



2016 Educator Effectiveness Webinar Series
Healthier Students are Better Learners
Q&A with Charles Basch, Ph.D.
June 2, 2016

In this webinar, Dr. Charles Basch, Richard March Hoe Professor of Health and Education at Teachers College, Columbia University, presented the causal connections between health factors and the motivation and ability to learn. This Q&A addressed the questions participants had for Dr. Basch following the webinar. The [webinar recording](#) and [presentation slides](#) are also available.

Questions

1. What are some key tips for families to enforce at home for healthy living?

Dr. Basch suggests that one of the best ways to cultivate healthy living at home for students, is to limit access to unhealthy food. He discusses how it is the job of schools to ensure that families and parents are aware of the health issues affecting students, continue to reach out to families, and translate evidence-based programs in local communities.

2. In which ways can we leverage technology to support health and academics in school and home settings?

Dr. Basch stresses the importance of how technical assistance is one strategy to help school address educationally-relevant health disparities and can be helpful in determining which students need which kinds of services as well as increasing communication between teachers and parents. He explains that the nature of communication has changed and that there is great potential to use texting to interact with education stakeholders. He also suggests that schools have a shared portal for parents and teachers, such as Canvas, to communicate about how health affects the academic success of students. Dr. Basch states the importance of better integration of existing information systems that contain health and educational data and advocates for early warning systems that go beyond the usual data elements—attendance, behavior and course performance—and also includes health related information; he believes it is important that schools keep track of reasons for absenteeism, and build health goals into annual school improvement efforts.

3. Where can I reference the information covered?

The information covered in the presentation can mostly be found in the PowerPoint presentation titled “*Healthier Students are Better Learners*,” by Dr. Charles Basch. Other information covered in the webinar can be found in other publications by Dr. Basch located in the “References” portion of the PowerPoint presentation.

4. What is the single most important thing to do to develop a robust school health program?

There is not one single strategy when developing a robust school program; however, Dr. Basch discusses the three following criteria for selecting strategic priorities: 1) the prevalence and extent of health disparities, 2) the evidence that certain health issues have causal effects on educational outcomes, and 3) the use of school-based programs and policies with proven or promising effects that are acceptable to school personnel and parents, and that are feasible to implement. During his presentation, Dr. Basch gives a variety of ways that schools can address the prevalence of eight different health issues: visual problems, asthma, teen pregnancy, aggression and violence, physical activity, breakfast, inattention and hyperactivity, and oral health.

5. How can schools address truancy, and can you offer any suggestions about this topic?

During his presentation, Dr. Basch describes how asthma, aggression and violence, physical activity, breakfast, inattention and hyperactivity, and oral health problems affect absenteeism, leading to poor educational outcomes. He also suggests that participants research the organization AttendanceWorks.org, which provides many resources and ideas for reducing absenteeism, including tiered interventions. The website also gives recommendations on how to improve school climate, ensure safe transportation, address health needs, recognize improvement and reward good attendance, involve students and parents in finding solutions, and monitor absenteeism aggressively.

6. Often times the families mention that they cannot afford the food; can you speak a little about this?

Dr. Basch discusses that hunger continues to be a huge problem in America. Dr. Basch suggests that schools have a universal school breakfast program, allow students to eat in the classroom, or have a Grab and Go or Breakfast After the Bell program. He also provides participants with information on several programs: School Breakfast and Lunch Programs, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), The Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP), Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), and Women, Infants, Children Nutrition (WIC) service. A good resource on this topic is the Food Research and Action Center (<http://frac.org/>).

7. What can nurses do for educators to assist in having healthy students?

Dr. Bach explains that nurses play essential roles, for they help to minimize the effects of chronic disease, have the potential to identify children with undiagnosed needs, and provide professional development for teachers and school staff. Dr. Basch explains that they should be key members of the school health leadership team. Basch highlighted the importance of

effective coordination where different people are playing different roles but all are working toward a common goal of helping students succeed.

8. How does free school breakfast and lunch play a role in health and learning?

Dr. Basch discusses how breakfast is one of the eight priority and educationally-relevant health factors contributing to the overall achievement of students. According to his presentation, about 14% of high school students skip breakfast. He compares the rate of Caucasian and African American girls consuming breakfast at age nine and age 19 and displays a graph that shows the disparities between the two, with African American girls consuming less breakfast at both ages. Also, both races consumed less breakfast as they got older. Breakfast also plays a factor in a student's cognition and rate of absenteeism, which ultimately has a negative effect on educational outcomes. To mitigate poor educational outcomes, Dr. Basch highly advises that schools implement a universal school breakfast program, allow students to eat in the classroom, and create a Grab and Go or Breakfast After the Bell Program. These suggestions ultimately reduce multiple impediments to a student's motivation and ability to learn.

9. How do you convince administrators about the importance of this topic?

Dr. Basch explains how it is essential for local leaders as well as administrators to have an understanding of how health disparities affect educational outcomes; this way priorities in schools will be addressed. Overall, it is important for administrators to understand the causal link to academic achievement and how ignoring health issues will jeopardize investments in school improvement. Dr. Basch explains that administrators must integrate health-related measures into accountability systems for school improvement efforts, include health goals in mandated school improvement plans, and establish school health councils or leadership teams. Administrators must also ensure that sufficient curricular time is devoted to health education, support professional development of staff, and adopt specific policies to address each of the educationally-relevant health problems.

10. How can urban districts better support the health of our students?

Schools alone do not have the resources needed to address students' health needs. Dr. Basch explains how involving the community is paramount in order to make people more aware and work with local schools in addressing health issues. Urban school districts need more help in addressing health factors. Professional development for leaders, teachers, and staff as well as outreach and education for parents will help.

11. Which aspect of health is it best to start with?

The aspect of health to best start with depends on the local context regarding importance and feasibility of addressing different health problems. Many times, students are affected by

multiple health issues. Districts or schools need to understand the resources available in their local communities and prioritize which health problems they will address with evidence-based programs. Unfortunately, many schools and communities do not have sufficient resources to reduce all health barriers to learning.

12. How can we quantify directly impacted sustained academic achievements when there are so many variables that need to be controlled?

Dr. Basch explains how it is not easy to quantify directly impacted sustained academic achievements when there are so many variables that need to be controlled, and it mostly depends on who the audience is for the results, since a variety of evidence is needed. He says that a cluster-randomized trial would be ideal and should be funded, but it would be costly and take many years to yield any results. In the meantime, Dr. Basch suggests demonstrating how specific school health initiatives affect proximal outcomes such as connectedness and attendance, which can be very compelling. He also advises that districts receive testimonials from school leaders, teachers, parents, and students. Dr. Basch also suggests that participants look into the following high-quality, evidence-based programs, found in the following resources: The Centers for Disease Control and Preventions' (CDC) *Guidelines for School Health Programs to Prevent Tobacco Use and Addiction* located in the CDC's Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWS) series; *School Health Guidelines to Prevent Unintentional Injuries and Violence* located in the CDC's MMWS series; *Moving into the Future: National Standards for Physical Education*; and *National Health Education Standards: Achieving Excellence*.

13. How can we help schools prioritize sleep and healthy school start times?

During the webinar, Dr. Basch explains the importance of sleep for children and adolescents and the development of their brain. This topic has not been given enough attention. There is a movement underway to help schools prioritize sleep and change the time that schools start. He discusses how sleep has a powerful effect on memory, attention, and emotional well-being and that policymakers need to realize that starting school too early in the day affects students' success. He mentions an article about the sleep patterns of high school students in America – over 90% of these students don't receive enough sleep, which is available at https://www.cdc.gov/pcd/issues/2014/14_0383.htm. Dr. Basch also suggests participants look into startschoollater.net, which gives information about increasing awareness of sleep effects, and helps policymakers recognize that starting school too early hurts students' chances for success.