

HOW DOES HEALTH INFLUENCE SCHOOL DROPOUT?

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The last brief in the *For the Sake of All* series discussed how poverty and low levels of education influence health. This brief examines the relationship between health and education in a different direction: how the health of children and youth influences education and high school completion.

Young people's health influences their ability to learn and to complete school. This is because health and education are closely related. This relationship is of particular concern for African Americans in the St. Louis region. In 2012, over two thousand African American 9-12 graders were classified as high school dropouts in St. Louis City and St. Louis County.¹



How can poor health lead to high school dropout?

There are patterns related to health that lead to a greater risk for school dropout. While these patterns occur often, they do not always result in school dropout.

There are at least three ways in which health challenges may lead to high school dropout:²

- 1) Childhood illness
- 2) Mental health problems
- 3) Poor school performance and risky behaviors

All three patterns increase the risk for leaving school before high school completion.

1 Childhood illness

Illnesses that begin early and continue throughout life limit students' ability to complete school. For example, poorly controlled asthma symptoms may disrupt sleep and hurt the academic performance of children living in urban settings.³ Poorly controlled asthma greatly affects high-school age African Americans in the St. Louis region. In 2011, the rate of emergency room visits for asthma was 7 times higher for African-Americans ages 15 to 19 compared to White youth in the same age group.⁴ The effects of childhood illness on education are often influenced by access to medical care and utilization of medical services.

2 Mental health problems

Nationally, one in five students experiences mental health problems.⁵ Locally, 12.3% (St. Louis County) and 12.7% (St. Louis City) of 6-12 graders say they have considered suicide in the last year.⁶ A large majority of children with mental health challenges

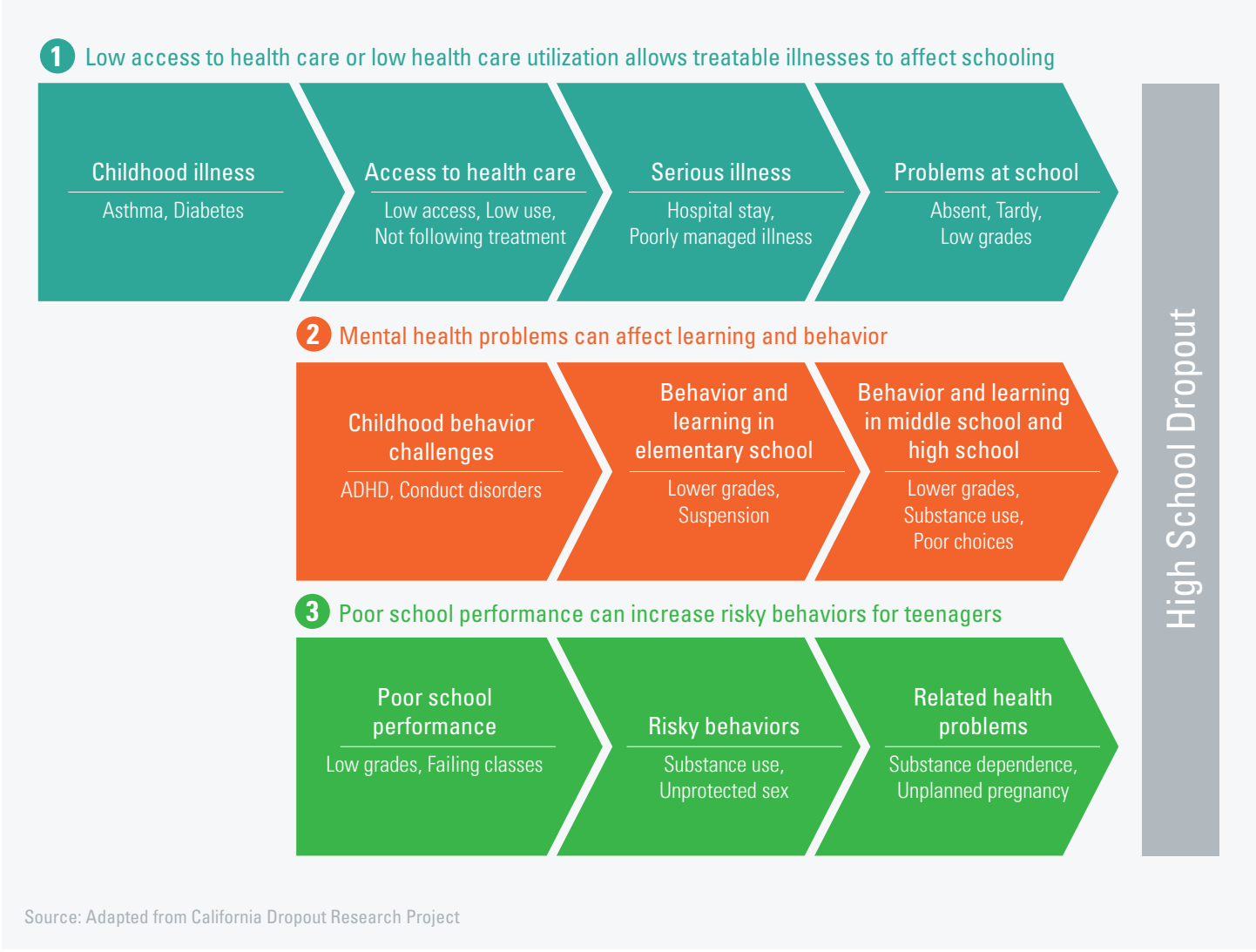
are not identified or treated. Over time, mental health problems increase the risk of school dropout. For example, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and behavioral disorders can lead to poor performance at school. The stigma associated with adolescent mental health problems can influence some parents' willingness to seek mental health care for their children.⁷

3 Poor school performance and risky behaviors

The first two patterns describe how illness and mental health problems affect education. The relationship between education and risky behaviors for teenagers, however, is in the

reverse direction. African American students who earn low grades are more likely to take part in behaviors that expose them to more health risks.⁷ And these new health risks lead to a higher dropout risk. For example, a student who earns low grades may be more likely to use drugs or to become sexually active early in life. This student may be on the path to failing in school and dropping out. African American teens in the St. Louis region are greatly affected by health problems related to risky behaviors. Even though overall teen birth rates have dropped, differences in teen birth rates still exist. In 2010, the teen birth rate of African-Americans ages 15 to 19 was almost two times higher than the national average.^{8,9}

Figure 1 shows how three patterns related to health can lead to high school dropout



We can give children and youth the opportunity to complete school by **INVESTING IN THEIR HEALTH**

How can we help children complete school?

1 Invest in coordinated school health programs for all students.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), too many health activities in schools are disconnected. Bringing the many parts of school health together into an organized approach can help schools to:

- > Eliminate gaps in services
- > Reduce duplication in supports
- > Build teamwork among school health professionals and educators
- > Develop partnerships and improved communication among public health, education, and school health professionals
- > Improve focus on helping students develop behaviors to improve health



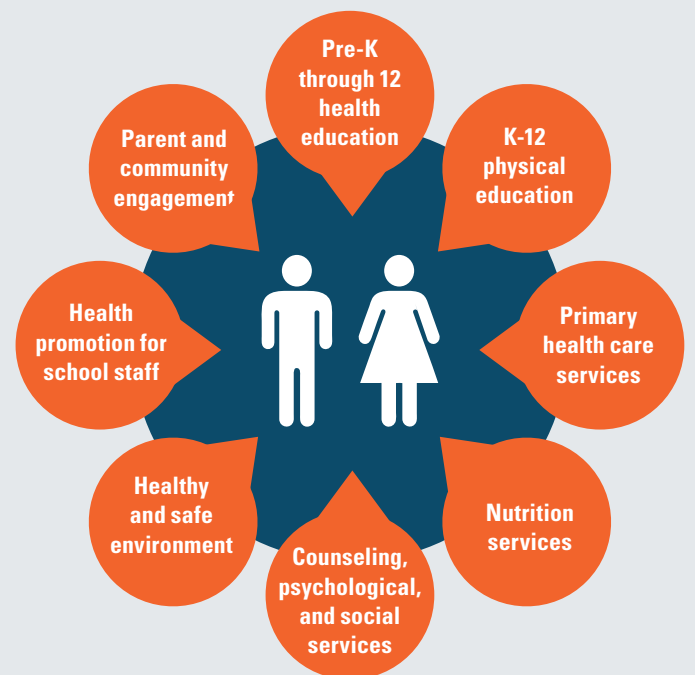
To Find Out More Click Below

[Click here](#) to learn more about coordinated school health programs.

There are several coordinated school health programs in St. Louis. For example, in August 2012, Mercy Children's Hospital and the St. Louis Public Schools opened a school-based clinic at Roosevelt High School. The Boeing Company supported this program with grant funding. The goal of the

clinic is to decrease time lost from school due to health problems. The clinic is open during school hours and offers care for staff, students, and the students' children who participate in the school's Parent-Infant Interaction Program. The clinic includes a waiting room and exam rooms for physical, behavioral, and dental care. Patients do not need to have health insurance or money to use clinic services. This program demonstrates a great investment of time and resources into coordinated school health.

Figure 2 illustrates the components of a well-coordinated school health program.^{10,11,12}





To Find Out More Click Below
[Click here](#) to learn more about the Mercy Clinic at Roosevelt.

Targeted investments would include:

- > Immediately expanding coordinated school health programs to all high schools and middle schools in high-poverty communities
- > Implementing evaluation, technical assistance, and resource plans to support school districts in their efforts to create or expand coordinated school health programs
- > Building partnerships among government and non-governmental agencies to coordinate school health efforts

2 Invest in counseling and psychological services for young people

Young people experiencing mental health problems often end up in emergency rooms. A better strategy is to invest in a system of care delivery among agencies serving children and adolescents.¹³ This approach frames youth mental health as a public health priority.

St. Louis County residents passed an increase in their sales tax to support a community children’s service fund. The fund invests in organizations that provide mental health and substance abuse services for youth. The fund’s leadership is committed to building an integrated service system. Funded services target paths that place high school completion at risk, such as substance abuse and teen pregnancy. The fund is an important foundation for supporting the mental health of young people. A recent needs assessment of the fund reports that many neighborhoods, particularly high poverty areas are not being served.¹⁴ This finding indicates a need to provide greater access to mental health services.

Targeted investments would include:

- > Securing a stable funding source for integrated and coordinated counseling and psychological services for youth across the St. Louis region
- > Building public-private partnerships to further develop and sustain a system of mental health care delivery for youth

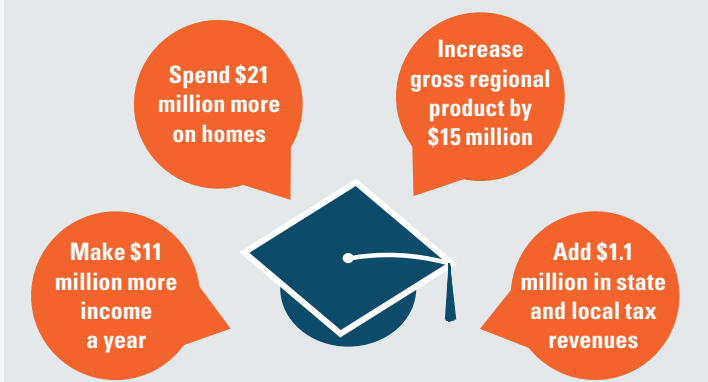


To Find Out More Click Below
[Click here](#) to learn more about the St. Louis County Children’s Service Fund.

How does decreasing high school dropout benefit us all?

Society benefits from a decrease in high school dropout. High school graduation is associated with a reduction in both crime and the need for welfare. Below are the likely benefits if 1,000 African American dropouts living in metro St. Louis had earned their diplomas.¹⁵

1,000 new graduates, combined, would likely do the following:



Each year in the St. Louis region thousands of African American students drop out of high school. Investing in their health and education makes sense.



To Find Out More Click Below

Learn more about [local efforts to address the high school dropout crisis](#) in St. Louis through the American Graduate initiative

Learn more about the [regional economic costs of dropout](#)

Learn more about building [community-school health council partnerships](#)

This is the second in a series of five briefs prepared by a team of researchers at Washington University and Saint Louis University. The data and recommendations discussed in the briefs will be explored in-depth in the forthcoming report, “For the Sake of All: A Report on the Health and Well-Being of African Americans in St. Louis.”

Next brief: *Mental Health in St. Louis*

Resources

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