

PLANNING AHEAD

Sustainability guide for school-based health centers

What is a school-based health center?

School-based health centers (SBHCs) are an evidence-driven strategy that brings health care to where our youngest Ohioans spend most of their time — school.

SBHCs are created through a partnership between a school and a community healthcare provider to provide access to, at minimum, comprehensive primary care services to students on a school campus. The healthcare provider (also referred to as SBHC operator) runs the day-to-day operations of the SBHC.

In addition to providing comprehensive primary care services, SBHCs often provide behavioral, oral, and vision health services, as well as care coordination, social services, and other wraparound supports.

Why do SBHCs face sustainability challenges?

SBHCs have a proven impact on student health, well-being, and academic success. However, sustaining that impact means navigating a complex and often challenging environment marked by funding gaps, operational hurdles, shifting policy conditions, and the demands of cross-sector collaboration. Key challenges SBHCs face are outlined below and grouped into four core sustainability categories:



Operational capacity

- **Case management burden** — Many SBHCs serve students from communities with high rates of uninsured or underinsured youth and complex health needs. This increases demands on providers to assist students with enrollment, care coordination, insurance navigation, and follow-up.
- **Visit volume** — SBHC visits are often longer when younger students are seen without a parent/guardian present. Scheduling must also align with academic calendars and minimize classroom disruptions, while limited physical space —such as fewer exam rooms or beds— further constrains daily visit capacity.
- **Workforce capacity** — Many SBHCs struggle to recruit and retain qualified providers— especially in rural or underserved areas—due to limited funding for competitive salaries, professional isolation, and part-time service models.



Together, these challenges strain staff capacity, limit the availability of services, and make it difficult to maintain consistent, high-quality care. Reduced visit volume also impacts revenue potential, further affecting overall sustainability.



Financial model and revenue

- **Reimbursement** — SBHCs provide many essential services that are not fully reimbursed, including care coordination, case management, social needs screening, and other wraparound supports.
- **Funding structure** — Billing revenue alone is often insufficient—particularly in the first 3–5 years—to fully support the SBHC model. Long-term sustainability typically requires managing multiple funding streams, including grants, contracts, philanthropy, or support from partner organizations.



These financial constraints limit revenue generation, threaten financial stability, and hinder the ability to grow or sustain services over time.



Partnership and community engagement

- **Collaboration dynamics** — Strong SBHC-school partnerships rely on trust, communication, and adaptability. Maintaining support takes ongoing effort and can be challenged by leadership turnover and shifting school priorities.
- **Community awareness and utilization** — Even when services exist, families may not understand the role of SBHCs or how to access them. This is especially true when trust in the healthcare system is low or outreach is limited.



Without strong partnerships and community engagement, SBHCs risk underutilization, weakened school integration, and loss of stakeholder support.



Systems and accountability

- **Regulatory complexity** — SBHCs operate within both educational and healthcare systems, requiring navigation of overlapping laws like HIPAA and FERPA.
- **Data and evaluation** — SBHCs often lack the infrastructure, staff time, or tools to collect and analyze data that demonstrate impact, guide quality improvement, and support funding or policy advocacy.



Challenges to integrate systems and collect and analyze data make it harder to operate efficiently, demonstrate impact, and advocate for sustained investment.



Sustainability Planning Tool

Sustaining an SBHC requires proactive planning. This **Sustainability Planning Tool** is designed to support that effort. The Tool is divided into two sections: **Assessment** and **Action plan**. The Assessment provides a structured way to assess your SBHC's strengths and challenges across the four core sustainability categories. For each category, use the guiding questions and evaluation criteria to identify your SBHC's key gaps, needs, and opportunities for action. The embedded sustainability tips in the Assessment section offer best practice strategies to consider as you build your action plan.

Once the assessment is complete, transition to the Action Plan to document specific next steps, responsible parties, and timelines.



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