.** Another 12 percent of districts encouraged such programs for students. Schools can be an important setting for drug- and alcohol-based interventions, and increased attention has been given to strategies that work with students of different ages.³
- **Although chemical hazards and air quality were addressed in 60 and 51 percent of districts, respectively, only 18 percent of districts analyzed addressed water quality in schools.** Research shows that hydration is an important aspect of good nutrition,⁴ so it is vital that the water to which children have access is clean, potable, and contaminant-free.

Figure 1. Percent of public school districts in 20 states covering selected physical environment topics in policy



State law was similar to or more comprehensive on physical environment topics than district policies in 19 of the 20 states.

- **For half of states (10 of 20), state laws were more comprehensive than the district policies, on average, in those states (see Figures 2a and 2b).** Nine of the states had similar coverage of physical environment topics. District policies in just one state (South Carolina) were more comprehensive than the state laws.
- **Certain topics have nearly universal attention in state laws and district policies in the 20 states.** Nearly all states (95%) and districts within the 20 states (98%) addressed providing a tobacco-free environment in schools/on school campuses. In addition, most states (90%) and districts (94%) addressed having an emergency operations plan.

Figure 2a and 2b. State law (left) and public school district (right) comprehensiveness of physical environment topics in policy.



These maps show the proportion of states (left panel) and districts (right panel) in each of the 20 selected states that have [■] **comprehensive** (state panel: 14; district panel: 4), [▲] **moderate** (state panel: 5; district panel: 16), [●] **low** (state panel: 1; district panel: 0), or [-] **no** (state panel: 0; district panel: 0) coverage of physical environment topics in state and district policies, respectively. For this report, only the 20 states represented with colored squares were studied (at the state and district levels); states shown in gray were excluded from this analysis.

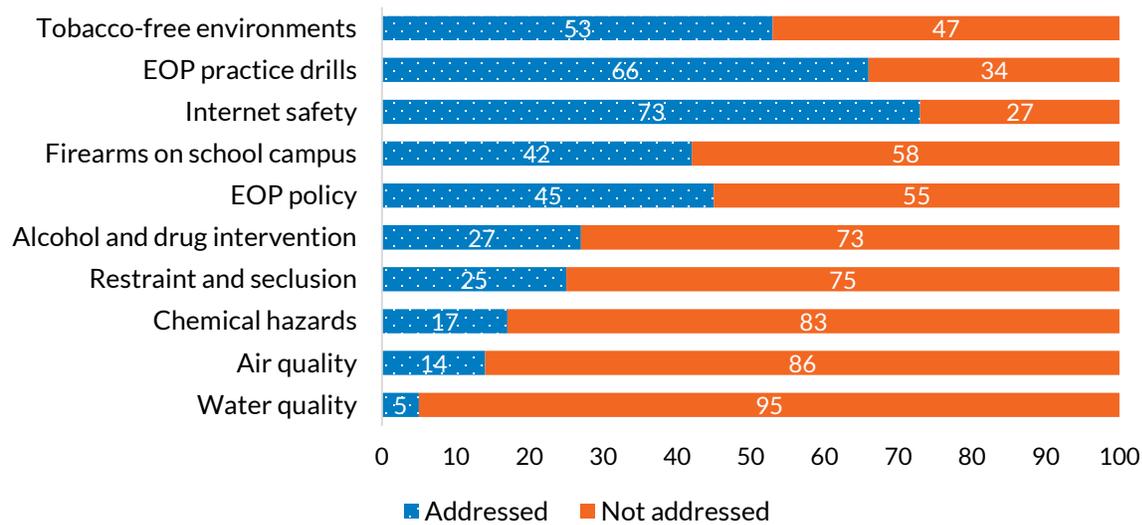
Charter LEA Policies

We also collected policies for a sample of 64 charter LEAs across the 20 selected states. Depending on the structure of charter LEAs in a given state, such policies may be applicable for a single school or for multiple schools run by the same charter provider. Charter policies often addressed different aspects of the physical environment when compared to district policies. Because the number of charter policies collected in a single state was often small (proportionate to their representation across all LEAs in the state), we chose to look across the full sample of charter schools rather than make generalizations at the state level.

Fewer charter LEAs addressed physical environment topics compared to public school districts across the 20 states.

- **Of all physical environment topics, the charter LEAs studied most often addressed internet safety** (see Figure 3). Almost three-quarters (73%) of charter schools addressed internet use policies or provide instruction on internet safety.
- **Charter LEAs in the 20 states addressed alcohol and drug intervention less often in their policies than their district counterparts.** Close to three-quarters of charter LEAs (73%) did not address intervention practices for students with substance abuse issues.
- **Sixty-six percent of charter LEAs addressed emergency practice drills in their policies.** Even fewer (45%) charter LEAs addressed emergency operations plans.

Figure 3. Percent of sampled charter LEAs covering selected physical environment topics in written policy.



The Institute for Health Research and Policy at the University of Illinois at Chicago, in partnership with Child Trends, examined the extent to which 11 healthy schools domains are addressed in local education policies across 20 strategically selected states (including 19 states and the District of Columbia; see Methods section for details on the sampling methodology). These domains include the 10 components of the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) model: Health Education; Physical Education and Physical Activity; Nutrition Environment and Services; Health Services; Counseling, Psychological, and Social Services; Social and Emotional Climate; Physical Environment; Employee Wellness; Family Engagement; and Community Involvement. An additional domain, WSCC References, addresses the extent to which district policies include explicit references to the WSCC model, or similar language such as the Centers for Disease Control and Preventions’ Coordinated School Health model. Sub-briefs covering the other domains can be found at <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/the-current-landscape-of-school-district-and-charter-policies-that-support-healthy-schools>.

¹ For purposes of this work, a charter LEA is an LEA listed in the U.S. Department of Education’s Common Core of Data (SY 2014-15) as an “Independent Charter District.”

² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Guidelines for school health programs to prevent tobacco use and addiction. (1994). *MMWR Morbidity and Mortal Weekly Report*. 43(RR-2);1–18. Retrieved: <http://www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/tobacco/guidelines/index.htm>.

³ Stigler M.H., Neusel E., Perry C.L. (2011). School-Based Programs to Prevent and Reduce Alcohol Use Among Youth. *Alcohol Research & Health*. 34(2). Retrieved from: <https://pubs.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/arh342/157-162.htm>.

⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2014). Increasing Access to Drinking Water in Schools. Atlanta GA: US Dept. of Health and Human Services.