Is Your School “Asthma-Friendly”?

There’s a lot that principals can do to keep asthmatic students healthy and ready to learn.

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IN BRIEF

About one in 11 school-age children have been diagnosed with asthma, a chronic condition that affects their attendance and academic performance. This article outlines the steps principals can take in establishing an asthma management program in their schools through a coordinated school health approach.

Why should principals be concerned about asthma management in schools? What role should they play in developing policies and practices to ensure that schools are “asthma-friendly” for students and staff? How can a coordinated approach benefit students with asthma and contribute to their academic success?
improve attendance, and positively impact academic achievement.

**Establishing an Asthma Management Program**

The first step in establishing a comprehensive asthma management plan is to learn as much as you can about the condition and how it might affect your students. If you don’t already have one, you can create a multidisciplinary team (sometimes called a coordinated school health team) to address student health issues. This is a good way to start learning not only about asthma but other chronic health conditions, such as diabetes.

Work with the school nurse, school physician, school counselor, social worker, and other relevant personnel to develop “asthma-friendly” policies (see sidebar). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Division of Adolescent and School Health (CDC/DASH) has developed the School Health Index for school health teams. It is a self-assessment and planning tool that schools can use to evaluate and improve their health and safety policies and programs. It’s easy to use, completely confidential, and available in electronic and print formats at [www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth](http://www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth).

**Key Asthma Issues**

**Access to medications.** Once you understand the basics of asthma management, you may feel more comfortable permitting students to carry and self-administer quick-relief asthma medication. Individual students should have written asthma action plans that provide school staff with critical information about their special needs for asthma management.

Every student should have immediate access to quick-relief medications. For older students, this often means carrying the medicine, with a backup supply kept by the school nurse. For very young students, it may be necessary for the school nurse to teach proper inhaler technique and administer the medicine or to delegate these procedures, as permissible, to a health assistant. The best plan for each student is determined case by case with input from the student, parents, physician, and school nurse, and shared with appropriate school staff. In all cases, the principal should ensure that school and district policies and practices are in compliance with applicable state laws and regulations, and they are reviewed and approved by the district’s school board on a regular basis.

**Asthma and physical activity.** It is especially important for principals to ensure that physically active students and student athletes have immediate access to needed medications, and that physical educators, coaches, and athletic trainers are trained in asthma management. Students who have exercise-induced asthma often require medication 15 to 20 minutes before physical activity. Using students’ asthma action plans, school nurses work with students, parents, physical education teachers, trainers, and coaches to encourage appropriate warm-up routines and ensure that staff know what to do if a student starts having a breathing problem. While physical activities may need to be modified occasionally, most students with asthma can fully participate in physical activities.

**Asthma education.** Your school can also play an important role in educating students and staff about asthma and other chronic health conditions. Education can help break down the stereotyping that often leads to bullying, fights, and/or absenteeism.

School nurses and community health educators can provide asthma education programs, such as Open Airways for Schools from the American Lung Association ([www.lungusa.org](http://www.lungusa.org)) and Power Breathing by the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America ([www.aafa.org](http://www.aafa.org)). Some school districts offer these programs in every school. Asthma education and awareness programs also can be extended to teachers, school staff, parents, and students—including those without asthma—as part of a comprehensive school health education program.

Across the country, 53 million young people attend schools and 5 million of them have been diagnosed with asthma. It is one of the most common causes for school absenteeism, accounting for 14.7 million missed school days each year. In a classroom of 30 students, three students are likely to have asthma and their wheezing, coughing, and shortness of breath not only interfere with their concentration but impact other students in the classroom as well.

As a principal, you know that children must be healthy to learn, and that they must be in the classroom to benefit from instruction. You also know that schools have an increased role in identifying and managing childhood chronic health conditions such as asthma. So what can schools do to ensure that students with asthma have every chance to achieve good health and academic success? Creating and implementing a coordinated school-based asthma management program is a start. Such programs can enhance student health,
Strategies for Asthma Relief

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, asthma attacks interfere with daily school activities and account for 14 million lost school days each year. Children with asthma need proper support at school to help them keep their asthma under control so they can fully participate. So what can principals do?

You can begin by asking yourself the following questions provided by the National Asthma Education and Prevention Program (NAEPP), National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute:

- Is your school smoke-free?
- Does the school maintain good indoor air quality?
- Is there a plan or policy to control or eliminate allergens and irritants that can make asthma worse? (e.g., pets with fur or feathers; mold; dust mites in carpets and upholstered furniture; and strong fumes from pesticides, paint, perfumes, and cleaning chemicals.)
- Is there a school nurse in your school every day?
- Can children carry their own asthma medications?
- Does your school have an emergency plan for taking care of a child with a severe asthma attack?
- Has your staff received instruction about asthma and how it is treated?
- Have your students been taught about asthma and how to help a classmate who has asthma?

If the answer to any of these questions is no, you may need to revise and strengthen your asthma control policy. Responding to the needs of students with chronic conditions such as asthma in the school setting requires a comprehensive, coordinated, and systematic approach. According to NAEPP, asthma-friendly schools should have policies and procedures that include:

- A system for confidentially identifying students with chronic conditions and reviewing their health records. This system would allow school staff to identify existing asthma needs, resources for meeting those needs, and potential barriers.
- Meetings with teachers and parents to discuss accommodations and educational aids and services that the asthmatic student may need.
- Clear roles and obligations of school staff, especially those who interact with asthmatic students on a regular basis.
- Assurance that students with asthma can take their medication when needed and have access to those medications at all times during the day.
- Appropriate health education for students with and without asthma. Integrate asthma awareness and lung health lessons into the health curriculum.
- A full-time certified school nurse, who would maintain the school's student asthma action plans and educate other school personnel.
- A coordinated effort with local community programs.
- A comprehensive asthma management plan.

Reducing environmental “triggers” in the school’s internal environment, combined with asthma awareness and proper medical management, can prevent most asthma attacks. Good communication between principal, parents, physicians, and school staff are essential for a successful asthma prevention effort.

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Environmental factors. Principals should ensure that students and staff work in a smoke-free environment and that all applicable state laws and regulations are strictly enforced. Improving indoor air quality (IAQ) at schools can help reduce or eliminate asthma triggers. The Environmental Protection Agency reports that approximately 10,000 schools have used the agency’s Indoor Air Quality Tools for Schools Kit (www.epa.gov/iaq/schools/asthma/iaq-1.htm) to assess their IAQ needs and guide inexpensive improvements, including routine cleaning and maintenance, quickly drying wet spots, and adopting integrated pest management techniques.

Benefits of a Coordinated School Health Approach

Schools cannot manage asthma by themselves. That’s why a coordinated school health approach and a multidisciplinary school health team are so important. This team can engage educators and health staff, involve parents and community members, and focus school energy on policies and practices that support the overall health of students and staff.

Parents are a key part of the team, communicating directly with the school nurse and giving permission to the nurse to discuss asthma management with students’ personal physicians. The coordinated school health team also can locate community resources, such as hospitals, health care organizations, and asthma organizations, which can provide additional asthma education materials and programs. Some of these organizations even run asthma camps for kids.

Once you have a better understanding of asthma, how to prevent or reduce the episodes of breathing difficulties, and how to respond when symptoms arise, you can implement policies and practices that will make your school “asthma-friendly” for otherwise healthy students who are ready and willing to learn.
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WEB RESOURCES

The National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute offers a wealth of resources about asthma.
www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/prof/lung/index.htm#asthma

The School Education Subcommission of the National Asthma Education and Prevention Program provides a guide for managing asthma in schools.
www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/prof/lung/asthma/asth_sch.htm

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Division of Adolescent and School Health has a “Healthy Youth” section of its Web site that offers information about the effects of asthma in school-age youths. www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/asthma/index.htm

The American Association of School Administrators’ spring 2003 issue of School Governance and Leadership focuses on asthma wellness.
www.aasa.org/files/PDFS/Publications/Spring_20031.pdf

Health in Action, by the American School Health Association, is the only publication that provides scientifically accurate and readable information that covers single health topics—including asthma—within the context of a coordinated school health program.
www.ashaweb.org/healthinaction.html

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