

CENTER FOR SCHOOL, HEALTH AND EDUCATION

For science. For action. For health.



Dear Champions of Education and Student Success:

When asked by a potential community partner what was the one thing that could be done to improve the health of its citizens, Dr. Adewale Troutman, the then newly appointed director for Louisville's health department answered, "to make sure that everyone graduates from high school." Like many others, the community partner wondered — what does high school graduation have to do with health?

Graduation from high school is the leading health indicator for adults, even when controlling for race and income. Although a college degree is additive, completing high school increases the likelihood of practicing health promoting behaviors, experiencing better health, living longer, and reducing the incidence of mortality and sickness in offspring. By contrast, students who drop out of high school are more likely to die at younger ages as adults from chronic conditions such as cardiovascular disease, cancer, infection, lung disease and diabetes, than their peers who graduated. Most of those who drop out of high school do not have health insurance and have limited access to health care. And the children of mothers who drop out are twice as likely to die before age 1 and six times more likely to suffer from poor health all their lives, if they survive.

The expanse of American kids dropping out of school before they graduate is well documented. Although the number is decreasing, every 26 seconds a student drops out. Approximately 6,000 students daily are pushed out, pulled out or just give up on school. Dropouts face economic obsolescence as adults, strain the GDP, and have great difficulty assisting in the educational success of their own children. As with health disparities, the odds of dropping out of school are disproportionately stacked against poor students of color — about a third will not graduate from high school, and African-American boys are the most at-risk. Half of them will not graduate with their ninth-grade class. Many will become juvenile justice statistics.

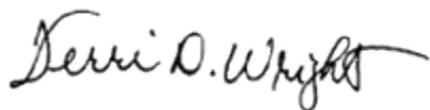
So again one may ask — what is the role of health in high school graduation? Many of the conditions that influence attendance, behavior and academic performance are correlated with whether or not students are healthy, engaged and safe. Unmet physical, mental, and emotional health issues — including asthma, vision deficiencies, hunger, pregnancy, repeated exposure to traumatic stress such as violence and other poverty-generated factors — will affect a student's ability to succeed academically.

The pathways to and consequences of dropping out perpetuate an insidious cycle of poverty, disparities and entrenched inequities that underscore why graduation has become a public health priority. It is therefore fitting that Healthy People 2020, the policy and practice guidelines developed by the Department of Health and Human Services, includes a graduation objective for health. For surely, if the goal of public health is to prevent disease and promote health, making sure everyone graduates from high school assures a public health return on investment (ROI).

As we wrestle with health care delivery, school reform, gun control and the other important issues of our day, could it be that we are sometimes penny wise and pound foolish? Why wouldn't we hedge our "downstream" interventions with cost effective "upstream" prevention strategies that will yield the results we claim to want? For example, we know the efficacy of school-based health centers as a viable model of health care. That is why Congress authorized funding for capital grants to expand the number of new centers and the capacity of existing ones in the Affordable Care Act. Yet, Congress failed to appropriate

funding for the centers' operation despite the evidence that African-American males — the group at greatest risk for dropping out, unemployment, prison, chronic disease, lack of health insurance or death by a gun wound — are three times more likely to remain in school when affiliated with a school-based health center. Rather than politicians, perhaps we should elect accountants who would know that high school graduation is a public health ROI.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Terri D. Wright". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline.

Terri D. Wright, MPH
Founding Director



Terri D. Wright is Director of the Center for School, Health, and Education at the American Public Health Association. For past issues of this Director's Letter and other information on school-based health care as a proven strategy for dropout prevention, please visit <http://www.schoolbasedhealthcare.org>. Also visit our [social media page](#) where you can follow us on Twitter ([@stopdropout](#)) and [Facebook](#) and link to our blog contributions in Global Policy TV and NBC's Education Nation.