

REACHING KIDS:

Partnering with Preschools and Schools to Improve Children's Health

Improving children's health and development has been of substantial interest to and investment in by national, state, and local funders for many years. Directly engaging with preschools and schools to improve these outcomes in children is increasingly a way to support a wide variety of efforts and interventions that reach a majority of children in an efficient and effective manner. Many examples of strategies and interventions are available to offer a "roadmap to success" that can be used in funders' efforts to improve the lives of children across the life course.

Over time, more attention is being paid to the role good health plays in children's academic success, from early childhood through the school years. Preschools and schools are major institutions in children's lives, providing oversight for many hours of a typical weekday. Though health improvement is not the primary mission of the education sector, schools have extensive influence in shaping children's health and long-term development outcomes.

Historical differences in mission, accountability, governance structures, funding sources, and other systems-level factors have limited collaboration between the health and education sectors. Communication barriers also result from the different "languages" educational entities and those in the health arena speak. Early childhood educators, schools, and those interested in children's health, however, share a commitment to children's well-being. Collaborations among these groups can provide a way to reach a majority of children in an efficient and effective manner. Understanding the educational sector's priorities and organizational processes can help health entities identify opportunities for engaging with these institutions.

The Grantmakers In Health Issue Dialogue *Reaching Kids: Partnering with Preschools and Schools to Improve Children's Health*, convened on May 27, 2009, highlighted intersections between health and education systems in the United States, including influences both systems have on children's healthy development across the life course. Several themes were discussed for health funders and other organizations to consider when working on preschool- and school-based programs and interventions.

► *Improving Children's School Readiness in Early Childhood*

- Early childhood is an extremely sensitive developmental stage during which experiences and exposures set the stage for future health outcomes. The foundation of learning

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children receive during this period also influences their success in school and later life.

- Early intervention is important for identifying and treating emotional distress and behavioral issues that may affect a child's ability to achieve important development skills and be ready for school. Intervention at this stage is critical because learning and skill formation depend on brain development and build sequentially upon previous learning.
- Young children benefit from quality preschool programs that include prevention and early intervention components to increase their learning and development. Performance gains children make in preschool programs are more likely to be sustained when linked to high-quality elementary school programs. This includes linking curricula, standards, and assessments from prekindergarten into elementary schools to ensure the continuity of quality instruction. Unfortunately, many preschool programs across the country are of poor or mediocre quality, with wide variations in areas such as requirements and learning standards.

► *Increasing Children's Access to Health Care Services within Educational Settings*

- School-based health centers (SBHCs) "bring the doctor's office to schools." These centers provide a comprehensive range of prevention and health promotion services in a centralized, convenient location. This care model also helps reduce health-related absences and supports students' health and readiness to learn.
- SBHCs can strengthen the surrounding community by serving a broader population and geographic area beyond enrolled students. These expanded populations include families of students, faculty and school personnel, out-of-school youth, other community members, and children at the preschool level through school-linked services.
- SBHCs reach many needy and high-risk children, including those requiring specialized health services such

as chronic care management or mental or dental health services. These services are also provided by schools through linkages with local community-based health professionals.

► ***Encouraging Children’s Healthy Eating and Active Living***

- Striking increases in obesity rates draw attention to the need to improve children’s nutrition and physical activity levels. Prevention and intervention efforts targeted at changing children’s energy balance can begin as early as the preschool period. Attitudes and habits formed during these years are more likely to continue in the future.
- Lower levels of student achievement have been linked to physical inactivity, poor nutrition, and obesity. Unhealthy eating and inactive lifestyles also contribute to school absenteeism, chronic conditions, and poorer health outcomes.
- Children’s eating behaviors are strongly motivated by the foods accessible in their immediate environments. Improvements are occurring in the nutritional quality of foods available in education settings, particularly through cafeteria and vending machine options.
- Daily physical activity substantially improves children’s health and quality of life. Promoting positive physical activity experiences as early as the preschool years can lay the foundation for regular activity across the life course. Other benefits include reductions in the risk of various diseases, increased emotional and psychological benefits, and reductions in antisocial and criminal behaviors.
- Preschools and schools can influence children’s dietary intake and physical activity through mandated wellness policies and other nutrition and physical activity guidelines and standards. Unfortunately, regulation and enforcement of these policies and standards vary and are rudimentary in some cases.

► ***Coordinating School Health Services***

- A growing number of schools engage in efforts to combine individual health care services with population-based interventions that improve the health and well-being of all students. These comprehensive, coordinated approaches improve attempts to respond to the complex needs of students. Benefits include reductions in absenteeism, as well as improvements in alertness, stamina, and academic achievement.
- Model approaches for coordinating school health ideally address a range of issues such as physical education; nutrition services; and counseling, psychological, and social services. Promoting staff health, encouraging

healthy and safe school environments, and involving families and the community also are important for ensuring the success of these models.

► ***Increasing Communication, Linkages, and Formal Partnerships between Schools, Families, and Other Community Stakeholders that Serve Children***

- Children’s learning is influenced by their experiences in the environments they encounter, including childcare settings, schools, homes, and communities. Educating and involving these entities will enhance efforts to address the basic social, emotional, and health needs that must be met for children to enjoy academic success.
- The community schools concept promotes children’s development and learning, while also actively strengthening the surrounding community. Core instructional programs and opportunities for educational and cultural enrichment are offered along with services that remove barriers to healthy learning and development.
- Community schools promote long-term, highly involved partnerships among schools, families, and community organizations and representatives. Programs in many of these schools are tailored to be reflective of the community’s strengths, resources, and ability to meet the needs of children and their families.

Working with preschools and schools is an important entry point for providing information and education, and delivering health care services to a large number of children. Though no single entity bears sole responsibility for ensuring children’s health and development, the education sector often has the most frequent and sustained interactions with children outside their homes. Funders pursuing collaborations with the educational sector can support a wide variety of efforts and interventions that address myriad intersections between health and education-related issues. Engaging in this work takes time and patience. Fortunately, the time appears ripe for the health and education sectors to engage in cross-sectoral partnerships, thereby leveraging their respective resources to ensure the healthy development and academic success of our children.

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