

## To close achievement gap, US must address major health risks for urban minority youth, study finds

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"Educationally relevant health disparities" are key drivers of the achievement gap, "but they are largely overlooked," said Charles Basch, the Richard March Hoe Professor of Health Education at Teachers College, Columbia University.

"Over the past several decades, a variety of strategies have been tried to help close the [achievement gap](#) - standards, accountability, NCLB, more rigorous teacher certification - and they're all important, but they won't have the desired effect unless students are ready and motivated to learn."

Basch recently released a meta-study, "Healthier Students Are Better Learners," which focuses on seven health risks that disproportionately impair the academic performance of urban minority youth.

At the College's Cowin Conference Center on March 9, Basch presented his findings and then discussed them with respondents Matthew Yale, Deputy Chief of Staff to U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan; and TC alumnus Howell Wechsler, Director of the Division of Adolescent School Health (DASH) for the U.S. [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#). The event, presented by TC's Campaign for Educational Equity, was moderated by Jane Quinn, Assistant Executive Director for Community Schools for the Children's Aid Society.

Basch, whose study pulls together research from over 300 sources, called

the health crisis for the nation's youth "staggering." Among the statistics he cited:

- Visual problems affect more than 20 percent of American youth
- Asthma affects more than 14 percent of youth under 18
- One in three teens is expected to become pregnant
- Twenty-eight percent of adolescents have been bullied at school
- Two in three students don't get enough physical activity
- 20 percent of youth skip breakfast on any given day.
- About 8 percent of youth ages 6-17 have been diagnosed with hyperactivity

And, Basch said, the situation is far worse for urban minority youth. Among the examples he gave:

- Black children are significantly more likely to suffer from asthma, and certain populations within Latinos - most notably Puerto Ricans - are as well. Urban minority youth also have higher rates of poorly controlled asthma, as indicated by over-use of the emergency room and under-use of efficacious medicines.
- Non-Hispanic black teens have pregnancy rates three times as high as whites, and rates for Hispanic teens are four times as high as for whites.
- Nearly 10 percent of Hispanic youths missed one or more day of

school in the past month because they were afraid - a figure more than twice as high as for whites. Rates for blacks were more than 50 percent higher than for whites.

"All of this is old news," Basch said. What's new, he said, is research on how these conditions work together to impair educational outcomes. The combined effect of the seven is synergistic, he said, creating a crisis that is more than the sum of its parts.

So what must happen to change that picture?

"The most important thing is not do just one thing," Basch said. "Instead, we must address a set of priorities simultaneously."

The country needs a national school health strategic plan, Basch said. Yet because education in America is so decentralized, planning must also go on at the local level. Health related measures must be integrated into school accountability mechanisms, and health goals must become part of individual school improvement plans.

For his part, Yale - who previously worked with Duncan in Chicago - said coordination between government agencies on health issues has been improving, as evidenced in particular by the federal response to last year's H1N1 (swine flu) outbreak. That effort brought together USDOE, CDC, the U.S Department of Agriculture and others, with education officials helping to write CDC guidelines.

"I don't think we're siloed anymore," he said.

Yale also cited other indicators that the Obama administration is focused on health. These included First Lady Michelle Obama's "Let's Move" initiative, and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, now up for reauthorization containing an additional \$41 million for an initiative

focused on healthier schools.

Wechsler, a former student of Basch's, called Basch's findings "insightful and clearly compelling. People in the health fields are often asked 'where's the evidence'" of the need for prioritizing health spending, he said, but Basch's data will enable them to "turn the tables on policymakers."

"Two decades ago, politicians decided to cut back on physical education on the assumption that less time in the gym meant more time in the classroom. Where was the evidence for that?" The results, he said, "threaten to sap the economic competitiveness of our country" and have led to "an epidemic of obesity.

Provided by The Earth Institute at Columbia University

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