



# Health Policy Snapshot

Public Health and Prevention

[www.rwjf.org/healthpolicy](http://www.rwjf.org/healthpolicy)

## ISSUE BRIEF

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# Why Does Education Matter So Much to Health?

## Takeaways:

- Better-educated individuals live longer, healthier lives than those with less education, and their children are more likely to thrive.
- An action plan released by the National Prevention Council, comprised of 17 federal departments, includes efforts to bolster education outcomes for youth.
- Changing demographics and other trends forecast that young people in the U.S. today are less likely than members of their parents' generation to graduate from high school, posing challenges to efforts to improve health status.

## Overview

While it's known that education leads to better jobs and higher income, research also shows strong links between education and longevity, reduced risk of illness, and increased vitality and school success for future generations. Yet, changing demographic trends and rising college costs portend poorly for health.

## EDUCATION IMPACTS LONGEVITY, DISEASE, HEALTH DISPARITIES

Education influences health in several ways. College graduates can expect to live at least five years longer than individuals who have not finished high school.<sup>1</sup> Better-educated individuals also are less likely to

have—or die from—some of the most common acute or chronic diseases like heart disease or diabetes.

Individuals with four more years of education report more positive health behaviors, including being less likely to smoke and less likely to be overweight.<sup>2</sup>

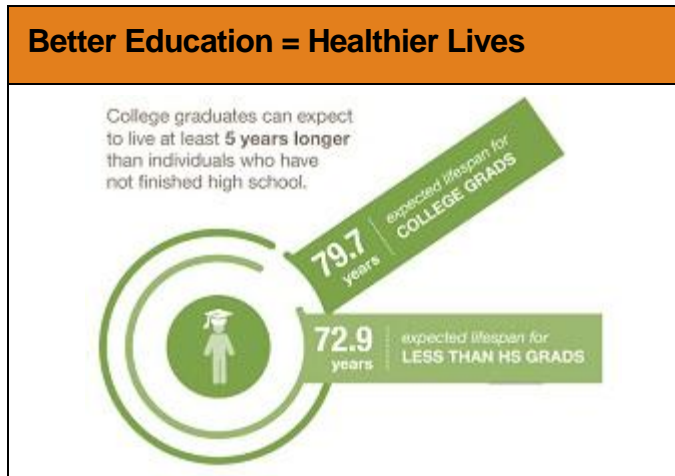
Several other factors, such as asthma and aggression, are associated with lower school performance and disproportionately impact lower-income, urban minority youth, perpetuating health disparities.<sup>3</sup>

Other studies highlight education's lasting legacy on the health and success of future generations. The infant mortality rate among children born to women who never graduated from high school (8.1%) is nearly double that of women with college degrees (4.2%).<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, only 13.3 percent of children whose parents lack a college or advanced degree earned a bachelor's degree, compared to nearly half of kids whose parents are college graduates.<sup>5</sup>

Education leads to higher earnings and increases access to healthier food and safer homes. College graduates earn nearly twice as much as high school graduates over a lifetime. Better-educated individuals also are more likely to have a job—one with healthier working conditions—better health insurance, and higher wages.<sup>6</sup>

## NATIONAL PREVENTION STRATEGY TARGETS EDUCATION TO BOOST HEALTH

The National Prevention Strategy, a national plan designed to increase the number of Americans who are healthy throughout their life, recognizes that good health comes not just from receiving quality medical care. As part of its strategy, the National Prevention Council released an action plan to bolster



Source: [http://www.equitycampaign.org/i/a/document/12557\\_EquityMattersVol6\\_Web03082010.pdf](http://www.equitycampaign.org/i/a/document/12557_EquityMattersVol6_Web03082010.pdf)

educational outcomes as a way to reduce preventable illness and disease and improve Americans' health.<sup>7</sup> This includes maintaining a skilled, cross-trained, and diverse prevention workforce, combating the effects of poverty by improving educational outcomes, and ensuring children have safe places to learn.

## TROUBLING TRENDS AHEAD

Current education trends are disconcerting for future generations. In the United States overall, nearly 46 percent of adults ages 25 and older have either not completed or gone beyond high school. That compares to 28 percent of those who are college graduates.<sup>8</sup>

Among high school freshmen, about 30 percent fail to graduate within four years.<sup>9</sup> Positive school environments support higher graduation rates. But in schools serving low-income youth of color, negative climates for learning and punitive discipline practices can push thousands of students out of school. The likelihood of dropping out also increases with decreasing income.

The cost of college tuition continues to rise at rates that are unsustainable for many families. These trends mean the United States is the only

industrialized nation where young people now are less likely than members of their parents' generation to graduate from high school,<sup>10</sup> possibly negatively impacting health.

## CONCLUSION

Policy-makers and coalitions across the country are prioritizing education reform to improve individual and community health. Some strategies which the *Roadmaps to Health* Community Grantees are exploring include: creating community schools to serve educational and social service needs; ensuring pre-schools are accredited; instituting truancy boards to reduce drop-out rates; establishing career learning opportunities to better connect what is taught in school to skills needed in the workplace; and renovating schools to ensure safety. Schools, public health agencies, community organizations, policy-makers, and others all play a role in ensuring a healthy future for our nation's children.

## WANT TO KNOW MORE?

- [Education Matters for Health \(RWJF\)](#)
- [Healthier Students are Better Learners: A Missing Link in Efforts to Close the Achievement Gap \(CEE\)](#)
- [National Prevention, Health Promotion and Public Health Council \(Healthcare.gov\)](#)

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.census.gov/did/www/nlms/>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.npc.umich.edu/publications/policy\\_briefs/brief9/](http://www.npc.umich.edu/publications/policy_briefs/brief9/)

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.equitycampaign.org/i/a/document/12557\\_EquityMattersVol6\\_Web03082010.pdf](http://www.equitycampaign.org/i/a/document/12557_EquityMattersVol6_Web03082010.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr55/nvsr55\\_14.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr55/nvsr55_14.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2007/2007017.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.rwjf.org/vulnerablepopulations/product.jsp?id=48252>

<sup>7</sup> [www.healthcare.gov/prevention/nphpphc/2012-npc-action-plan.pdf](http://www.healthcare.gov/prevention/nphpphc/2012-npc-action-plan.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.census.gov/acs/www/>

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.edweek.org/rc/articles/2009/04/22/cities\\_in\\_crisis.html](http://www.edweek.org/rc/articles/2009/04/22/cities_in_crisis.html)

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.nassgap.org/.../counting\\_on\\_graduation\\_Habash\\_10-08.pdf](http://www.nassgap.org/.../counting_on_graduation_Habash_10-08.pdf)