Remarks by Rochelle Davis

Feb. 8, 2023 | UCLA Center for the Transformation of Schools presents “Our Children Can’t Wait” Webinar featuring several contributing authors to “Our Children Can’t Wait: The Urgency of Reinventing Education Policy in America” (Teachers College Press).

HSC founder, Rochelle Davis, spoke about the connection between health and learning, the focus of Chapter 7 co-written with Alex Mays, HSC’s former senior national program director. Their related interview on “Making Schools Healthier Places for Learning” is available on Apple Podcasts and Spotify.

At Healthy Schools Campaign, we have never met a teacher, principal or school administrator who was not acutely aware of the relationship between health and student performance.

Each morning, as children enter thousands of classrooms across the country, schools are expected to deliver on the promise that a quality education will lead to a productive, prosperous life. Teachers work hard to share lessons and build the knowledge, skills and habits that will help students succeed beyond the classroom.

Meanwhile, the healthcare needs of our nation’s youth are becoming more complex, and chronic diseases among children are increasing. We are also acutely aware of the growing mental health crisis among young people.

On top of all this, school environments often do not provide conditions that support health. In fact, millions of students — with and without health conditions — do not attend schools that support their health and well-being.

They do not have the opportunity to engage in physical activity during the day, which has been shown to increase school performance, and their school buildings may lack healthy air and access to fresh water, nutritious food and/or a school nurse or social worker. Many of these children also live in communities that lack healthy opportunities to learn, play and grow.
Research shows that higher levels of achievement are often related to health — and that health problems are closely connected to hindered performance. Many students have one or more health issues that undermine their ability to focus in school — or even attend school. Until we address the health disparities that many low-income children and children of color face, learning disparities will persist.

While the pandemic called attention to student health and wellness needs, these are not new problems; they just became more apparent. Recognizing the role that health plays in students’ ability to learn and thrive, and integrating this into the scope of educational priorities, can be a catalyst to address the opportunity gaps faced by so many children of color.

Healthy Schools Campaign approaches this effort with two decades of experience working on the ground in Chicago schools with parents, teachers, school nurses and students. The lessons learned inform our national policy work.

What we know from these efforts is that there are many school-level interventions that can successfully promote health and wellness. The challenge has been prioritizing these programs, fully integrating them into the school setting, and successfully sustaining and scaling them.

Some of the challenges to scaling and sustaining these programs are:

- Misalignment with accountability systems
- Lack of agency by school staff
- Fragmented policies and programs
- Wrong pocket problem
- Data sharing challenges

My co-author, Alex Mays, and I have identified six areas of change essential to ensuring all students and staff have the opportunity to learn and work in a healthy school environment:

1. **Education accountability and improvement systems must include health and wellness measures.**
   What gets measured gets done. Chronic absenteeism and school climate are two measures that have gained some popularity for inclusion.

2. **School staff training and supports must include a focus on health.**
   While more schools understand the importance of student health and well-being, school staff often lack the knowledge and skills to support a healthy learning environment. Staff need preparation — both pre-service and in-service — and resources to understand how they can address student health and promote a healthier school environment.

3. **Make health data available to inform decision-making.**
   Ensuring states, school districts and schools have access to health data can help ensure health and wellness are prioritized — and that school staff understand the issues impacting their school community.
For example, health data can be integrated into school-level needs assessments, and school improvement planning, to ensure resources are directed to students whose health issues are affecting their ability to learn.

In addition, health data can guide efforts connecting students and their families with wraparound services and supports, including access to meals, health care and housing.

Here’s one example: In the D.C. area, a number of agencies agreed to share and combine data to develop a more complete picture of student health needs. This led to health organizations partnering with high-need schools and connecting children to well-child visits and dental care.

4. Use sustainable funding to support school health
Schools often rely on government or private funding to support health-related efforts. This leads to a patchwork of programs and, given the uncertainty of funding, does not allow schools to build capacity to truly support student health.

However, there are opportunities for creating sustainable funding for school health. I’d like to cite two examples:

**Integrating health into school funding formulas:** Policymakers are beginning to recognize the difference between funding equally and funding equitably. The latter ensures resources for school health and wellness are integrated within school funding formulas.

For example, a core component of Illinois’ Evidence-Based Formula. This includes an Adequacy Target Calculation, which considers what each district needs to adequately educate its students. With access to additional funds, school can implement best practices, such as early childhood education, smaller class sizes and special education services.

In addition, the calculation factors in the staffing, including school nurses and social workers, to meet student needs.

**Expanding Medicaid-funded school health services:** In 2014, federal Medicaid policy shifted to allow schools to bill for all Medicaid-eligible health services provided to all students enrolled in Medicaid, instead of only covering the services included in an IEP. So far, 18 states have leveraged this policy opportunity, and we are advising more states so they can take part. This program provides a regular funding stream targeted to an at-risk population.

5) Implement cross-sector partnerships.
There are many examples of partnerships between the health sector and schools that can leverage significant resources for school districts and help families navigate a comprehensive system of care. There is the opportunity to think broadly about partnerships.

For example, in Chicago, we were able to convince the water agencies to fund green schoolyards. These schoolyards provide a place for active play, outdoor learning and access to nature. They also capture stormwater, addressing another critical community issue.
6) Center parents, students and community voices in education decisions.
Finally, by making sure that parent, student and community voices are included in education decisions, the real-life barriers that students face will be integrated into policy and practices.

In conclusion, this is a pivotal moment in our nation’s history. Amidst massive and simultaneous failings, we must rise to the challenge of rebuilding the infrastructure designed to support our children’s educational and health needs and address persistent inequities.

A positive learning environment that ensures all students are able to be in school, healthy and ready to learn is critical for transformative learning and development.


About Healthy Schools Campaign
Healthy Schools Campaign (HSC) engages stakeholders and advocates for policy changes at local, state and national levels to ensure that all students have access to healthy school environments, including nutritious food, physical activity, and essential health services, so they can learn and thrive. HSC’s Healthy Students, Promising Futures initiative supports states and school districts in expanding access to Medicaid-funded school health services. To learn more, visit healthyschoolscampaign.org and healthystudentspromisingfutures.org.