

## 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 children and families in our community and beyond. We have made it a priority to advocate for the unique needs of children and to address community health issues that impact child health.

Eighty percent of 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 – children 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.<sup>1</sup>

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 Hospital is leading an initiative to develop school-friendly health system principles to help hospitals and health care delivery systems that encompass hospitals and ambulatory settings to 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.*

The work builds upon lessons learned from other "friendly" initiatives to better position hospitals and health care delivery 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.

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<sup>1</sup> 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>  
January 2021

This effort leverages twenty years of Children's National leading school health efforts in the 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.<sup>2</sup> The programs and initiatives currently impact over 100,000 students in 217 schools in Washington, D.C. region. Over the next five years, Children's National aims to develop school-friendly health system principles, enact infrastructure changes and build a workforce responsive to and accountable to improving student health and academic outcomes.

When we launched this effort in 2019, we did not anticipate working through a worldwide health crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic severely stressed our health care delivery systems and caused educational disruption for nearly every child in the United States. It will be more important than ever for hospitals and health care delivery systems to utilize a framework that strengthens collaborations with schools that ensures all children can reach optimal health and achieve their full academic potential.

## 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 perceptions of what it means to be a school-friendly health system. Beginning in 2020, RESOLVE conducted 21 interviews with expert stakeholders, including pediatricians, educators, health care delivery system and school administrators, school nurses, parents and guardians, community health experts and others. An advisory committee provided further refinement and expert guidance. From this rich analysis, five central themes or characteristics of a school-friendly health system (SFHS) surfaced.

1. SFHSs are familiar with, and responsive to, the culture, policies, and needs of school systems and students.
2. SFHSs consider how they can support the academic achievement of children at all touchpoints, understanding this extends beyond school-based interventions.
3. SFHSs provide accessible health services in a way that limits students' out-of-class time as much as possible.
4. SFHSs collaborate with parents, guardians, and families effectively, understanding that these are the most important conduits between health care delivery systems and schools.
5. SFHSs incorporate the academic success of their patients into their organizational priority setting and strategic planning and set metrics and incentives that align with those priorities.

## WHAT'S NEXT

As a next step, Children's National is seeking broader expert and stakeholder feedback – through multiple forums and channels – to test and refine these themes and transform them into actionable principles. Contributors will be asked to offer feedback on the five themes of a school-friendly health system, as well as examples of how these characteristics can be demonstrated and metrics for success. In addition, Children's National is seeking input from national associations on what tools/accompanying resources would support their profession in implementation of SFHS principles.

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<sup>2</sup> Children's National Hospital 2019 School Health Programs and Initiatives Report. Access at [ChildrensNational.org/School-Partnerships](https://www.childrensnational.org/School-Partnerships).  
January 2021