

# School-Based Outreach

## The Need for School-Based Outreach

Schools are a natural setting to reach out to and enroll eligible, uninsured children in low-cost or free health care coverage through Medicaid and the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP). Nearly 90 percent of the nation's children attend public school, including most of the estimated 7.1 million children who are likely eligible for Medicaid or SCHIP.

Children who have health care coverage are better prepared to learn in school. A recent study showed that students who lack health care coverage miss more school days, which can have a negative impact on intellectual development and educational achievement.

The number of uninsured children has decreased by nearly 2 million since 1998, largely due to children being enrolled in Medicaid and SCHIP. Although there has been significant progress in enrolling eligible, uninsured children in these programs, more than 9 million children are still uninsured. Seven in 10 of them are likely eligible for Medicaid or SCHIP, and most can be reached through outreach within public schools.

Schools are considered trusted institutions that can communicate credibly with families. A survey of parents with children eligible for public health care coverage found that more than half of them said they would be more likely to enroll their children if they could do so at their school or child care center.

Schools may also have a financial incentive to ensure that eligible, uninsured children are enrolled in Medicaid and SCHIP. In many states, schools can be reimbursed for Medicaid and SCHIP outreach and training through Medicaid Administrative Claiming (MAC). Other school-based public programs such as the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), After School, Head Start and subsidized child care are logical enrollment gateways because they often serve the same low-income families as Medicaid and SCHIP. In an average month, 29 million children participate in the School Lunch Program and most of them meet income eligibility guidelines for public health care coverage programs.

For these reasons, school communities are an important avenue to reach parents of eligible, uninsured children about the availability of low-cost or free health care coverage through Medicaid or SCHIP.

## Getting Started

Understanding the landscape is an important first step when reaching out to local schools.

**Become familiar with your school community's academic calendar.** Research the start and end dates for traditional schools, year-round schools and summer school programs, and note important meetings, parent-teacher conference and school event dates that could provide opportunities to reach parents.

**Research school resources. Schools vary tremendously in the ways they interact with families.** They may have health clinics, nutrition specialists or parent liaison programs where

school staff works directly with parents. Find out what groups provide the best avenue through which to implement your outreach strategy.

**Research financial and other benefits to schools.** Check with your state's education and health agencies to find out if local schools qualify for Medicaid Administrative Claiming (MAC) funding for outreach and training activities.

**Identify a children's health care champion.** Recruit an educator, principal, school nurse, School Lunch Program staffer or parent who knows the school and school system and can introduce you to key decision-makers. Work cooperatively to gain the support of leaders within the school district, such as the superintendent or the director of school nurses.

**Think beyond the local elementary school.** Consider including middle and high schools, preschools, day care centers, vocational/trade schools, private schools (including those of faith) and adult education classes in your outreach efforts.

**Use available data to target low-income school districts.** Work with your state Medicaid office to obtain data on areas in your state with a high number of potentially eligible children. Contact your local School Lunch Program office to see if they have data on the school districts with a high number of children enrolled in their program.

**Engage school-based organizations and leaders in your coalition.** Once you have identified key decision-makers, invite them to your coalition meeting to discuss what they can do to help enroll children in Medicaid and SCHIP. Explain that many children in your state lack health care coverage, and that there are health and educational consequences. Participants might include:

- State Medicaid or CHIP director. For your state's Medicaid and CHIP program Web site, go to the **Cover the Uninsured State Profiles**.
- State Department of Education staff. To find your state's Department of Education, visit the **U.S. Department of Education Web site**.
- School Nurses Association leader. To find out if your state has an affiliate of the National Association of School Nurses, **visit their Web site**.
- School Lunch Program staff. **Find your state's field office for the National School Lunch Program**.
- Parent Teacher Association (PTA). To find your state's PTA affiliate, go to the **National PTA's Web site**.
- Other education leaders. Your state's Education Association may be a good resource to identify other key education leaders within your state or community. To find your state's National Education Association affiliate, **visit their Web site**.
- Other school and youth organizations. **View a list of supporters**, including school-based and youth organizations. Many of these national organizations have local chapters or affiliates in your state, which can be found on their individual Web sites.

## Strategies

Once you have garnered the support of key leaders within the school community, work with them to design an outreach and enrollment strategy. Following are strategies to consider:

**Engage varied members of the school community.** School counselors and social workers, coaches, band leaders, aides and allied staff such as bus drivers and food service workers can all assist in outreach efforts.

**Create incentives for participation.** Find an organization such as a state health plan or community foundation to underwrite your training and outreach efforts by providing mini-grants or other rewards to schools, such as donated computers or tickets to a local sporting event.

**Send informational letters.** Work with your state's health and education departments to send letters to school personnel, including administrators, principals, teachers, coaches, band directors and school nurses.

**Work with school nurses.** School nurses can help you determine how to add health insurance questions to mandatory health forms, coordinate special health care coverage sign-up events, directly enroll children in health care coverage programs using the presumptive eligibility option and send home information about health care coverage with sick children.

**Work with the School Lunch Program.** Include information in packets sent home to parents of children receiving free or reduced-price school lunches or enrolled in summer lunch programs, as most of them will be eligible for coverage under Medicaid or SCHIP.

**Work with local Head Start or day care programs.** Parents prepare even the youngest of children for school. Reach out to your community's day care centers to inform these parents about available low-cost and free health care coverage to help give their kids a healthy start. **Find your Head Start regional office.**

**Present at workshops and seminars for school nurses, teachers, social workers and other educators.** Make sure school professionals know about the importance of health care coverage, the details on your state's program and how families can start the enrollment process. If possible, provide them with applications to give parents.

## What You Can Do to Reach Families

One of the benefits of working with the school community is the multiple channels of communication available to reach the parents of eligible, uninsured children. Once you have identified a school-based outreach strategy that will work for your community, you can conduct various outreach activities that will reach families.

School registration and orientation, back-to-school nights, PTA/organization meetings, parent-teacher conferences, athletic season openers and training camps all provide good outreach opportunities.

Following is a checklist of outreach activities to get the message out to parents to enroll their children in Medicaid and SCHIP:

**Provide information during back-to-school registration.** Prepare materials in advance to insert into back-to-school packets and to make available at back-to-school nights and parent-teacher conferences. **Order free materials.**

**Distribute information about available health care coverage throughout the school community.** Make information available by displaying posters on bulletin boards, handing out fliers at sporting events and school pick-up and drop-off locations, and asking teachers and nurses to send information home with students.

**Organize a health and enrollment fair.** Work with your local PTA, school administrator and local health care organizations to host a health fair on school grounds, secure food and entertainment, advertise the event to parents, provide incentives for enrollment, and provide application assistance. For more information on planning a health and enrollment fair, download the [Health and Enrollment Fair Planning Guide](#).

**Work with the staff of state or local Medicaid and SCHIP agencies to station outreach workers at schools.** Provide application assisters on-site at designated dates and times to help families fill out applications, determine eligibility, identify required documents and mail applications to the appropriate place.

**Publish an article in the school newsletter.** Make it easy for schools to communicate your message by providing them with an article to include in newsletters educating parents about the availability of low-cost or free health care coverage.

**Ask families, school personnel and older students to tell a friend.** Word of mouth is a great communications vehicle.