

CENTER FOR SCHOOL, HEALTH AND EDUCATION

For science. For action. For health.



Experts agree: It's time to end inequities that impact education and health

We have a good understanding of why students drop out of high school. So why aren't students succeeding in schools and why aren't schools succeeding in helping them?

This is one of many vexing questions raised by a panel of experts at the American Public Health Association's annual meeting. Addressing the dropout crisis, they concurred, requires that we eliminate the disparities that drive both dropout and health inequity.

Students drop out for a host of reasons, many of which tie back to physical and emotional health as well as to social conditions such as teen pregnancy, bullying and violence, and the many effects of poverty. Dropping out of high school leads to an unending cycle of adverse effects. Students who don't graduate are more likely to face health risks, less likely to be employed and insured, and will earn lower incomes, all of which contribute to a repeating cycle of poverty.

Reversing this trend demands that our educational system addresses the barriers to health and education that keep students from succeeding. This isn't a new topic, as those of you who follow this issue or have read our columns here can attest. But it's far from status quo, which is why we keep examining it from different angles.

At the expert panel, one clear theme emerged: All of us — teachers, administrators, health care providers, community members — must work at the "population level," creating solutions for all students rather than working only with individuals.

For example, panel speaker Robert Balfanz, co-director of the Everyone Graduates Center and research scientist at the Center for Social Organization of Schools,

challenged education professionals to design learning environments that meet high educational standards and provide “the right support to the right student at the right time at the scale and intensity required.” As a bright spot, Balfanz cited a field trial with Diplomas Now and three middle schools in high-poverty areas that resulted in better school attendance, better behavior and higher course performance.

It is also important to look at the relationship between health, education and poverty. Panel speaker Charles Basch, professor of health and education at Teachers College, Columbia University, noted that young people who experience the most health, academic and economic disparities are all the same population. When we break down the factors that disproportionately affect these students — such as violence, pregnancy and poor nutrition — we see patterns in their educational experience. We must, said Basch, create programs that address these factors simultaneously instead of individually.

As we address disparities, we must also build pathways to success for students. Panel speaker Ron Walker, executive director of the Coalition of Schools Educating Boys of Color, shared that “coming to school well fed, being able to see, where you can breathe, where you’re able to enjoy physical activity — that’s something that’s not afforded to all of our young people.” In order to see success, he contended that we need to shift the focus away from simply looking at the “common core,” such as academics, and pay more attention to the “uncommon core,” such as health and wellness.

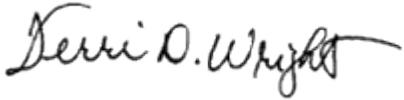
To me, one of the most prominent outcomes from this panel was the consensus that to help all students be successful and graduate from high school, we need to broaden the conversation beyond education and health circles. We must approach this as a societal effort. For example, we must look at whether people have access to safe and affordable housing, healthy food and safe neighborhoods and understand how those issues play an important role in their overall health. And we must engage others in the conversation, the exploration and the solution.

“Health is advanced when we health professionals are working closely with other people in other sectors of society,” said Howard K. Koh, U.S. assistant secretary of health, during the panel discussion. “At the end of the day, everything is interconnected, it’s all interrelated and we all have promises to keep.”

At the center of this connection sit our nation’s school-based health centers. They are the essential link between education and health, providing our students, schools and communities with the appropriate tools and resources they need to be successful. They are proven to improve graduation rates by overcoming health and social barriers to educational success. Now we need more of them, serving more students.

I invite you to join me in this ongoing conversation by sharing your perspective in the comments section. Please visit [APHA’s Center for School, Health and Education](#) to learn more about the link between education and health and the positive impacts of school-based health centers. Carry this message of equity and opportunity to your work, your elected officials and your community, and define your role in improving graduation rates.

Sincerely,



Terri D. Wright, MPH
Founding Director



Terri D. Wright is founder of the [Center for School, Health and Education](#) at the American Public Health Association. Follow us on Twitter at [@stopdropout](#) and Facebook at [Center for School, Health and Education](#).

For information on the connection between academic success and student health, please see Global Policy TV blog posts by Terri D. Wright:

- [Teen Pregnancy is the Main Reason Girls Drop Out of School. Let's Change This.](#)
- [Unpacking Poverty: Three Steps to Ensuring Educational Success for All](#)
- [School Based Health Centers Making Strides for Kids](#)
- [High School Graduation is Public Health ROI](#)