

HEALTHY SCHOOLS CAMPAIGN

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Healthy Schools Campaign Releases Toolkit Showing Link Between Chronic Absenteeism and Health Disparities and Provides Recommendations to Address Issue

Chicago, Ill., June 9, 2016 - This week, the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights released a new report containing alarming data on chronic absenteeism—or missing 10 percent or more of school days. The new report shows a staggering number of children are chronically absent each year: more than 6.5 million nationwide missed 15 or more days of school in the 2013-14 academic year. These chronically absent students included 3 million high school students (18 percent) and 3.5 million elementary school students (11 percent). Chronic absenteeism is a proven early warning sign of academic risk and school dropout. Research shows that children who are chronically absent in kindergarten and first grade are much less likely to be reading at grade level by third grade; in turn, students who are not reading at grade level by third grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school.

The connection between student health and chronic absenteeism is clear. Both chronic and acute health conditions can prevent students from attending school. Research indicates that common health conditions resulting in missed school include asthma, influenza, diabetes, obesity and related illness, seizure disorders, mental health and anxiety and vision problems. This pattern may be either exacerbated or ameliorated by a variety of factors in the school environment.

While health-related chronic absenteeism can affect students of any background, its most devastating impact is felt by students who face health disparities, poverty and other challenges in attaining school success. Research shows that these are the same students who benefit most from being in school. This impact is driven by two related factors: higher rates of health-related chronic absence, and a more profound impact of that absence. Students who face disproportionate rates of illness or other factors known to cause chronic absence (such as a lack of transportation) often also lack resources to make up for missed instruction and the other missed benefits of being in school, such as access to nutrition programs and services.

In many cases, these same students attend schools that lack resources to provide the health-promoting conditions shown to support attendance and lifelong wellness. Students in low-income schools, for example, are less likely to have recess and high-quality physical education than students in higher-income schools. In addition, schools serving low-income communities are more likely to have no school nurse or to have higher ratios of students to nurses than schools serving higher-income communities.

The link between chronic absenteeism and student health disparities is incontrovertible. “We view chronic absenteeism as an issue of health inequity, particularly among underserved communities and communities of color,” says Rochelle Davis, President + CEO of Healthy Schools Campaign. “It is our goal to address the health issues that plague many lower income schools across the country.”

Under the new Every Student Succeeds Act, states are now required to include chronic absenteeism on their state report cards. As a result, it is important to provide states and districts with guidance on how to implement effective solutions. That is why Healthy Schools Campaign has released a toolkit to assist school districts in understanding their student health needs, sharing best practices to address the most prevalent student health conditions and on how to build partnerships with others to support students, families and communities.

Requiring schools to include chronic absenteeism in school reports is an important first step and a key opportunity to support student health, address chronic absenteeism and have a profound positive impact on children's lifelong learning and health. This can only be achieved through strong partnerships and implementation of best practices like the ones we have outlined in our toolkit, available at <https://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. Coming from a social justice perspective, we believe this focus is especially critical in light of the vast health disparities our nation faces. HSC facilitates collaboration among parents, teachers, principals, 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.