Health Literacy *in the* 21st Century

SETTING AN EDUCATION AGENDA

SYMPOSIUM PROCEEDINGS: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

January 28 & 29, 2009
Headquarters of the National Education Association
Washington, D.C.

CONVENED BY NEAHIN
NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION
HEALTH INFORMATION NETWORK

SUPPORTED BY United Health Foundation℠

Executive Summary

Convening the Symposium On January 28-29, 2009 in Washington, D.C., the National Education Association Health Information Network (NEA HIN), with the support of the United Health Foundation (UHF), gathered together 30 experts and leaders from the fields of education, health and philanthropy for the symposium Health Literacy in the 21st Century: Setting an Education Agenda. During these two days, the symposium's participants began a dialogue about what kind of K-12 educational infrastructure will be needed to prepare current and future students to participate in the 21st century's health and health care systems.

Critical Need in 21st Century

A healthy population is critical to our nation's future. What makes health literacy an urgent issue in today's — and tomorrow's — complex world of health information and services is the simple fact that consumers, more than ever before, have the opportunity and responsibility to manage their own and their family's health care. To do this competently, they must process lots of information about services and providers, treatment options and related costs. They must also possess skills to problem-solve, make sound decisions and tap into the myriad of resources available to support them through the process. Compounding this, consumers are dealing with rising health care costs within an economy under stress.

In order to provide current and future generations of students with the knowledge and skills of health literacy, schools must play a central role in preparing young consumers to manage and advocate for their health and health care needs. Yet the goal of health literacy is particularly challenging given an environment in which schools today are focused on educating an increasingly diverse student population, to levels of academic achievement never before expected, while simultaneously addressing many other priorities.

Framing the Issue

The definition of health literacy endorsed by the symposium's participants is that found in the National Health Education Standards: Health literacy is the capacity of an individual to obtain, interpret and understand basic health information and services and the competence to use such information and services in ways that are health-enhancing.

To provide a common framework within which to discuss the complex issues surrounding health literacy, NEA HIN commissioned three "white papers" that were presented to the symposium. Each paper addressed distinct aspects of health literacy:

Consumers in a Complex and Dynamic Health Care Environment. Key trends in the health care arena are shaping consumer expectations and behaviors, such as the growing costs of health care and the greater share of those costs being paid by consumers. Further, consumers increasingly bear greater responsibility for their own health.

Health Literacy and Adolescents: An Agenda for the Future. General literacy is a problem for many adolescents, raising questions about their ability to successfully navigate the health care delivery system. A research agenda is needed to help shape the creation of new policies, programs and tools to promote health literacy.

The Role of 21st Century Schools in Promoting Health Literacy. School-based health education that is aligned to standards can effectively address the knowledge and skills needed to achieve health literacy among students. The Coordinated School Health model provides an environment in which students can practice and have reinforced the skills of healthy behaviors.

Robust Discussions

Symposium participants aligned around several major constructs regarding health literacy upon which further dialogue can productively build. These include: health literacy must include skills as well as knowledge; schools alone cannot be held accountable for the responsibility of preparing students to be health literate; other systems (health care, government, philanthropy, business, etc.) must play a role; health literacy is a necessary component of healthy behavior; barriers to advancing health literacy include insufficient accountability, limited school resources and ownership concerns.

Additionally, symposium participants brainstormed potential roles for key stakeholders in the advancement of health literacy and considered ways to strengthen the case for and better position health literacy through curriculum, policy and communications strategies.

Conclusion

The Health Literacy Symposium's rich discussion of the issues and opportunities surrounding health literacy generated a foundational alignment around key themes as well as provocative ideas for advancing health literacy within today's school environment. Participants strongly advocated continuing the dialogue and, especially, pursuing broader engagement of additional stakeholders.

National Health Education Standards: Achieving Excellence

The National Health Education Standards, developed by a coalition of health education organizations and professionals from across the country, set out expectations for what students should know and be able to do by grades 2, 5, 8 and 12 to promote personal, family and community health. The standards provide a framework for curriculum development and selection, instruction and student assessment in health education.

For more details about these standards, visit: www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/sher/standards/.

STANDARD 1	Students will comprehend concepts related to health promotion and disease prevention to enhance health.
STANDARD 2	Students will analyze the influence of family, peers, culture, media, technology and other factors on health behaviors.
STANDARD 3	Students will demonstrate the ability to access valid information, products and services to enhance health.
STANDARD 4	Students will demonstrate the ability to use interpersonal communication skills to enhance health and avoid or reduce health risks.
STANDARD 5	Students will demonstrate the ability to use decision-making skills to enhance health.
STANDARD 6	Students will demonstrate the ability to use goal-setting skills to enhance health.
STANDARD 7	Students will demonstrate the ability to practice health-enhancing behaviors and avoid or reduce health risks.
STANDARD 8	Students will demonstrate the ability to advocate for personal, family and community health.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The conveners would like to acknowledge the symposium participants, whose valuable insights and expertise helped to propel a national conversation about health literacy in the 21st century.

ABOUT UNITED HEALTH FOUNDATION

Guided by a passion to help people live healthier lives, United Health Foundation supports activities that expand access to quality health care services for those in challenging circumstances and partners with others to improve the well being of communities. The Foundation also provides helpful information to support decisions that lead to better health outcomes and healthier communities. Since established by UnitedHealth Group {NYSE: UNH} in 1999 as a not for profit private foundation, the Foundation has committed more than $160 million to improve health and health care. For more information, visit www.unitedhealthfoundation.org.

ABOUT THE NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION HEALTH INFORMATION NETWORK

As the nonprofit health affiliate of the National Education Association, the NEA Health Information Network (NEA HIN) provides health and safety information to 3.2 million educational employees and students it serves. NEA HIN distributes information nationally through NEA's 51 state/territory affiliates as well as 14,000 local education associations. NEA HIN serves as a link between public school employees; local, state and national health organizations; and government agencies. Since its inception, NEA HIN has addressed numerous health & safety issues that affect NEA members and students, including HIV/AIDS, substance abuse, cancer, teen pregnancy, mental wellness, nutrition, school safety, asthma and environmental hazards in schools. For more information, visit www.neahin.org.

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