

Taking Action: Building Effective Partnerships to Support Student Health

Section Four

Taking action to address health-related chronic absenteeism can have a powerful impact on students' academic success and well-being for a lifetime.

This document focuses on preparing educators—particularly school district decision-makers—with knowledge and practical guidance for creating such meaningful change.

This section focuses connecting with partners in the health and public health sectors that are well-positioned to support schools in addressing the health-related causes of chronic absenteeism.

To access the full toolkit, please visit:
healthyschoolscampaign.org/chronic-absenteeism

Building Partnerships

While many school leaders recognize the importance of healthy school environments for addressing chronic absenteeism, the scale of the work ahead can seem daunting—especially in the context of widespread budget cuts and a lack of resources for supporting health and wellness. However, schools do not need to take on this great challenge alone. Health and public health sectors can play a key role in supporting efforts to address chronic absenteeism.

Who Are Key Partners in the Health and Public Health Sectors?

Partners in the health and public health sectors are well-positioned to support schools in addressing the health-related causes of chronic absenteeism. This may range from technical assistance to funding for health services and many areas in between. Such partnerships represent a rapidly evolving area where communities nationwide are finding innovative ways to collaborate around shared goals for children's health.

Possible partners include:

- Local hospitals, particularly children's hospitals
- Accountable Care Organizations, Managed Care Organizations and health plans responsible for providing coverage to students in your community
- Local community benefits experts—this could be the individual responsible for overseeing community benefits or community outreach at one of the local, non-profit children's hospitals
- Community organizations dedicated to supporting children's health
- State or local advocacy organizations
- Public health agencies or public health department
- Pediatricians, local chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics

These partners will vary greatly by community; the most practical partnerships will emerge from the primary causes of chronic absenteeism and opportunities for change identified in your school community.

Why Is the Health Sector Motivated to Address Chronic Absenteeism?

The time is right for the health and education sectors to work together to address chronic absenteeism and promote student health. In addition to fundamental mission-based motives, leaders in the health sector and public health sector are motivated to be part of this work by several powerful factors: provisions of the Affordable Care Act; recognition of the cost savings inherent to community-based preventive care; and an understanding that educational attainment directly supports lifetime health. With over 49 million children attending public schools across the country, partnering with schools presents an important opportunity for the health sector to reach vulnerable and underserved children.

Provisions of the Affordable Care Act: With the passage of the Affordable Care Act, the country's health care system is transforming. It increasingly prioritizes prevention, community-based care, population health, care coordination and chronic disease management. New opportunities—and motivations—exist for the health sector to engage with and support schools. Medical providers such as hospital systems can meet key requirements of the Affordable Care Act by partnering with schools and providing resources to support schools in addressing many of the factors that contribute to health-related chronic absenteeism. One example of this is known as the Community Benefit requirement. To maintain their tax-exempt status, non-profit hospitals are required to provide measurable benefits to the communities they serve. The Affordable Care Act pushes this requirement beyond providing free care to uninsured patients and creates an expectation that hospitals invest in the health of their surrounding communities. If a hospital has identified obesity and asthma as health needs in its community, for example, that hospital may invest community benefit resources in school physical activity programs, nutrition education and school nursing focused on asthma management.

Cost savings of community-based preventive care:

Our nation's health care system transformation provides incentives for the health sector to identify ways to reduce costs over time while improving health

outcomes. Focusing on community-based preventive care is a natural way to do this. For example, a hospital may cover the cost of employing a school nurse who provides asthma management in the school setting, recognizing that this is far more cost-effective than providing an ambulance response and emergency room treatment for asthma attacks. Of course, this strategy brings great benefits beyond cost savings: it helps keep students in school (rather than the hospital), school nurses can provide management plans to reduce the frequency and severity of asthma attacks and school nurses can even bring a public health approach to evaluating the school environment to identify and address asthma triggers such as mold or certain cleaning products. With applications ranging from dental care to flu shots and much more, this approach can be a key element of addressing health-related chronic absenteeism.

Positive impact of educational attainment on long-term health outcomes: Health and education are critically linked. Much of the research cited in this report focuses on the ways that health has an impact on opportunities to learn; in fact, the connection works both ways. Research shows that adults with higher educational attainment report a better health status than those with lower education levels. Obtaining a college education correlates with lower rates of health conditions and longer life expectancy. Healthy People 2020, a comprehensive set of key disease prevention and health promotion objectives, recognizes the percentage of students who receive a high school diploma four years after starting ninth grade as a

Leading Health Indicator. Leaders in the health and public health sectors who recognize this connection are motivated to support education in part as a strategy to improve the long-term health of our population as a whole.

What Are Key Opportunities for Collaboration?

Health-related chronic absenteeism is a natural area of collaboration for the health, public health and education sectors. The issue provides a clear lever for leaders in each sector to rally resources and take action. In each community, leaders from these sectors can identify areas of opportunity to work together with significant benefits for children's academic success and long-term health. Key areas of opportunity for collaboration to address this issue include:

Using data to identify the health-related reasons for absenteeism: To effectively address health-related chronic absenteeism, it is important for leaders to have information about what health issues have the greatest impact on attendance and what interventions have proven effective in addressing those issues. The key is using data to identify and intervene early, before students have missed so much school they are unable to catch up. When possible, it is critical to use the data available to determine the underlying causes of chronic absenteeism. The health and public health sectors have access to data that can help leaders in the education sector understand the health-related causes of chronic absenteeism. Many local public health departments have data organized by zip code on prevalent health issues, including asthma, obesity, community violence

Engaging Health Providers in Promoting Good Attendance

Health providers can be powerful advocates for good attendance, particularly when it comes to health-related absenteeism.

In addition to the many serious health issues at the root of health-related chronic absenteeism, students may miss school unnecessarily for perceived health issues such as rashes or minor headaches. Health providers can communicate with students and families about the importance of attendance and clarify that students

may—and should—still attend school when they experience these health conditions.

Attendance Works has developed a robust set of resources and materials for health providers, as well as resources for school district leaders to use in engaging health providers in discussing the importance of attendance. To access these resources, visit attendanceworks.org.

and behavioral health. In addition, non-profit hospitals are now required to conduct community health needs assessments (CHNA) every three years to identify and address the health needs of their communities. Schools can reach out to local non-profit hospitals to participate in the CHNA process or request data that is collected.

Providing health services in school or the community:

The health and public health sectors can play an important role in making sure schools have the resources to meet the health needs of their students. For example, local health providers can partner with schools to establish school-based health clinics or mobile care vans and deliver vision, hearing and dental screenings. Local hospitals can ensure that schools have adequate levels of staffing in school nursing, mental health and other specialized support areas by working with schools to identify staffing goals and providing support staff when needed. Many cities, including Toledo and Austin, are successfully implementing this approach. In addition to direct service delivery, the health and public health sectors can deliver health education in classrooms and support parent and staff wellness programs.

Creating healthier schools and home environments:

Well-maintained school buildings, healthy school food, opportunities for physical activity and clean indoor air all play a huge role in students' health and therefore in their attendance at school. These areas are rich with opportunities for collaboration, particularly with public health departments and community partners that can provide support for physical activity and nutrition education programs. Public health and other government agencies such as local EPA representatives are also well-positioned to provide resources related to indoor air quality and health-promoting building maintenance strategies. Public health and government agencies can also collaborate with schools to engage parents around the importance of creating healthy home environments and connect parents with resources available in the community.

Engaging health providers to deliver the message on attendance at check ups and appointments:

The medical community can play a key role in communicating the importance of attendance and flagging any health factors that are preventing children from attending school. For example, pediatricians

Case Study: Cross-Sector Collaboration to Address Chronic Absenteeism in New York City

In the summer of 2010, following a report about the pervasiveness of chronic absenteeism in New York City schools, Mayor Michael Bloomberg's administration undertook one of the nation's most ambitious cross-sector efforts to tackle this issue in New York City public schools. Acknowledging that chronic absenteeism is a complex, under-recognized problem affecting academic achievement, dropout rates and juvenile crime, the mayor created an interagency task force to develop a comprehensive set of strategies to combat this problem. Key partners included the Department of Education, Administration for Children's Services, the Department of Homeless Services, the Department of Health, the Department for the Aging, NYC Service, the Department of Youth and Community Development, the NYC Police Department, as well as private sector and community partners.

The strategies developed by the interagency task force

were piloted in 25 schools in year one, 50 schools in year two, and 100 schools in year three, with over 60,000 students. Key strategies included using data to identify at-risk students and develop early warning flags to identify for early intervention students at risk of chronic absenteeism; creating a Success Mentor Corps, reaching nearly 10,000 at-risk students; sharing strategies to link schools to existing community resources (including city preventive service providers); and including chronic absenteeism as a metric in school progress report cards and evaluations at the Department of Education.

As a result of this initiative, task force schools significantly and consistently outperformed comparison schools in reducing chronic absenteeism. Students in the task force schools were less likely to be chronically absent than students in comparison schools. [Read the full report](#) on this initiative.

can ask children and their families about their school attendance during their annual check-up and discuss the importance of good attendance, especially in early grades, with families.

Supporting students in responding to trauma and mental health issues: The health and public health sectors can play a powerful role in increasing access to mental health services in schools. These partners can also support schools in building their own capacity in this area, such as by providing professional development to educators on recognizing early warning signs of mental health problems and understanding how violence and trauma have an impact on student learning. Health and public health partners can share data to help school leaders identify the mental health and trauma-related risk factors, such as violence, in the surrounding community and ensure students have adequate support to navigate those factors.

Addressing chronic absenteeism is a natural area for collaboration among the education, health and public health sectors: it brings great benefits not only for students' learning but for their lifetime health as well.

Learn More in the Full Report

This is section four of five in Addressing the Health-Related Causes of Chronic Absenteeism: A Toolkit for Action. To access the other sections, visit: healthyschoolscampaign.org/chronic-absenteeism

About Healthy Schools Campaign

Healthy Schools Campaign (HSC) is dedicated to making schools healthier places where all children can learn and thrive. HSC advocates for children to have access to nutritious school food, physical activity, school health resources, green schoolyards and clean air. HSC has a special focus on the wellness and environmental health issues affecting low-income students of color. We start with a social justice perspective and believe this focus is especially critical in light of the vast health disparities our nation faces. HSC facilitates collaboration

among parents, educators, students and policymakers to help prepare this diverse group of stakeholders to lead change for healthier schools at the school, district, state and national levels.

In partnership with Trust for America's Health, HSC co-convenes the National Collaborative on Education and Health, which is working to transform the conditions of health in schools across the country and has a key focus on chronic absenteeism.

Stay connected!

We invite you to learn more, access resources and lend your voice to the dialogue about healthy schools.

For questions or to discuss this issue, please contact Alex Mays, National Program Director, at alex@healthyschoolscampaign.org.

Learn more and sign up for updates from HSC at healthyschoolscampaign.org.

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