

**Washington Health Foundation Panel**  
**September 15, 2008**  
**Washington State Basic Education Finance Joint Task Force**

**SUMMARY**

- Investment in educational success, particularly for students from low-income families and students of color, is an important investment in long term health for those populations.
- The Achievement Gap and Health Disparities are closely linked. Many of the students experiencing academic failure are the same students experiencing poor health. The amount of progress we can make on the academic side of that equation is limited if we do not address the health side, and vice-versa.
- The Coordinated School Health model, designed and tested by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, is an important potential tool that we recommend be formally incorporated as we move forward in Education Reform in Washington State.
- This model, including intensified school community partnerships, should be implemented in high-need districts and buildings as one tool to address the achievement gap.

**Resources:**

Governor's Interagency Council on Health Disparities

<http://healthequity.wa.gov>

Centers for Disease Control - Coordinated School Health

<http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/partners/funded/cshp.htm>

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# Health and academic achievement: lost opportunities for too many

By Vickie Ybarra

June 18, 2008

*Special to The Times*

Health and education are two sides of the same coin: Each affects the other and they combine to affect, ultimately, the well-being of our residents and our communities. Inequities in health status and education for communities of color are real in our state, and they point to tremendous missed opportunities among our residents.

In the aggregate, people with overall higher levels of academic attainment are healthier. This has to do with the obvious factors, such as earning power and employment-related health benefits, but also with having the space to make healthy life choices to avoid preventable injury and chronic disease.

Children and adults who are healthier are able to participate more fully in school. Imagine the child with uncontrolled asthma missing so much school every year that he falls behind in schoolwork, or the young adult with an untreated behavioral condition that forces her to drop out of college.

Poor health or low educational attainment prevent people from reaching their potential; prevent them from experiencing the same level of opportunities as their peers.

There are two important efforts that ultimately will help create more-equitable opportunities for children and communities of color in Washington.

First, the Governor's Interagency Council on Health Disparities, created in 2006, is tasked with developing a state action plan for eliminating health disparities, and expects to have its plan to the governor and Legislature in time for the 2010 session. The council meets quarterly and is actively seeking public input into its process.

Second, several state agencies — the commissions on African American, Hispanic and Asian Pacific American Affairs, along with the Governor's Office on Indian Affairs (GOIA) and the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction — were charged by the 2008 Legislature with conducting studies on the academic-achievement gaps experienced by their respective communities and crafting recommendations for the Legislature before the end of this year. These agencies also are actively seeking public input into their processes.

Washington is a great state with great people. We value individual and collective work and opportunity, and we have a long track record of reflecting these values in our public policy. Both the health-care and education systems in Washington function well for many people. We know, however, that people of color and people from low-income communities are those most likely to be left behind by both. Until we successfully address these inequities, Washington cannot be the "healthiest state in the nation" nor create a "world-class education system."

There are opportunities for cross-fertilization and collaboration among these two important efforts. For example, because educational attainment is so predictably tied with health status, the Health Disparities Council has already identified educational attainment as one of its top-12 priority areas of concern. If this priority is included in its 2010 plan, the council will need to create specific recommendations around educational attainment.

Similarly, I encourage the agencies studying the achievement gap to work as collaboratively as possible on their recommendations to the Legislature. If they find sufficient overlap among their concerns, a united voice around a top few recommendations will be a powerful message, one hard to ignore.

Inequities in education and health in our state are unacceptable lost opportunities for too many Washingtonians. Both will require substantial, systemic change to reverse. Solid, well-researched recommendations represent the first of many steps that will need to be taken in the future.

Let us plan with the end in mind, let us build on the strengths of one another and of our great state, and let us build systems that will ultimately ignite opportunity for all of our children and all of our residents.

*Vickie Ybarra, president of the Yakima School Board, is chairwoman of the Governor's Interagency Council on Health Disparities.*

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