



# 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 educational opportunities for youth.
- Current education trends—with young people less likely to graduate from high school than their parents' generation—will pose challenges for the health of future generations.

## Overview

It's well-known that education leads to better jobs and higher income, but research also links education with reduced risk of illness, increased vitality, longevity, and better school success for future generations. Yet, changing demographic trends and rising college costs threaten the future of education in the United States, which may impact how long people live and how healthy people feel while alive.

## EDUCATION IMPACTS LONGEVITY, DISEASE, AND 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 are less likely to be overweight or obese and report more

positive health behaviors, including being less likely to smoke.<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.<sup>3</sup>

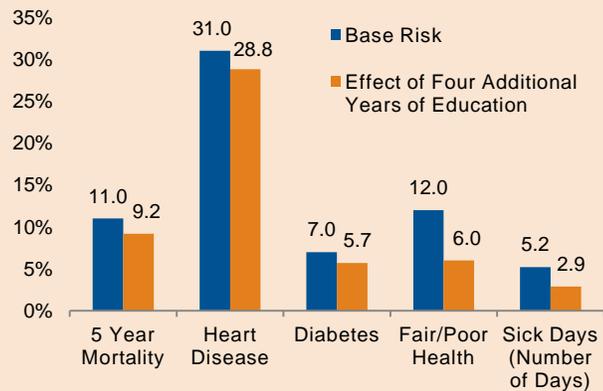
Other studies highlight education's lasting legacy on the health and success of future generations. The infant mortality rate among children born to women who never graduated from high school (8.1%) is nearly double that of women with college degrees (4.2%).<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, only 13.3 percent of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

Education leads to higher earnings and increased 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 lifetime, recognizes that good health does not just come from receiving quality medical care. As part of its strategy, the National Prevention Council released an action plan that aims to improve educational opportunities as a way to promote health and help reduce preventable illness and disease.<sup>7</sup>

### Effect of Additional Four Years of Education on Health Outcomes



Source: [http://www.npc.umich.edu/publications/policy\\_briefs/brief9/policy\\_brief9.pdf](http://www.npc.umich.edu/publications/policy_briefs/brief9/policy_brief9.pdf)

The plan includes strategies for maintaining a skilled, cross-trained, and diverse prevention workforce to combat the effects of poverty and ensure that children have safe places to learn.

### TROUBLING TRENDS AHEAD

Current education trends may pose problems for future generations. In the United States overall, nearly 46 percent of adults ages 25 and older have either not completed or pursued education beyond high school.<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, yet in schools that serve 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 as income level decreases.

The cost of college tuition, which continues to rise at a rate that is unsustainable for many families, is another troubling trend. Together, these trends mean the United States is the only industrialized nation where young people are less likely than members of

their parents' generation to graduate from high school.<sup>10</sup>

### CONCLUSION

Policy-makers and coalitions across the country are prioritizing education reform to improve individual and community health. For example, the *Roadmaps to Health* Community Grantees are exploring several strategies including: creating community schools to serve educational and social service needs; ensuring that 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 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](#)
- [National Prevention Strategy](#)

<sup>1</sup> [www.census.gov/did/www/nlms/](http://www.census.gov/did/www/nlms/)

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

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

<sup>4</sup> [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> [www.rwjf.org/vulnerablepopulations/product.jsp?id=48252](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> [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://p16.nebraska.edu/pdf/10-23-](http://p16.nebraska.edu/pdf/10-23-08%20Education%20Trust%20Counting%20On%20Graduation.pdf)

[08%20Education%20Trust%20Counting%20On%20Graduation.pdf](http://p16.nebraska.edu/pdf/10-23-08%20Education%20Trust%20Counting%20On%20Graduation.pdf)