

CENTER FOR SCHOOL, HEALTH AND EDUCATION

For science. For action. For health.



Dear Champions of Education and Student Success:

Education has been labeled the civil rights issue of our time. The negative effects of poverty on the health and education of students is well documented, and it mostly affects kids of color who tend to live in lower-income communities. Sadly, “dropout factory” — a high school where no more than 60 percent of the students who start as freshmen make it to their senior year — has become a common term. And most of these low-performing public schools tend to be in the poorest ZIP codes across our country.

Experts have shown us that these schools are tougher to turn around because their students live in poverty. When we consider poverty as one major issue, it feels insurmountable and overwhelming so, in efforts to create even playing fields, we tinker around the edges of support. We offer tutoring and mentoring programs, or we ask for stronger teachers and better classrooms. These are tremendously valuable. However, they are part of an easier, short-term fix. These well-intentioned programs and arguments address only the symptoms of poverty. They do not help identify and address the core issues of poverty that lead to students dropping out.

The hard fix is to call out the specific conditions that kids live in, conditions that have a profound effect on their school performance. Consequently, we must ask: What social and economic complexities are they facing on a day-to-day basis? What does it really mean to live in poverty? Then, we must address how these specific conditions affect the lives of students — conditions such as traumatic stress from exposure to repeated violence, hunger, homelessness, untreated health conditions, intermittent electricity, substance abuse — the list is endless. However, school-based health centers can help.

School-based health centers provide students with primary, preventive and mental health care. Because they are located on site, in communities with the greatest need and operated by a trusted, multi-disciplinary staff, centers are well positioned to identify poverty-related barriers to school success and help students manage challenges. They serve as safe havens, identifying and connecting students and families to critical resources in the community. They also serve as advisors to teachers and principals on how best to support their students

Having a school-based strategy to address poverty-related issues faced by students allows us — as a community — to foster healthy environments that support student success and graduation, putting them one step closer to ending the vicious cycle of poverty. For example, our pilot program in a Detroit school-based health center, addresses this head on. A commonly used instrument to assess student health risks has been adapted to help identify those issues specific to poverty, such as:

- In the past three months, did you ever miss school because you had to take care of someone, work or had problems getting to school?
- In the past 12 months, have you ever had to stay in a shelter, motel or some other place because you didn't have a home to stay in?
- In the past three months, was it ever hard to study or do your homework because you didn't have electricity?

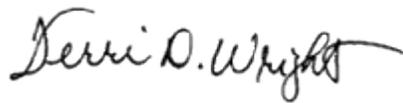
The questionnaire is online, ensuring that students feel confident that their responses are confidential, thus

encouraging honest responses. Often, barriers faced by students are not isolated incidences. Understanding what conditions individual students face sheds light on what may be happening school wide, enabling staff to respond with programmatic and policy solutions.

In fact, the school-based health center where the pilot program is operating was designed (in collaboration with the school's administrators) with this in mind. For example, students shared that intermittent access to running water at home made it impossible for them to wash their clothes or take a shower. They were worried about being teased for having body odor and wearing dirty clothes. In response, the center now offers a washing machine and shower, reducing stress and burdens that might otherwise lead to bullying and absenteeism.

I challenge thought leaders and policymakers to not aggregate the complexities of poverty faced by young people. Rather, let's get to the root causes of poverty and move beyond treating the symptoms. It's up to us to give all kids opportunities for educational success including graduation from high school. They deserve it.

Sincerely,



Terri D. Wright, MPH
Founding Director

