



Increasing the Delivery of Childhood Immunizations through Health Center and School Partnerships

Introduction

Health centers play a crucial role in enhancing the health and well-being of school-aged children, providing essential services that ensure early detection and preventive care, including immunizations. Health centers can enhance their support for school-aged children by leveraging existing partnerships and establishing new collaborations with schools.

Partnerships are essential for providing childhood immunizations. Health centers can address gaps in immunization coverage by partnering with schools to offer immunizations at school-based service sites, school-based health centers, schools, and within communities. School-required immunizations are important for keeping students healthy, safe, and in school. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “On-time vaccination throughout childhood is essential because it helps provide immunity before children are exposed to potentially life-threatening diseases.”¹

Data suggests that the percentage of children receiving required vaccinations decreased by 14% during the COVID-19 pandemic and related school closures.² According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, “More than two years into the COVID-19 pandemic, about half of United States primary care pediatricians reported a decrease in patients receiving routine childhood vaccinations...” Findings from an American Academy of Pediatrics Periodic Survey conducted from August 2022 to January 2023 revealed that “when asked to identify barriers to timely vaccination delivery in their practice, more than half of pediatricians reported ...missed well-child visits were moderate or significant barriers.”² The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that the kindergarten vaccination rate has fallen from 95% to 93%, below the rate needed for herd immunity for highly contagious diseases such as measles.³ According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, “**It is especially important to maintain routine immunizations to prevent a disease outbreak, public health emergency or future pandemic.**”⁴ **By establishing a partnership, health centers can work with schools to ensure all children have access to care and routine immunizations.**



This resource is designed to support health centers partnering with schools to increase the delivery of childhood immunizations for school-aged children. Such partnerships between health centers and schools are an effective strategy to break down barriers and ensure that students receive access to quality care.

For additional ideas, resources, and strategies, check out the School-Based Health Alliance’s “Toolkit to Increase Well-Child Visits and Vaccinations in School-Aged Youth”

Existing Partnerships with Schools

Partnerships between health centers and schools create transformative results. Bringing healthcare where students spend most of their time, through school-based service sites and school-based health centers, supports student success by removing barriers, including access, lack of insurance, and parents and guardians missing work. Health centers can partner with schools to build trust, communicate, and make referrals for immunizations at the main health center sites.

Building on existing partnerships, health centers can partner with schools to deliver vaccines and implement immunization programs that increase knowledge and promote behavior change regarding vaccine-preventable diseases.



Tips and Ideas...

- Work in partnership with students, families, and communities to understand barriers to care.
- Build buy-in and trust with school staff to support health center efforts. Develop messages for school staff that help them see their essential role in breaking down barriers to immunization access, ensuring students receive access to quality care that positively impacts education outcomes.
- Engage parents, guardians, and students (as age-appropriate) through advisory committees to support health center efforts. Develop tailored messages emphasizing their crucial role as peer-to-peer champions in facilitating immunization access and securing buy-in, ensuring students receive quality care that enhances educational outcomes. Educate students and families about immunizations and inform them of vaccine offerings. Allow adequate time to answer questions from parents, guardians, and students.
- Host a town hall or immunization education program in the school for students, parents, guardians, and families to ask questions and learn about immunizations.
- Work in partnership with school principals to present at professional development days and workshops, giving teachers and staff an overview of available immunizations and how they will impact student health and academic success.



- Build a planning team and establish goals for efforts to increase the delivery of childhood immunizations.
- Meet with school partners to update, plan, coordinate, and problem-solve school-based health care and school health related issues and needs.
- Identify a school or school district champion to work with to increase the delivery of childhood immunizations.
- Identify a school-based health center staff member to promote the availability of immunizations.
- Create systems for school staff to refer students to health centers for immunizations.
- Provide immunizations at schools consistently if the health center has a school-based service site or school-based health center.
- Make every visit an opportunity to provide recommended immunizations.
- Create opportunities to immunize students, family members, and school staff.
- Collaborate with school staff, particularly school health staff such as the school nurse and school counselors, to identify students missing their routine immunizations.
- Work with the school nurse to determine how many students need catch-up immunizations.
- Work collaboratively with the school nurse on ideas about culturally appropriate vaccine messaging and referrals.
- Partner with the school to host a school-located immunization event. Now is the perfect time to start if you have never partnered with a school to host an immunization clinic.

New Partnerships with Schools

Health centers can launch new partnerships with schools to increase referrals for immunizations. This collaboration also presents an opportunity to implement immunization awareness programs, serving as a strategy to test and strengthen the partnership. If successful, the collaboration is likely to grow.



Tips and Ideas...

- 01 Consider approaching the school district's central office. The school district administrator (often referred to as the superintendent) has the power and authority and holds the final level of support to sign off on the needed agreement(s) between the district and the health center.
- 02 Approach an individual school to identify a champion with whom to help the health center navigate approval through the district, such as the school nurse, school counselor, or school administrator (often the principal or assistant principal).
- 03 Learn about the school district or school's education goals. Develop messages about how the partnership can support their goals.
- 04 Create a system for the school to refer students to health center services easily.
- 05 Develop joint messages with the school partner to build buy-in and trust with parents and guardians to support referrals to health center.



What do school partnerships make possible for quality improvement...

Partnerships with schools enable health centers to reach current school-aged patients and engage new ones. These collaborations create an additional pathway to ensure students are connected to health care and receive age-appropriate vaccinations. School-aged children who receive care at school-located service sites or school-based health centers are included in health centers' reporting to the Bureau of Primary Health Care through the Uniform Data System. This reporting covers multiple metrics, including age-appropriate immunizations for children and adolescents.

Tracking the care of school-aged children allows health centers to explore the impact of school partnerships on their performance outcomes, including Uniform Data System and health center-specific goals. This enables health centers to identify strengths and growth opportunities, informing quality improvement initiatives to increase the percentage of children and adolescents that receive age-appropriate immunizations. Performance data can help health centers demonstrate their reach to young people in their communities and their role in supporting preventative care informed by an increase in those who receive age-appropriate immunizations.



Tips and Ideas...

- Identify current school-aged patients overdue for a well-child visit and missing their routine immunizations, and leverage or establish school partnerships to bring services to schools that serve those patients.
- Collaborate with schools where partnerships exist to identify students needing a well-child visit, or missing their routine immunizations who could become new health center patients and receive school-based services.
- Determine if the health center is more effective in reaching some populations for well-child visits and routine immunizations.
 - Use patient information such as age, race, ethnicity, or gender to explore trends in reach and uptake of services, identify disparities, and inform targeted interventions to improve health equity and service delivery outcomes.
 - Engage in quality improvement practices to test and implement changes to reach populations with lower rates of well-child visits and age-appropriate immunizations.
- Use data to compare the impact of different intensities of school-based partnerships, such as formal referral systems, once-a-year pop-up immunization clinics, routine intermittent service availability on school campuses, and fully integrated school-based health centers, to determine which has the most positive impact on service receipt among school-aged patients.

Health Center Highlight

“ The school-based health center (SBHC) at River Rouge High School has served Wayne County students ages 10-to-21 years for the past six years. When COVID caused the schools to close in March 2020, the School-Based Health Center (SBHC) staff quickly developed creative new ways to reach their students. Like the entire nation, the school saw a decline in immunization uptake. They designed a pilot nurse-led program to increase vaccinations and address the social determinant needs during the pandemic. Following multiple team meetings and meticulous planning, the staff held two drive-up immunization clinics. Initial observations showed an overall increase in immunization uptake, and 97% of participants became current with recommended vaccinations. Most parents (93%) said they would attend again and recommend it to others. They also felt that infection control precautions helped make the care delivered safe and efficient. The social determinants of health, including food insecurity, were assessed at the drive-up immunization clinic. The drive-up clinic did not advertise but served as a food distribution site and provide families with non-perishable food boxes. This method of vaccine delivery is a viable model going into the future.⁵ ”

- Dr. Maureen Murphy, DNP, APRN, FNP-BC, School-Based Healthcare Center at River Rouge High School, River Rouge, Michigan



Conclusion

Families often view schools as a trusted resource and can provide safe and convenient access to school-located vaccination clinics. One takeaway from the COVID-19 pandemic is the importance of health and education working together to ensure that students are in school, healthy, and ready to learn.

When school-aged children have their health needs met, they are more likely to arrive and stay at school healthy and ready to learn. A health center and school partnership can facilitate the sharing of resources and expertise, enabling comprehensive outreach and education efforts. By co-locating services and joint coordination efforts, health centers can ensure that immunizations are conveniently and consistently provided, ultimately increasing the delivery of immunizations and improving health outcomes and academic success amongst school-age children.

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Acknowledgments

This publication is supported by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of an award totaling \$625,000 with 0% financed with non-governmental sources. The contents are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement, by HRSA, HHS, or the U.S. Government. For more information, please visit [HRSA.gov](https://www.hrsa.gov).