

The Development of Principles for a School-Friendly Health System

OVERVIEW

Since our founding in 1870, Children's National Hospital has been committed to serving patients and families in our community and beyond. We have made it a priority to advocate for the unique needs of children and address community health issues that impact child health.

Eighty percent of our health outcomes are determined by social factors outside of access to health care, such as housing, education and environment. Children's National understands the urgency and necessity of working beyond the hospital to address these social determinants of health and other "upstream" factors.

Education is a critical social determinant of health. Studies have shown that poor health can put education at risk – kids with poor health tend to have higher absenteeism rates, lower academic achievement and can experience educational setbacks that interfere with schooling. Conversely, education creates opportunities for better health – adults with more education tend to have better jobs, live in healthier neighborhoods and have better access to resources that contribute to better health.¹

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing inequities in education and other areas; recovery from this disruption is critical to preserving and protecting children's health. Like nothing before, COVID-19 underscored the critical linkage between health and education and the need to intentionally tend to this bond. It presents an opportunity to learn – to examine how collaborations between health and school systems enhanced the resiliency of both sectors, or where they could have, and to build on these models going forward.

Given this critical intersection, Children's National is leading an initiative to develop school-friendly health system (SFHS) principles to help hospitals and health systems deliver better care and patient experience that enhance children's prospects for improved health and academic success. These principles focus on the role of the hospital and health care delivery system, and the initiatives it can partner on with school systems that contribute to a child's health and academic success.

Our vision of a school-friendly health system is one designed to ensure all children reach optimal health and achieve their full academic potential.

"YOU CAN'T EDUCATE A CHILD WHO ISN'T HEALTHY, AND YOU CAN'T KEEP A CHILD HEALTHY WHO ISN'T EDUCATED."

— DR. JOYCELYN ELDERS,
FORMER U.S. SURGEON GENERAL

¹ Why Education Matters to Health: Exploring the Causes. Virginia Commonwealth University Center on Society and Health. April 2014. <https://societyhealth.vcu.edu/media/society-health/pdf/test-folder/CSH-EHI-Issue-Brief-2.pdf>
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This effort is rooted in the understanding that health and school systems are critical community pillars. They touch every resident, whether as service providers, employers or convening hubs. Health systems and schools are already working together in many innovative ways in hundreds of communities across the country. Together, and in partnership with other sectors, they meet a host of essential community needs, including, of course, education and health care, but also access to social services, parenting classes, food access, wellness programs and many more. Understanding that each sector performs better when collaborating with the other, this framework was developed with input from scores of both health care and education professionals and complements existing school health frameworks, including the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child or WSCC model. However, *this framework is intended primarily as a tool for health systems, focusing on how they can contribute to improving children's health and academic outcomes, including better positioning themselves as school partners.*

The work builds upon lessons learned from other “friendly” initiatives to better position health systems to meet the needs of specific populations, such as the nationally recognized [baby-friendly](#) hospitals and [age-friendly](#) health systems initiatives. These efforts have shown that guiding, organizational frameworks can have significant, positive impact on patient and family experience, health care costs and health outcomes. Adopting a school-friendly focus has the potential to improve both health and academic outcomes.

This effort leverages more than 20 years of Children's National leading school health efforts in Washington, D.C., and the surrounding region. Since 2001, Children's National has operated Children's School Services, Inc., the DC School Health Nursing Program, in partnership with the DC Department of Health, and engaged in dozens of school-based health programs throughout the region. Today, Children's National leads 29 school health programs and initiatives that span efforts from direct clinical care to educational interventions for children and school staff.² The programs and initiatives currently impact over 100,000 students in more than 200 schools in the Washington, D.C., region.

OUR APPROACH

In the first phase of this initiative, Children's National engaged RESOLVE, a D.C.-based nonprofit specializing in collaborative policy development, to conduct an interview scan of experts and stakeholders at the intersection of health and education and assess the field's perception of what it means to be a school-friendly health system. Beginning in 2020, RESOLVE conducted dozens of interviews with expert stakeholders, including pediatricians, educators, health system and school administrators, school nurses, parents and guardians, community health experts and others. In addition, we surveyed and conducted several webinars with associations to gather additional input on the emerging themes, such as the Children's Hospital Association, American School Health Association, American Federation of Teachers and American Academy of Pediatrics. An advisory committee provided further refinement and expert guidance.

² Children's National Hospital 2019 School Health Programs and Initiatives Report. Access at [ChildrensNational.org/School-Partnerships](https://www.childrensnational.org/School-Partnerships).
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From this rich analysis, five central principles of a school-friendly health system (SFHS) surfaced.

1. **AWARENESS:** School-Friendly Health Systems are familiar with, and responsive to, the culture, policies and needs of the school systems and student populations they serve.
2. **ALL TOUCHPOINTS APPROACH:** School-Friendly Health Systems consider how they can support children's academic outcomes at all touchpoints, including patient visits, program development and policy advocacy.
3. **ACCESSIBILITY:** School-Friendly Health Systems provide accessible health services in a way that limits disruption of students' typical school experience as much as possible.
4. **FAMILY ENGAGEMENT:** School-Friendly Health Systems collaborate with parents, guardians and families effectively, understanding that these are the most important conduits between health systems and schools.
5. **ACCOUNTABILITY:** School-Friendly Health Systems include academic-related outcomes among their organizational priorities and set metrics and incentives that align with those priorities.

A full report of the School-Friendly Health System framework is available upon request at SchoolPartnerships@childrensnational.org.

WHAT'S NEXT

The SFHS principles reflect a broad range of competencies, practices and policy positions that experts and stakeholders view as emblematic of a SFHS – some already practiced, some aspirational. We recognize that how a health system can most effectively embody each SFHS principle will depend on its unique context and that of the surrounding community. As a next step, Children's National is launching a pilot with an initial cohort of hospitals and primary health care centers who serve children across the nation to test and refine the principles and document metrics for success. The ultimate goal will be for the pilot sites to enact infrastructure changes and build a workforce responsive and accountable to ensuring all children reach optimal health and achieve their full academic potential. This effort will seek guidance from national associations to give input on tools and accompanying resources to support the implementation of SFHS principles. Feedback from the pilot cohort and each member's implementation experience will be used to strengthen the SFHS principles for future users. For more information and to get involved, contact SchoolPartnerships@childrensnational.org.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

May 2021 American School Health Association recorded webinar: [Introducing School-Friendly Health System Principles to Improve Delivery of Health Services and Outcomes in Schools](#)

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