

Charlotte-Mecklenburg County, North Carolina

Creating an Asthma-Friendly School Environment

Problem Overview

Asthma—a leading chronic illness among youth in the United States and a major cause of school absenteeism—cannot be cured, but it can be controlled. Many students with symptoms are not aware that they have asthma. In the urban Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) district in North Carolina

- About 8,500 of the approximately 136,000 students have asthma.
- Some of the students with asthma do not receive regular or follow-up health care, manage their asthma effectively, or take their medications as prescribed.

Program/Activity Description

The CMS, supported through funding from CDC's Division of Adolescent and School Health, developed and implemented the Asthma Education Program (AEP), a collaborative effort between the Mecklenburg County Health Department and CMS. The CMS established the program to provide safe and supportive learning environments, increase student participation in academic and school activities, improve attendance, and build lifelong self-management skills for children with asthma. The AEP

- Developed School Health Teams—using CDC's school health model—to focus on asthma and wellness activities.
- Involved school nurses in providing clinical support, case management, and education for students with asthma.
- Developed asthma action plans for students with asthma.
- Coordinated indoor air quality initiatives based on the Environmental Protection Agency's Tools for Schools program.
- Launched a school-based service providing respiratory therapists to help care for students with asthma in school.

Program/Activity Outcome

Since 2004, the CMS AEP has

- Increased the identification of students with asthma.
- Offered the American Lung Association's *Open Airways for Schools* curriculum to all students with asthma in grades 3–5, and developed asthma education curricula for grades 4–6 and 9.
- Assisted more than 700 students through the AEP respiratory care program.
- Worked with community physician practices to develop a universal asthma action plan and an asthma education program for parents of students with asthma.
- Developed district-wide asthma-friendly policies and guidelines.
- Partnered with Chris Draft, a National Football League player with asthma, to launch a local asthma awareness campaign.

Successful school initiatives, such as the CMS AEP, can serve as models for other school districts nationwide to better serve students with asthma and help decrease asthma-related absenteeism.

