

Creating Asthma-Friendly Schools: Lessons Learned for Managing Asthma and Decreasing Student Absenteeism

Albuquerque, New Mexico

Problem Overview

In 2003, five million school-aged children and youth nationwide were reported to have asthma, and 3.1 million had experienced an asthma episode or attack within the previous year. Asthma is one of the leading causes of school absenteeism, which can negatively affect students' academic performance. In the Albuquerque/Bernalillo County area of New Mexico, an estimated 10,000 school-aged children have asthma.

Program Description

Albuquerque receives funds from CDC to develop and implement policies and programs to reduce asthma episodes and related school absences. In 2003, the New Mexico Departments of Health and Education launched the Albuquerque Public Schools (APS) Asthma Program. Program goals include (1) improving in-school asthma management, (2) establishing "asthma-friendly" school policies and procedures, (3) increasing access to health care and health insurance, and (4) reducing absenteeism. To accomplish these goals, the APS Asthma Program hired staff, created a community advisory board, and contracted with community organizations.

Specific strategies include the following:

- Program school nurses provide asthma education to school staff and students in grades 3–5.
- The APS Nursing Administration updates asthma education and management procedures to reflect best practices.
- Students and families unable to access state-funded or private health insurance are referred to the New Mexico Department of Health's Children's Medical Services.
- All APS health rooms are equipped with asthma-control devices.

Program Impact

The number of schools participating in the APS Asthma Program grew from 20 in year one to 85 by year four. During the first 4 years of the project:

- Individual health plans, orders for medication, and asthma action plans increased, indicating better management of student asthma.
- Overall absences due to asthma decreased from 39% to 26%.

Schools that can reduce absenteeism—a common challenge facing students with asthma—also can help remove a barrier to learning and academic achievement. Successful school demonstration programs are models for other school systems to modify and implement.

Note: Success stories, including background data and outcomes, reflect information as reported by participating programs. Also, in this context, impact refers to short-term or intermediate outcomes.

