

People have to be healthy, and they have to be educated to do well. I believe that a city is only as strong as its most vulnerable members and that protecting their health is one of the keys to helping them do better, to break through the barriers that hold them back.

Asthma is a perfect example. Among chronic diseases, asthma is the number one reason kids miss school. A pattern of missing school sets them up for not doing well and can have a great impact on their lives.

My team started studying the prevalence of asthma among inner-city elementary school children in Pittsburgh four years ago. What we're seeing is that about 25 percent have physician-diagnosed asthma, which is very high, while the state, national and county prevalence for this age group is around 10 to 13 percent. The highest pockets of asthma are among poor children and minority children. They're the most vulnerable.

One way to help level the playing field is to keep these kids healthy and keep them in school. If we want a community that benefits everyone — “a community of we” — we have to do something about this. And we can. We have medicine to control the disease. Raising awareness of the issue and educating vulnerable populations will help.

We also have to do something about the environmental factors that we know worsen the asthma of these children. Smoking is prevalent in a lot of the communities we study. Many of the children live near point sources of air pollution. They are exposed to the highest levels of particulate matter and black carbon and have almost a twofold risk of having asthma — similar to what we see with tobacco smoke. Their asthma is likely to be more severe, which means they're going to miss more school and fall behind.

Pittsburgh is a very resilient city. People tend to work together to solve problems. Together we can raise awareness. Together, we can improve environmental conditions. If we do, we'll improve the health of these children, their future outcomes, and the health and future of our community.

— Interviewed by Jeffery Fraser

KEEP KIDS HEALTHY AND IN SCHOOL

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