

Sustaining School Based Health Centers

Report Summary

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Multiple obstacles stand between low-income families and good health care. Beyond paying medical bills, just accessing care can be daunting. The closest clinic may be several bus rides away and closed during weekends and evenings. Taking a child to be seen for an ear infection could take all day and mean lost wages and school time. School-based health centers (SBHC) help to make healthcare affordable and accessible by providing health services to young people where they spend most of their waking hours: at school. Research to date suggests that SBHCs can significantly expand access to healthcare and reduce healthcare costs. Because of these benefits, the Affordable Care Act of 2010 recognized SBHCs as a federally authorized program and provided a one-time mandatory appropriation of \$200 million for SBHC capital expenses. Unfortunately, keeping the doors of these centers open can be difficult for the health organizations that operate them in partnership with schools.

A Chapin Hall report explores how five SBHCs, established through the Elev8 Initiative in Chicago Public Schools in 2009, have weathered a myriad of challenges and key lessons they have learned along the way that have helped to sustain their work. Like SBHCs across the country, the Elev8 SBHCs have faced several significant barriers to sustaining their work. Based on the information collected, the strategies that appear to have been most beneficial to sustaining the five Elev8 SBHCs include:

Finding common ground. The SBHCs and their host schools learned over time to limit the scope of services the centers provided to those of greatest concern to both the health providers and the school community.

Establishing SBHCs where demand is high. Because SBHCs rely heavily on third-party reimbursements, SBHCs in schools and communities with a large number of potential patients, including both students and community members, are more sustainable.

Building strong ties among health center and school staff. Keeping lines of communication open among health and school staff—through regular health committee meetings or through health and school liaisons—can build trust and reduce tensions over time.

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