

CENTER FOR SCHOOL, HEALTH AND EDUCATION

For science. For action. For health.



March 2013

Dear Champions of Education and Student Success:

Graduation from high school is not only a rite of passage; it is the ticket to economic prosperity and quality of life. The formula is simple: High school graduates are more employable, healthier and more likely to have health insurance, all of which positively contribute to our economy.

But here's the flip side of that formula: New graduation data show glaring achievement gaps for students of color and economically disadvantaged students.

In November, the U.S. Department of Education released 2011-2012 high school graduation rates. Rates range from 59 percent in the District of Columbia to 88 percent in Iowa. Looking more closely, we see that only 49 percent of black students in Minnesota graduate, compared with 84 percent of their white peers. In Ohio, the graduation rate for economically disadvantaged students was 65 percent; for all students it was 80 percent.

If we continue to leave these young people behind, to let them leave school early without a diploma, we fuel a continuing cycle of poverty, unemployment and costly chronic disease. That's a failing grade for all of us.

The connection between graduation and life-long opportunity is underscored in Healthy People 2020, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) 10-year goals for health promotion and disease prevention. For the first time, Healthy People links education and health, naming graduation a public health priority. This is a groundbreaking step that acknowledges the inextricable relationship between education and health and compels us to aggressively tackle the dropout crisis from all fronts.

According to HHS, academic success and achievement are associated with lower rates of risky adult behaviors and higher rates of healthy behaviors, and they are also strong predictors of overall adult health outcomes. In addition, high school graduation lowers the risk for incarceration and leads to enhanced financial stability during adulthood.

So how can we abide one-third of our students dropping out before graduation? Turning this crisis around requires a hard look at why youth are dropping out of school. The main causes are social experiences such as bullying, violence, poor nutrition and poverty-generated factors that affect students' health and ability to succeed academically.

See the pattern? Poverty, social barriers and poor health keep students from graduating. And dropping out leads to poverty and poor health as adults. We must break this cycle.

One of the best strategies to address this issue is school-based health care. Our nation's 1,900 school-based health centers help students avoid risky behaviors, triage crises like violence and hunger at home and school and provide the mental and physical health care that allows students to come to class and focus. They create a positive school environment, which is proven to boost attendance and academic

achievement and protects against risky behaviors.

For example, the number one reason girls drop out of high school is teen pregnancy. Boys often drop out because of disciplinary issues, an action that disproportionately affects boys of color. Students of both genders also drop out because they're working to support their families, are disengaged from school or have chronic absenteeism — all of which can be linked to social factors and the need to support young people's social, emotional and physical health.

Across the country, a collective will is building to keep students in school, healthy and on track to graduation. The NAACP, for example, has adopted a resolution to promote educational success and student health by advancing school-based health centers. The American Public Health Association adopted a policy to improve high school graduation and established the Center for School, Health and Education to advance conditions favorable to learning and graduation and note graduation as a public health priority.

We have the opportunity to make a powerful shift in our country. By knocking down social barriers to students' success, we can end the cycle of dropout, poor adult health and low earning potential. By using school-based health care to boost graduation rates, we can create a new reality that includes good student health, higher graduation rates, better adult health and higher economic productivity.

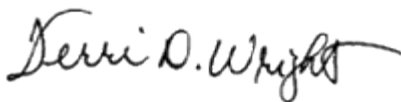
Most importantly, we can close the achievement gap so all our students have equal opportunity to graduate, and we can level the playing field for career success and economic prosperity.

Thank you for your ongoing efforts to engage the public, lawmakers, the media and partners in support of an educational system that prioritizes student health as a key strategy to preventing dropout. I welcome your input and feedback, and I look forward to ongoing collaboration.

To get that under way, I invite you to visit our website www.schoolbasedhealthcare.org. You can now easily link from our home page to find previous Letters from the Director or visit our new Learning Community. There we will continue a discussion begun at APHA's 2012 Annual Meeting on best practices for addressing the social, emotional and health risks that influence the achievement gap and strategies to engage the education community. Please watch this space for details about our first webinar on "Implementing the HP 2020 Objective for Graduation".

Finally, visit our new social media page where you can follow us on Twitter ([@stopdropout](https://twitter.com/stopdropout)) and link to our blog contributions in [Global Policy TV](#) and [NBC's Education Nation](#). Again, I look forward to collaborating with you both on and offline!

Sincerely,



Terri D. Wright, MPH
Director

