What can Schools do to Improve?

“[Children]…who face violence, hunger, substance abuse, and unintended pregnancy, and despair cannot possibly focus on academic excellence. There is no curriculum brilliant enough to compensate for a hungry stomach or a distracted mind”

-National Action Plan for Comprehensive School Health Education

Welcome!

This is the 2nd Blog post in a 3-part series titled, When Schools Create Healthy Learning Environments will Student Learning Improve?

Environments will Student Learning Improve? This blog will discuss what schools can do to improve student health, the school environment and to overcome health factors that can prevent student learning, which were discussed in 1st Blog:

Eight Health Factors that Prevent Student Learning

1. Poor Nutrition
2. Lack of Physical Fitness
3. Unsafe School Facility
4. Substance Abuse
5. Violence
6. Teenage Pregnancy
7. Early Childhood Factors
8. Emotional and Mental Health Conditions

Health and Academic Performance

Over two decades of research supports the linkage between students' physical, mental, and emotional health and their academic performance. Simply stated, the academic success of students is strongly associated with their health. Most people agree that healthy children are teachable children. So, it is no surprise that when children come to school with unmet health needs, their learning is impaired.

The World Health Organization coined the term ‘social determinants of health’ as root causes for why certain groups of people have a higher incidence of disease, death and accidents. ‘Social determinants of health’ stem from social, political, cultural and economic inequities. These social determinants are not genetic causes, but are characterized by the environment an
individual is ‘exposed to’, such as the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age, including the health and education systems. Furthermore, ‘social determinants of health’ perpetuate lifelong health, education and economic inequities. However, education systems working in a ‘coordinated and coherent’ manner with strategic partners in health, wellness and housing can be an effective ‘equalizer’ and possible solution. Thus, it is imperative that schools find innovative ways to embed “health” into their educational environment.

7 Ways Schools can Improve

Below are a few examples of what schools ‘are doing’ and ‘can do’ to improve the health of the school environment to support student achievement:

1. **School Based Health Centers (SBHC)** – is a growing trend in schools, SBHCs are school-based, full-service health centers for students and, in ideal cases, the surrounding community. SBHC’s provide medical, dental and vision services, screenings, diagnostic treatments and health counseling, urgent and emergency care, timely identification and interventions, assistance with daily medication, health services for children with special health needs, referrals to and linkages with other community providers.

2. **Physical Education Curriculum** – according to the National Association for Sport and Physical Education, an integrated physical education program can produce students that exhibit a physically active lifestyle, achieve and maintain a health-enhancing level of physical fitness, demonstrate responsible personal and social behavior, and provide students’ with opportunities for enjoyment, challenge, self-expression and social interaction.

3. **School Nutrition Services** – school meal programs are not new, however, some notable school districts around the country are enhancing their school nutrition services, such as
Denver Public Schools’ H4 plan, (Healthy Meals, Healthy Kids, Healthy Community, Healthy Planet), in response to parent’s requests for more nutritious meals and less processed foods, is ‘going back to basics’ by providing school meals entirely from scratch. Similarly, DC Public Schools is serving early dinner for a portion of their student population with the aim to fight hunger due to poverty, reduce childhood obesity and increase participation in after-school programs.

4. **School Counseling, Psychological and Social Services** – not every school district offers these specialized services but should. School-based mental health services are provided to students as well as other direct services and instruction that is geared at connecting schools with external community resources. This component directly addresses students’ behavioral and emotional issues and is an excellent rationale for schools that currently lack such services to forge new collaborations with appropriate local, county and nonprofit agencies.

5. **Healthy School Environment** – it is imperative that we recognize that the physical condition of schools either deters or helps students learn and succeed. An example is the ‘Green Seed Schools’ Program in New Orleans, Louisiana, which helps schools “Go Green”. Schools receive grants toward energy audits, indoor quality, to create on-site renewable energy generation and can utilize the upgrades to help educate students, teachers and the community on how important ‘going green’ is to create a healthy and more sustainable environment and community.

6. **Family and Community Involvement in School Health Education** – schools are public institutions that have the greatest day-to-day access to young people. So, schools are well-positioned to serve as catalysts to help students and parents develop healthy
behaviors and attitudes. Schools can enhance ‘protective factors’ in students that include a positive view of one’s future, parental involvement and active participation in school, which reduce effects of a stressful life and increase a child’s ability to avoid risky behaviors. Schools can cultivate positive and supportive school environments for families. One example is to host a ‘Family Dinner Night’ and invite the local health department to provide information to families which addresses a relevant health need. Additionally, schools provide the ideal settings to encourage, support, and promote positive student, parent and community social interactions. Such efforts strengthen ‘school connectedness’, necessary for decreasing substance abuse, school absenteeism, violence, early sexual initiation and emotional distress.

7. **School Site Health Promotion for Staff** – provide services to school faculty and staff that include assessment, education, and fitness activities designed to maintain and improve the health and well-being of school staff that teach, interact and serve as role models for students.

The key point is for every ‘cause’ of learning impairment there are successful programs of prevention. Implementing a ‘coordinated and comprehensive’ effort to address these known ‘causes’ or inhibitors to learning should be priority one! When this goal is accomplished only then will the health of our children improve and with it their ability to learn, achieve and succeed! Do you agree? Have other ideas or want to share a school program that’s working? Please post your comments…I look forward to your feedback. Next month the discussion will be, *Coordinated School Health Plan: A Model for Reform?*
Reference


