



**Safe**  
Schools  
**Healthy**  
Students

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# Conducting a Needs Assessment and Environmental Scan for a Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative in Your School and Community

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Part of the SS/HS Framework Implementation Toolkit

1. Plan

2. Implement

3. Sustain & Expand



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# Needs Assessment & Environmental Scan

## The Safe Schools/Healthy Students Way

### History of the Initiative



In 1999, the U.S. Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, and Justice embarked on a unique and unprecedented collaboration, creating the Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative (SS/HS) in response to rising concerns about youth violence, substance abuse, and school safety. The designers of the original Federal grant program recognized that violence among young people is caused by a multitude of factors—including early childhood experiences, family life, mental health, and substance use issues. No single action can be counted on to prevent it. Therefore, the three federal agencies worked together, pooled their resources, and established a program that funded communities across the country to implement a comprehensive approach to mental health promotion and youth violence prevention. To date, more than 13 million students in almost 400 communities from all 50 states have benefited from a SS/HS initiative.

In each of these communities, agencies and organizations from education, law enforcement, juvenile justice, and mental health came together to address these underlying causes of youth violence. Over the years, these collaborations have achieved some dramatic results. A [comprehensive evaluation](#) of some of the initial SS/HS communities reported that more than 90 percent of school staff saw a reduction of violence on school grounds and nearly 80 percent said that SS/HS had reduced violence in their communities.

### The SS/HS Framework

With continued support from the Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) over the past decade and a half, the SS/HS approach has been refined, expanded, and improved. The collective experience of SS/HS communities is best represented by the [SS/HS framework](#), a simple delta that captures the essence of the SS/HS way. As a delta represents change, the SS/HS framework represents an approach to mental health promotion and youth violence prevention that creates the conditions for change in your community. If the iconic schoolhouse that serves as the logo of the SS/HS initiative represents *where* we do our work, the delta of the SS/HS framework represents *how* we do it.



The SS/HS framework is made up of three parts—elements, strategic approaches, and guiding principles. **Elements** are the essential goals of a SS/HS initiative, what we are trying to accomplish:

- Promoting early childhood social & emotional learning & development
- Promoting mental, emotional & behavioral health
- Connecting families, schools & communities
- Preventing behavioral health problems
- Creating safe & violence-free schools

**Strategic approaches** provide the ways or methods for our agencies and organizations to work together, as partners, to accomplish the work of a SS/HS initiative:

- Collaboration & partnerships

- Technology
- Policy change & development
- Capacity building
- Systemic change & integration.

**Guiding principles** permeate the elements and approaches. Like values, they guide our work on a SS/HS initiative:

- Cultural and linguistic competency
- Serving vulnerable and at-risk populations
- Developmentally appropriate.
- Resource leveraging
- Sustainability
- Youth guided and family driven
- Evidence-based interventions.

### **The Crux of It All: Partnerships**

A SS/HS initiative only works when a community comes together. The SS/HS framework helps create the conditions for change, but *collaboration with partners* makes change happen. Many SS/HS communities report that—in addition to making their schools safer and their students healthier—the most important outcome of their SS/HS initiative has been the partnerships. When a school system joins forces with mental health providers and then get child welfare, juvenile justice, and law enforcement on board, remarkable things happen. When faith communities, businesses, and civic organizations join the movement, the remarkable becomes the substantial. And when families and youth join the initiative, substantial becomes stellar. Most SS/HS communities will tell you: a SS/HS initiative works best when families and youth are included in all aspects of the initiative. They express the diversity of voices within the community. They inform and improve the planning and delivery of programs and services. And they ultimately become our biggest advocates.

## **The SS/HS Framework Implementation Toolkit**

This Implementation Guide is part of a comprehensive toolkit designed to help you implement the SS/HS framework in your community. The Framework Implementation Toolkit, or Toolkit, is divided into three sections, defined by the phase of the initiative—planning, implementation, and sustainability and expansion. For each phase, we provide you with a how-to guide like this one as well as the many workbooks, worksheets, and online training courses that were developed for the SS/HS communities. Because most of the resources in this Toolkit were developed for the communities that were funded by the SS/HS grant program, they are often in-depth, detailed, and structured around mandatory requirements of the grant program. We ask you to keep this in mind as you use these supplemental resources because, at times, they may feel overwhelming. But we recommend that you use what you can and leave the rest for others to use.

### **Who Should Use this Toolkit**

This toolkit has been developed for the leaders and staff of local educational agencies—a city, county or regional school system or a single school or cluster of schools. As the name implied, Safe Schools is about creating safer environments for students to learn and excel in. But if the school or school system is the hub, then the community is its spokes and rims to make the wheel turn. As noted, a SS/HS initiative only succeeds when a community works together. Therefore, this toolkit is designed to be accessible to the leaders and staff members of partner agencies who can also lead a SS/HS initiative. The many community leaders, staff members, federal employees, policy makers, and families and youth that make up the SS/HS community wish you well in this most important work.

# I. Why Conduct a Needs Assessment and Environmental Scan?

This Guide has been prepared to supplement the comprehensive planning process outlined in the [Planning a Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative in Your School and Community](#) guide. It offers a more in-depth look at conducting two important activities in planning a SS/HS initiative for your school or community.

A needs assessment is a planned and purposeful process of gathering, analyzing, and reporting current data and information about the characteristics and needs of children, youth, and families in your schools and community. An environmental scan will identify existing resources, services and systems, and programs that serve children, youth, and families at the community and state level. Together, a needs assessment and an environmental scan will help you better understand the needs of the children, youth, and families in your schools and communities as well as the current resources and services available to them. The findings will help inform your policy and program decision-making and help you see how your gaps in services, resources, and practices compare with other jurisdictions in your region or state. The needs assessment and environmental scan process will also provide your team with an opportunity to communicate with important stakeholders, which helps to ensure that there is broad representation of the current work in mental health promotion and youth violence prevention that is taking place in your community.

*Benefits of Conducting a Needs Assessment and Environmental Scan*

- ✓ Improve the alignment, integration, and effectiveness of systems level efforts;
- ✓ Identify gaps in existing services and assess resource capacity;
- ✓ Identify risk and protective factors;
- ✓ Strengthen existing partnerships and identify new and expanded opportunities for local- and state-level organization partnerships;
- ✓ Build support between program partners and other public and private sector partners; and
- ✓ Engage key stakeholders, including families and youth, that reflect the diversity of populations at the community and, if applicable, the state level.

In Figure 1, we diagram how the needs assessment and the environmental scan support the comprehensive plan. In the following sections, we provide specific recommendations for how to conduct a needs assessment and an environmental scan. In Appendix A, we include a version of this diagram with examples. In Appendix B, we include a template for documenting the data gathered during a needs assessment and environmental scan, and in Appendix C, we review some of the models that inform a needs assessment and environmental scan.

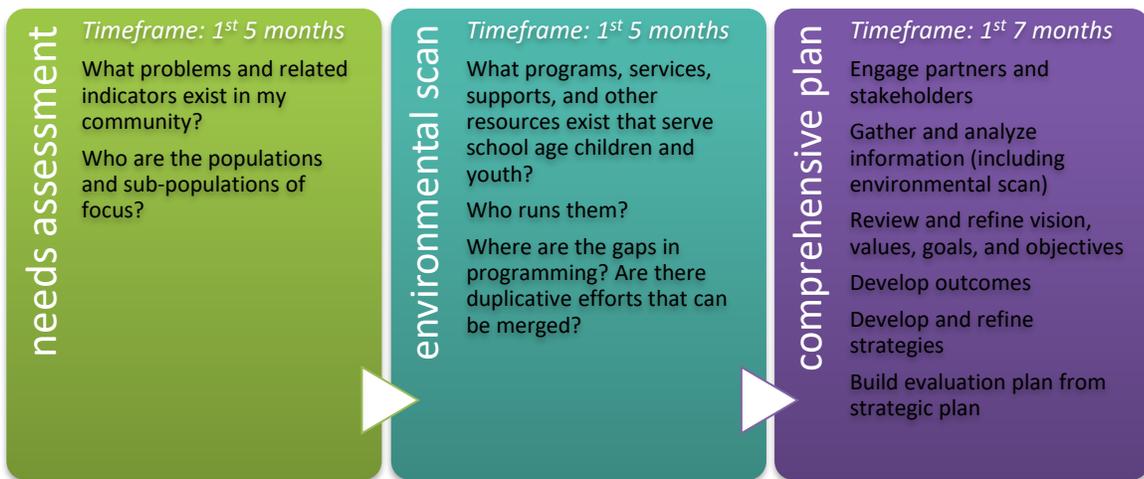


Figure 1: Linking the Needs Assessments, Environmental Scan and Comprehensive Plan  
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# III. Conducting the Needs Assessment

## Overview of the Needs Assessment Process

Conducting a needs assessment should be a collaborative effort with your stakeholders as you:

- Compile data on the risk and protective factors related to each of the five SS/HS Elements.
- Define the populations of focus and sub-populations.
- Select at least one indicator for each of the five SS/HS Elements, and locate data sources for each of the indicators.

## Focusing on Populations and Subpopulations

The needs assessment should focus on your populations and subpopulations of focus for your initiative. The populations of focus refer to the group of children and youth identified as the intended recipients of resources and services. For example, the population of focus for Head Start services would include preschool-aged children (3 to 5 years old).

Because it is important to address behavioral health disparities in your work, the needs assessment should also focus on subpopulations that are disproportionately affected by violence within the target population. For example, the SS/HS initiative in Vermont focused on Somali children and families as a sub-population because of their greater need.

## Compiling Data on Risk and Protective Factors and Assets

Risk factors are a measurable characteristic that can be associated with a negative problematic outcome. Risk factors can occur on multiple levels, including biological, psychological, family, community, and cultural levels. We have provided some examples in the sidebar.

Protective factors are resources within the individual, family, or community that are associated with a lower likelihood of negative problematic outcomes. They reduce the negative impact of a risk factor on a problem outcome. We have provided some examples in the sidebar.

Related to protective factors are assets. Assets are a useful or valuable quality, person, or thing that can provide an advantage or a resource to a population or subpopulation. They can include individuals with useful skills and talents, experiences of community members, or individual businesses and home-based enterprises. Assets can also include civic and business associations and cultural and faith-based organizations can be assets. Public, private and nonprofit organizations like institutions of higher education, hospitals and social services agencies, public schools, police and fire departments, libraries, and parks and recreation are other notable assets. Physical assets can include vacant land, commercial and industrial structures, housing, energy and waste resources,

### *Some Risk Factors Related to Children, Youth, and Families*

- ✓ Victimization
- ✓ Bullying
- ✓ Academic failure
- ✓ Aggressive and antisocial behavior
- ✓ School and neighborhood violence and crime
- ✓ High number of teen pregnancy
- ✓ Alcohol and drug abuse
- ✓ High poverty neighborhoods
- ✓ Family conflict
- ✓ Child abuse and maltreatment
- ✓ Low attachment to school

### *Some Protective Factors Related to Children, Youth, and Families*

- ✓ Meaningful participation of many diverse stakeholders with their own strengths, interests, and different levels of experience.
- ✓ Positive and supportive relationships with peers, adults, and family
- ✓ Adequate social supports
- ✓ Access to mentors
- ✓ Access to a quality education
- ✓ Supports for early learning
- ✓ Feeling safe in the neighborhood and at school
- ✓ Healthy social and economic environments
- ✓ Supportive relationships with family members
- ✓ High academic skills
- ✓ Individual emotional resilience

community bulletin boards, and community meeting spaces. Finally, some assets “intangibles” could include community reputation, community pride, and a sense of history.

When conducting a needs assessment, determining risk and protective factors as well as assets will help you identify gaps in services and systems. It is also important to align your assessment of risk and protective factors with the population identified in the indicator. For example, if the indicator is the percentage of high school students that report feeling sad, the needs assessment should focus on students in grades 9-12.

As you do the needs assessment, be sure to review a variety of data sources from a variety of systems (e.g. mental health, juvenile justice, child welfare) to ensure that you have a comprehensive view of the needs in your school and community. In addition to reviewing quantitative data, it is important to review qualitative data related to the risk and protective factors, and community needs. If this data does not exist for your community, you may want to consider hosting a focus group with a variety of community stakeholders (e.g. families, students, health, mental health, juvenile justice, education, advocates, community and religious leaders) to obtain their perspective on your school and community needs.

**Selecting the Indicators**

Indicators—also known as performance objectives or performance targets—are an important way to help you plan, implement, and evaluate your SS/HS initiative. They identify priorities, articulate benchmarks, and help track progress. Your indicators can also help you build awareness of problems and trends, help you inform and educate policymakers and policy, and support accountability to funders and stakeholders. SS/HS communities used at least one indicator for each of the five elements to help them determine the success of their programs and services. We would recommend this approach, particularly if you are planning to implement programs and services in more than one school or community. The table below offers some of the indicators used by the SS/HS communities funded by the Federal program.

**Table 1: SS/HS Element Shared Indicators**

<i>SS/HS Elements</i>	<i>Indicators</i>
1. Promoting Early Childhood Social and Emotional Learning and Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Number and rate of children enrolled in early childhood education programs.</li> </ul>
2. Promoting Mental, Emotional, and Behavioral Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Total number of students who received school-based mental health services.</li> <li>Percentage of mental health service referrals for students which resulted in mental health services being provided in the community.</li> </ul>
3. Connecting Families, Schools, and Communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Number of families involved in school or community based programs that support student development and achievement.</li> <li>Number of school, community, and family initiatives that promote safe student academic, recreational, and social environments.</li> </ul>
4. Preventing Behavioral Health Problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Percentage of students who report consuming alcohol on one or more occasions during the past 30 days.</li> </ul>
5. Creating Safe and Violence-Free Schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Percentage of students who reported being in a physical fight on school property during the current school year.</li> <li>Percentage of students who did not go to school on one or more days during the past 30 days because they felt unsafe at school or on their way to and from school.</li> </ul>

## Identifying the Data Sources for the Shared Indicators

Data are either quantitative or qualitative. Quantitative data sources are numbers, rates, and statistics and include both primary and secondary sources. Qualitative data refer to information gathered through focus groups, interviews, and observations. In conducting the needs assessment, the data source must be tied to the selected indicator. A data source for each of the shared indicators must be identified. For example, the most recent Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS) survey would be a good data source for indicators on adolescent substance use.

## IV. Conducting the Environmental Scan

### Overview of the Environmental Scan Process

After gathering data for the needs assessment, the environmental scan will help your team determine the types of resources that are currently addressing the needs of your population and subpopulation of focus. As with your needs assessment, your environmental scan should identify the existing resources within your community that address the indicators for the population and subpopulations of focus. The sidebar identifies the key steps in conducting an environmental scan, and the following subsections briefly outline the primary activities in these steps.

*Key Steps in an Environmental Scan*

- ✓ Document existing resources, services and systems
- ✓ Describe funding streams supporting the existing resources
- ✓ Identify existing policies and procedures
- ✓ Identify technology resources
- ✓ Describe systems change and integration activities.

SS/HS communities found it important to use multiple methods of scanning the environment to get a true picture of the availability of existing resources. Not all methods will yield accurate or complete results. A combination of the following methods may be helpful:

- Direct observation
- Questionnaires
- Consultation with people in key positions or with specific knowledge
- Review of relevant policies
- Interviews
- Focus groups

You may want to consult an evaluator before and during your environmental scan to obtain guidance on the best ways to conduct the scan and how to interpret and report the data you obtain

### Documenting Existing Resources, Services, and Systems

The first step of the environmental scan is to document the current resources, services, and systems (infrastructure) that address the shared indicators. This step should include documenting existing partnerships, work groups, and task forces devoted to addressing the issues. For example, if the shared indicator addresses early childhood development, list the resources that support early childhood development such as Head Start or the “Parents as Teachers” program. Record the focus or purpose of the resource, for example, the purpose of the Early Head Start program is to help young children develop social skills so they will be ready to learn at school. Also, document who is responsible for providing the resource or service (e.g., “the Early Head Start program is provided by the YMCA.”).

## Describing the Existing Funding Streams

In addition to mapping out the systems and programs in place *prior* to the start of your new program, the environmental scan also should include a description of the various funding streams that support programs and services implemented to address needs highlighted by the shared indicators. For example, if the state receives \$800,000 annually from SAMHSA’s Project LAUNCH grant to support early childhood and a portion of those funds are used to enhance early childhood education programs to address a shared indicator for school readiness, document this information in your environmental scan. Likewise, if a school received \$50,000 from a local community foundation to support programs related to the same shared indicator, document this information. Also, consider including in-kind resources, such as a community space provided by a partner for program service delivery, in your description of funding streams.

## Identifying Existing Policies and Procedures

Use the environmental scan process to assess existing policies and procedures in place to address a shared indicator. For example, if you are including Element 1 (Promoting Early Childhood Social and Emotional Learning and Development) of the SS/HS Framework in your initiative, then you should list policies in place related to screening and school readiness that the Early Head Start program follows. Or, if the shared indicator is under Element 5 (Creating Safe and Violence Free Schools) of the Framework and the service offered via School Resource Officers (SROs), then indicate how local law enforcement agencies require annual training for SROs to ensure best practices in school discipline are used in schools at all time. This process will help to identify any gaps in strategies and policies and eventually develop an approach (or revise an existing one).

## Identifying Technology Resources

It is important to identify the technology resources currently used to address the shared indicators within existing programs and systems. List applicable databases and electronic records that are shared by your community collaborative. Technology resources can be both traditional systems as well as innovative systems such as a web-based bullying reporting system for schools that is shared with local law enforcement agencies, or a simple text messaging campaign that offers positive parenting tips to parents of young children. Of course, make sure that the identified technology resource is relevant to the shared indicator, population of focus, and existing resource or service.

## Describing Systems Change and Integration Activities

The last step in the environmental scan process is to document the current systems change and integration activities related to the indicators and the resources or existing service. Include examples of collaborations and activities with organizations that address the indicators from different vantage points. An example could be the development of a shared funding stream between the school district and the community mental health agency to provide school-based mental health services in all middle schools.

### *Environmental Scan Supports Partnerships*

The environmental scan process provides your community collaborative with an opportunity to engage in active partnership and collaboration with numerous stakeholders throughout various systems in your community. It is important to obtain varied perspectives throughout this process to determine the needs, strengths, and gaps in your community. During your discussions with stakeholders, use the “Four Simple Questions” developed by the IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Act) Partnership to guide your discussions:

- ✓ Who cares about this issue and why?
- ✓ What work is already underway separately?
- ✓ What shared work could unite us?
- ✓ How can we deepen our connections?

## V. Analyzing the Needs and Gaps in Resources

The last step of the needs assessment and environmental scanning process is to assess gaps in services and infrastructure. In this important step, you should indicate where and how services related to the shared indicators can be created or enhanced. With the gaps analysis, you will need to assess what types of systems or infrastructure developments are needed to address the shared indicators.

After the needs assessment and environmental scanning process have been completed, your community collaborative should be well-positioned for critical, strategic analysis. During this analysis, use the SS/HS Framework to review and consider any conclusions that may be drawn and how those conclusions can inform planning. These conclusions will also inform the development of a comprehensive plan that is based on a strong understanding of where the project began.

To help with your analysis as you further develop your comprehensive plan, consider the following questions:

- What needs of children and youth are going unmet;
- What available programs, supports, and services are designed to meet these needs;
- Are there any major problems not being addressed by a service, program, or activity;
- Are the children and youth at greatest risk receiving prevention programs, services, and supports? If not, why not;
- Are there duplicative services, programs, and supports attempting to address the same problem? If so, which are more effective and which are less so;
- Are those who are implementing the separate programs coordinating their efforts in any way;
- Are there documented policies and procedures for addressing behavioral health disparities; and
- Is there a blending of funding across these various programs and efforts?

Addressing these concerns will help you organize the data from the needs assessment and environmental scan. Having a complete understanding of the needs and resources in your community will lead to greater clarity about where the gaps and the most critical unmet needs exist. In addition, this process will highlight ways in which service delivery, policies, and funding structures can be improved.

## VI. Next Steps

This Guide, and the other guides and resources in the [SS/HS Framework Implementation Toolkit](#), represent the experience and lessons learned of the coordinators and managers of the SS/HS communities as well as the Federal and TA staff members. We trust that you will take advantage of the collective wisdom represented in this resource, so you and your community can plan, implement, and sustain an initiative that supports schools and communities in creating safe, healthy and productive schools in which students can learn and grow into healthy and contributing adults.

We invite you review and us the other Guides in this Toolkit:

- [Planning a SS/HS Initiative in Your School and Community](#)
- [Coordinator’s Guide: Managing a SS/HS Initiative](#)
- [Implementing a SS/HS Initiative in Your School and Community](#)
- [Sustaining & Expanding a SS/HS Initiative in Your School and Community with Support from the State](#)

Each Guide includes examples and recommendations. We also feature additional resources—including checklists and online training modules—on the [SS/HS Framework Implementation Toolkit](#) website.



## APPENDIX A: Linking Needs Assessments and Environmental Scan with the Comprehensive Plan

### needs assessment

*Timeframe: First 5 months*

**What problems and related indicators exist in my community?**

**Who are the populations and sub-populations of focus?**

Examples:

*Young children do not enter school ready to learn.*

*School-based mental health services are not currently addressed.*

*Substance abuse prevention programming in schools is not evidence-based.*

*Access to school and community behavioral health programs is lacking in many communities.*

*Low income families in the community are not participating in parenting programs.*

### environmental scan

*Timeframe: First 5 months*

**What programs, services, supports, and other resources exist that serve school age children and youth?**

**Who runs them?**

**Where are the gaps in programming? Are there duplicative efforts that can be merged?**

Examples:

*Early Head Start has been in place for two decades and is run through the county department of education; not all eligible children are enrolled.*

*The school is ideally positioned to expand curriculum to include classes on marijuana use prevention, but funding has not been available.*

*Some schools are creating programs to provide classroom management coaches to teachers.*

*Families have not been consulted during program design, implementation, or evaluation.*

### comprehensive plan

*Timeframe: First 7 months*

**Engage partners and stakeholders**

**Gather and analyze information (including environmental scan)**

**Review and refine vision, values, goals, and objectives**

**Develop outcomes**

**Develop and refine strategies**

**Build evaluation plan from strategic plan**

Examples:

*Engage partners to lead efforts to address Early Head Start program enrollment efforts.*

*Develop and implement work force development initiative to train teachers and direct service providers in healthy social, emotional, and behavioral development of young children.*

*Charge partners to identify regulatory, practice, and policy reforms that would support school based mental health services.*

*Include family and youth representative as community partners.*





## Appendix C: Theoretical Models That Inform Needs Assessments & Environmental Scans

The 2009 Institute of Medicine (IOM) report, [\*Preventing Mental, Emotional and Behavioral Health Disorders Among Young People\*](#), emphasized the need for a public health approach and the need for development of prevention infrastructure in states and communities. Developing this infrastructure requires that state and local communities become familiar with, adopt, and implement a framework that will guide their work. In most widely recognized public health models, a series of action steps are necessary. Shown below, the Public Health Wheel shows the action steps that address three core functions of a public health approach: assessment, policy development, and assurance.

*Health further* builds upon the prevention focus of the IOM report, making the case for promotion and providing modifications to the three core functions of the public health wheel by adapting it to incorporate a special focus on children’s mental health and well-being. This public health conceptual framework, often referred to as the “Georgetown Conceptual Framework,” includes a strong focus on promotion as well as prevention and integrates values and principles that infuse concepts central to public health as well as systems of care, including the following:

- Taking a population focus, with an emphasis on the overall health of *all* children. Data needs to be implemented and sustained effectively for entire populations.
- Placing greater emphasis on creating environments that promote and support optimal behavioral health and on developing skills that enhance resilience.
- Striving to optimize mental health for *every* child.
- Working collaboratively across a broad range of systems and sectors, from the child mental health care system, to the public health system, and all other systems (education, child welfare and juvenile justice) and structures that impact children’s well-being.
- Adapting the implementation to local contexts—taking local needs and strengths into consideration when implementing the framework.

SS/HS communities identified other public health frameworks that provide structure and tools to support the SS/HS strategy. Listed below are several approaches that may be helpful:

- [Strategic Prevention Framework](#)
- [PROSPER: Promoting School-community-university Partnerships to Enhance Resilience](#)
- [Communities that Care](#)
- [Collective Impact](#)

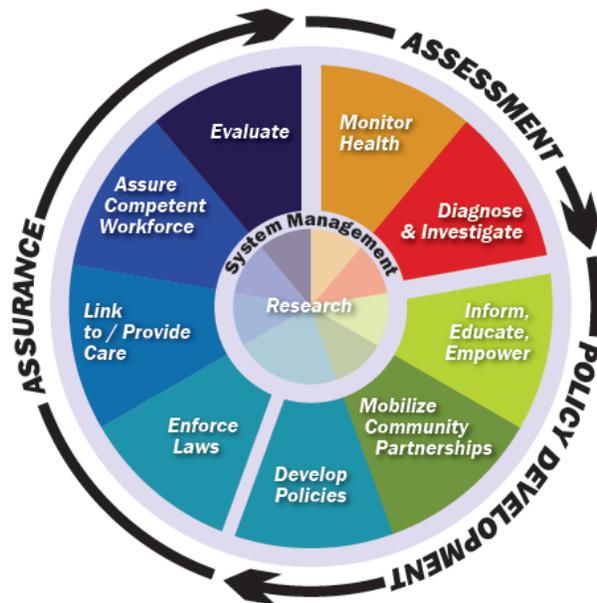


Figure 1: The Public Health Wheel