

# Briefing Paper



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## Denver Paid Sick Days Would Promote Children's School Success

Paid sick days for working parents can enhance children's school success. Parents face a difficult choice if their children get sick when they lack paid sick days: staying home with the child and missing pay (and possibly facing discipline at work); sending the child to school sick, which compromises their school performance and spreads illness to others; leaving the child at home alone, putting the child at risk; leaving the child with an older sibling who in turn must stay home from school; or trusting the child to a temporary caregiver. Each of these scenarios has potential costs for schools or for child well-being. The negative effects of inadequate sick days coverage disproportionately affect people of color and low-income adults in Denver, because they are less likely than other Denver residents to be able to earn paid sick days. This paper by the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) addresses how children's school success can be improved when working parents have access to paid sick days by reviewing published research, Denver Public Schools data, and information provided in interviews and surveys of Denver Public Schools personnel.<sup>1</sup>

"I had a young gal who missed 40 days of school to care for a sick younger brother. He was really sick. I had to refer her to court. The mom was very upfront. [She said] 'I'll lose my job if I take time off work, and if I lose my job, we lose the house. So the next best thing is for my oldest daughter to stay home.'"

Denver Public School Principal

<sup>1</sup> IWPR administered an online survey to all Denver Public School principals and conducted phone interviews with DPS personnel. A total of 22 surveys—17 done online and five by phone--serve to highlight the experiences of principals and administrators with student illness and the role of parents' ability to take leave from work. All 146 principals in the Denver Public Schools were either e-mailed the survey or contacted by phone and asked to participate in an interview.

## Parents Without Paid Sick Days Send Sick Children to School

- Parents without paid sick days are 71 percent more likely than parents with paid sick days to send a sick child to school or child care, according to a 2010 national survey of 1,461 adults by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago (Smith and Kim 2010). A survey of nearly 1,200 San Francisco adults conducted by the Institute for Women’s Policy Research found that parents without paid sick days were 41 percent more likely to send a sick child to school than parents with paid sick days (Drago and Lovell 2011).
- A survey of 1,212 residents of New York City, The Unheard Third 2009 Survey, found that 30 percent of low-income working parents without paid sick leave had sent a sick child to school or child care in the last year because they could not be absent from work (The Community Service Society of New York 2009).

“Parents can’t afford to lose a day of pay.”

Denver Public School Principal  
(When asked the reason why parents send children to school sick)

- In the 2001 Kaiser Women’s Health Survey, a nationally representative sample of nearly 4,000 women, only 39 percent of working mothers with children under 18 years of age reported that they can call on someone, such as a family member, friend, or other caregiver to provide care for their sick child (Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation 2003).
- Parents' ability to be with sick children may speed the healing process. Research has shown that the presence of parents plays an important role in the recovery of hospitalized children, helping to decrease the duration of hospital stays and, in some cases, the incidence of post-operative complications (Taylor and O’Connor, 1989; Brain and Maclay, 1968). Although little research has examined the effect of parental care outside of the hospital setting, studies have found that parents are important to children’s ability to cope with chronic illnesses such as asthma and diabetes (Berg et al. 2011; Lieu et al. 1997).

## Sick Children Spread Contagious Illness

- One middle school principal of Denver Public Schools said he witnessed an 8-10 percent drop in attendance during the 2009 H1N1 epidemic. Half of the school’s staff—many of

whom were infected by contagious students—were also absent because of the illness (IWPR interview, September 21, 2011).

- Denver Public Schools enroll over 79,000 students, with nearly 34,000 of them elementary school students (DPS Report of Student Membership 2010–2011). While adults are responsible for only 32 percent and seniors for only 3 percent of infectious contacts, children and teenagers are responsible for nearly 65 percent (Glass et al. 2005). Recent studies show that children who go to pre-school and school are more likely to contract the flu (Viboud et al. 2004). Unless vaccinated, school-aged children were also more likely to transmit the flu to family members (Principi et al. 2003).
- According to a computation simulation of the rate of infection among 10,000 children, teenagers, adults, and seniors in a small town within the United States, contagious illnesses like influenza spread more quickly in schools than in the workplace (Glass, et al. 2005).
- In an analysis of reported outbreak clusters during the 2009 H1N1 epidemic, researchers estimated that a school-aged child with H1N1 infected 2.4 other children within the school on average (Yang et al. 2009).

## **Illness Diminishes Children's Ability to Succeed in School**

- The Centers for Disease Control states that the health of young people is strongly linked to their academic success (CDC 2010). Health-related factors such chronic illnesses have been shown to diminish school performance (Haas and Edwards 2008).
- It is estimated that between 13 and 20 percent of all children in the United States have a special health care need (SHCN)—a broad category that encompasses any chronic physical, developmental, behavioral, or emotional condition that requires regular or specialized medical attention (McPherson et al. 1998; Bethell et al. 2008). A 2011 survey of 1,457 children found that those with an SCHN were much more likely to be disengaged in school and to perform poorly academically. The patterns of absence and the severity of illness can make it difficult for children and adolescents with serious special health needs to achieve their potential. The same 2011 study found that students with a SCHN missed an average of four more school days per year than their peers without such needs. (Forrest et al. 2011).
- Repeated student absences from school due to illness or other factors are strongly associated with a student's failure to graduate. One study of almost 13,000 public school students in Philadelphia found that only 13 percent of children with attendance rates of less than 80 percent in sixth grade went on to complete high school (Balfanz et al. 2007).

- Studies have shown that preventive care measures taken by parents can reduce the frequency of hospitalization and prevent the exacerbation of symptoms for children with and without a special health care need (Lieu et al. 1997; Christakis et al. 2001). Paid sick leave would allow parents to engage in more preventive care efforts—such as regular doctor visits—that are crucial to managing their children’s health, reducing their chance of absenteeism and encouraging their academic success.

## Sick Children Strain School Resources

- Most of the Denver Public Schools officials interviewed by IWPR reported incidents of teachers becoming ill due to contact with ill students. One principal estimated that 90 percent of staff illnesses at his middle school were due to students being sick. Other principals said they have received complaints from faculty and staff about children with contagious illnesses being sent to school (IWPR interviews, September 21, 2011).
- During a contagious illness outbreak (e.g. the 2009 H1N1 epidemic), school nurses can struggle to keep up with the volume of sick children sent to school (IWPR interview, September 21, 2011).

“Many times throughout the school year, I hear the nurse complain about why students are sent to school sick and why parents do this.”

Denver Public Schools Principal

- Only 24 schools (16 percent) in the Denver Public Schools system have a full-time 5-day school nurse or licensed nurse practitioner on staff. Due to the large number of elementary schools in Denver Public Schools, school nurses generally spend 1–2 days a week at each school (DPS Nursing Services June 2011). When parents send their children to school sick and few schools are able to provide full-time, on-site nurses, the risk of spreading an illness is greater.
- Researchers estimate that 5 percent of teachers are absent on any given school day; personal illness accounts for 59 percent of these absences (Miller 2008). Nationally, salaries for substitute teachers and other administrative costs related to teacher absence total almost \$4 billion annually (District Management Council 2004).
- Absenteeism among teachers has been shown to reduce student performance and productivity—sometimes severely enough to lower certain students' classification in the

state proficiency system (Miller et al. 2008). Both student performance on state standardized tests and student absenteeism directly impact school funding.

## **Older Children Stay Home to Care for Sick Siblings**

- Ten out of thirteen of the Denver Public Schools principals interviewed by IWPR reported numerous instances of children remaining home to care for a sick younger sibling; several named it as a “main reason” for student absences (IWPR interviews conducted September 16–29, 2011).
- Low-income families often rely on the aid of older children to care for younger siblings (Heymann 2000). In 2001, 20 adolescent girls ages 15 to 18 participated in group interviews in which they discussed family obligations, future goals, and relationships. Four out of the twenty teens from this study reported having to remain home from school to care for ill siblings several times during the year (Dodson and Dickert 2004).
- Of the Denver Public Schools principals who spoke with IWPR, several reported that girls—usually in 6<sup>th</sup> grade and above—were more likely to be kept home to provide care for ill siblings than were boys (IWPR interviews conducted September 16–21, 2011).
- Girls spend almost 14 hours per week caring for younger siblings, more than twice as much as boys (Aronson et al. 1996). According to findings from the 2004 Minnesota Student Survey, a survey of two-thirds of sixth, ninth, and twelfth grade students in Minnesota, girls of every racial and ethnic group are far more likely than boys to spend six or more hours per week doing chores at home or babysitting, and this is especially true among girls of color (Williams et al. 2008).
- Research suggests that when sick children are left in the care of siblings, accidents and emergencies are likely to happen (Heymann 2006a). Lower rates of accidental death are seen among children who spend more time in supervised care settings and less time alone (Gornick and Meyers 2003, 265; Heymann 2006a). Increased access to paid sick days that can be used for family care would reduce the time that children spend without adult supervision.

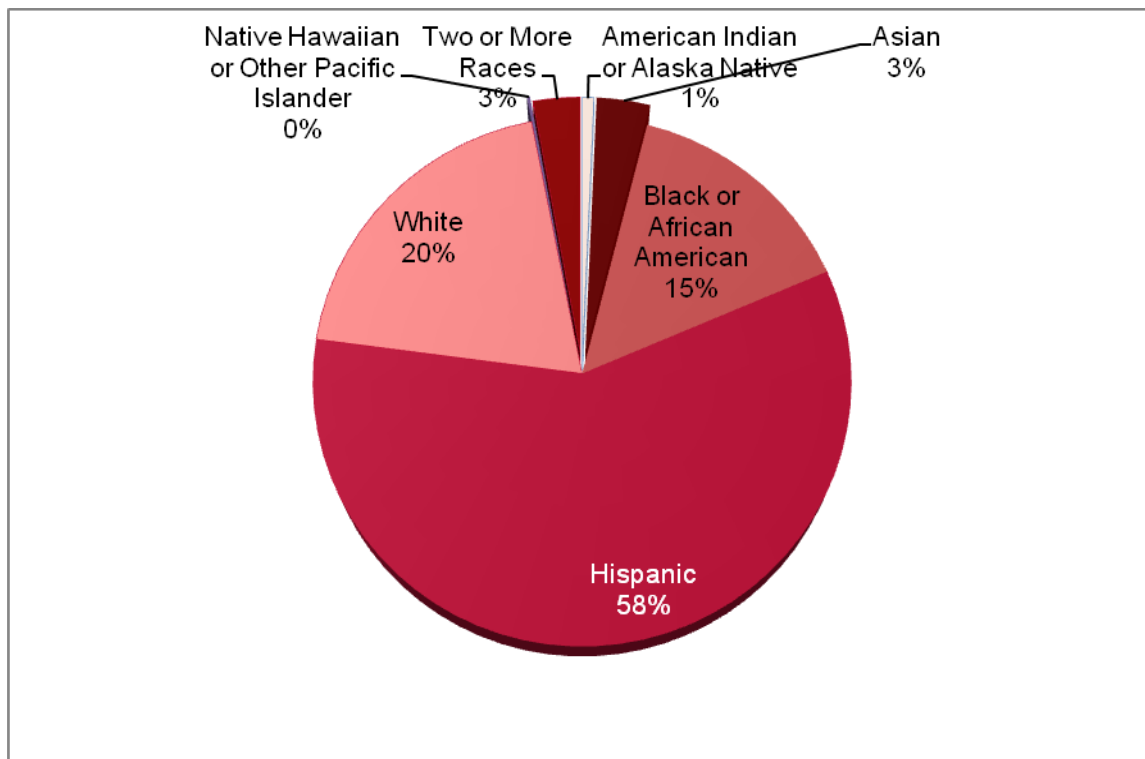
## **Racial/Ethnic Minorities and Low-Income Families Are Disproportionately Affected**

- Black and Hispanic workers in Denver are less likely than white workers to have access to paid sick days—66 percent of white workers have access, but only 55 percent of black workers and 41 percent of Hispanic workers. Access to paid sick days is associated with

improved health, a reduction in delayed medical care, and a decrease in emergency department usage. Universal access to paid sick days would help reduce racial/ethnic health disparities in Denver (Williams and Miller 2011).

- Out of the 79,423 students in Denver Public Schools, 63,671 (80 percent) are “non-white”. (See Figure 1) (Denver Public Schools, Student Membership, Membership and Ethnicity Reports October 1, 2010).

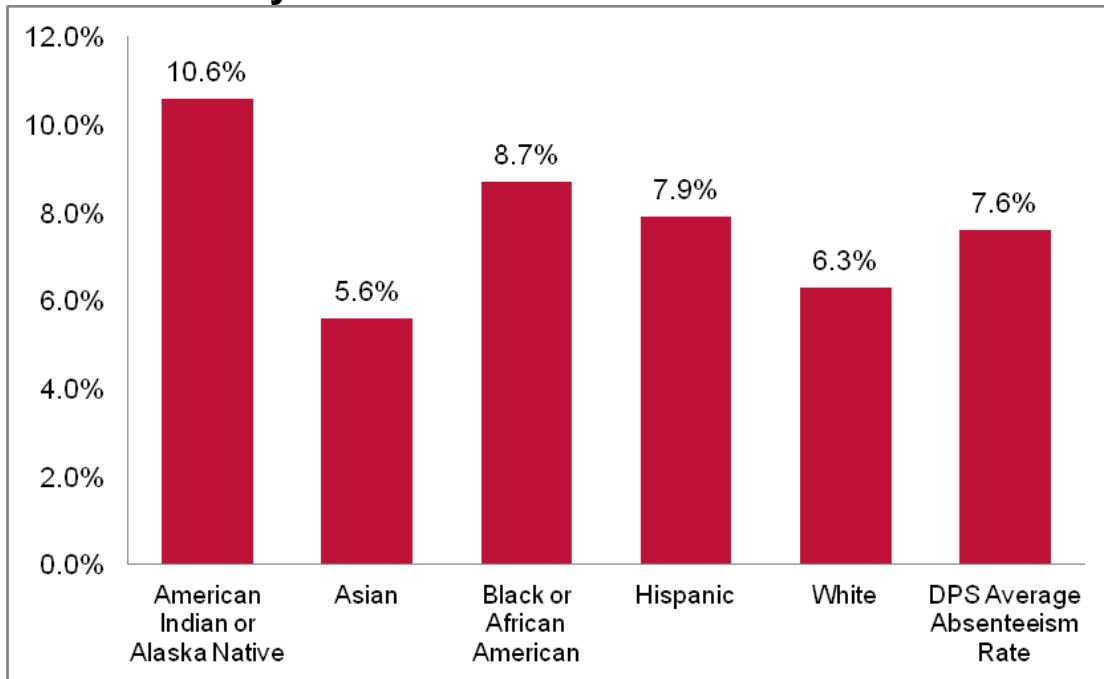
**Figure 1. Total Denver Student Population by Race/Ethnicity 2010-2011**



Source: Denver Public Schools, Student Membership, Membership and Ethnicity Reports October 1, 2010.

- Roughly 61 percent of all elementary school students (21,127 children) attending Denver Public Schools are Hispanic. Spanish-speaking students (including non-English Language Learners (ELLs) comprise 40 percent of Denver Public Schools student population (Denver Public Schools, Communications Office 2010)
- Absenteeism rates differ across races and ethnicities with American Indians having the highest rates, at 10.6 percent and Asians with the lowest rate, at 5.6 percent. The average absenteeism rate for Denver Public Schools is 7.6 percent (Figure 2; IWPR 2011).

**Figure 2. Denver Public Schools School Absenteeism Rates by Race/Ethnicity**



Source: IWPR calculations from the Denver Public Schools, Student Attendance Rates by Race Report October 1, 2010.

- Across the Denver Public Schools, the average number of students in a school who receive free or reduced school lunches is 73 percent. (Denver Public Schools, Communications Office 2010).
- Health problems disproportionately affect youth from minority and low-income communities, placing children and adolescents of color at greater risk for certain health risk factors and illnesses. According to the 2005 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, a survey of 13,953 high school students conducted by the Centers for Disease Control, African American and Hispanic teens are more likely to suffer from asthma, to be overweight and to describe their health as fair or poor compared with white or Asian American children (CDC 2005). Chronic health problems such as asthma and obesity can increase absenteeism and disrupt school performance (Forrest et al. 2011; Schwimmer et al. 2003).
- A two-child family with a single working parent earning \$10 per hour can only miss 3 days of pay in a month before falling below the federal poverty line, suggesting that a lack of paid sick days makes low-income families particularly vulnerable to financial hardships resulting from illness (Gould et al. 2011).

- State governments—including Colorado—have prioritized policy initiatives to reduce racial/ethnic health disparities among children and adolescents in school (Healthy States Initiative, 2007; Healthy Schools Colorado).

Increasing access to paid sick days among Denver workers would promote student success in the Denver Public Schools through widespread benefits to parents, students and teachers. When working parents have no real choice but to go to work, parents may send their children to school sick, leave them in the care of an older sibling, or leave them at home alone—all with dangerous and costly consequences. Sick children in schools have reduced productivity, are likely to spread contagious illnesses, and are a strain on valuable school resources. Research suggests that access to earned paid sick days can play an important role in increasing the effectiveness of schools and reducing the achievement gap.

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