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Bridges for the asthma achievement gap

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GSK

When her kindergarten classmates were learning fundamentals of reading and math, five-year old Countess was absent from the classroom half of the time. This bright, energetic, voracious reader missed 21 school days of the first two months of the school year. Why?

She wasn't in the classroom because she was either in the emergency room or at home recovering from an asthma attack. Her severe asthma was out of control and her family just couldn't cope.

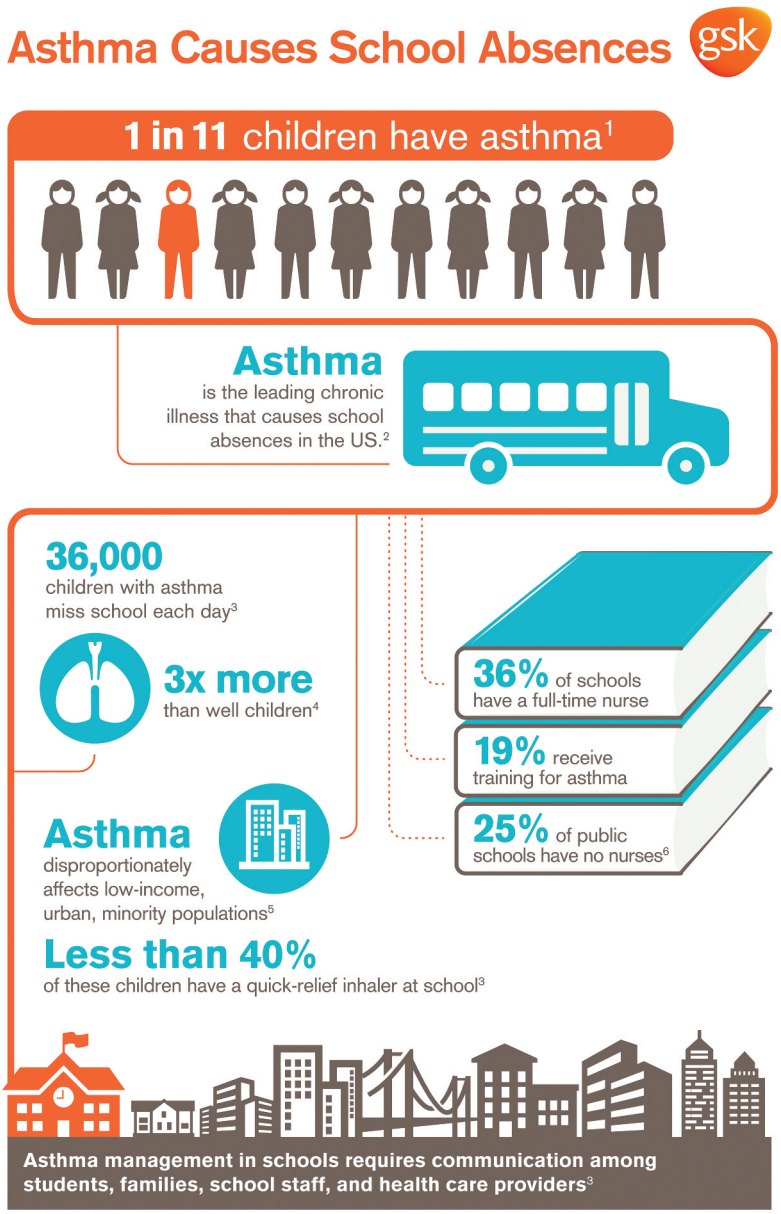
The impact on her education and her family was devastating. Forced to constantly miss work, Countess' mom eventually lost her job. For a single working mom, caring for her sick child was her priority, even though it created a desperate situation.

But this story has a happy ending: this young family found Building Bridges for Asthma Care in the Denver Public Schools. Or, rather, the program found them. Today everyone is on more stable footing, thanks to the schools and their colleagues at Children's Hospital Colorado.

So how did we get here?

Blame the asthma achievement gap and healthcare disparities

Stories like Countess' are all too common. Asthma is a leading cause of absenteeism in elementary schools. It's an even bigger problem for low income and minority children, where access to healthcare can be a challenge, in addition to exposure to environmental triggers and some potential genetic risks.



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Studies show that uncontrolled asthma may contribute significantly to a widening achievement gap between inner-city students and their peers. These children face many obstacles when it comes to education and their well-being; GSK asked what could be done to strike asthma from the list.

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Building Bridges for Asthma Care

One of the major obstacles to managing asthma is communication. Much information needs to be shared between students, families, school staff and healthcare providers. So, in 2012, GSK, funded a collaboration with Children's Hospital Colorado, Connecticut Children's Medical Center, National Jewish Health and the public school systems in Hartford, CT, US and Denver, CO, US. This resulted in a program that has been established in a group of schools in Denver and Hartford called "Building Bridges for Asthma Care," which puts students at the center of a new, school-based, asthma management model.

As part of Building Bridges, school nurses identify students with asthma, based on medical history provided by their parents. During the year, the nurses monitor the child's absenteeism, physical activity, and asthma control levels, and communicate this information to parents and healthcare providers.

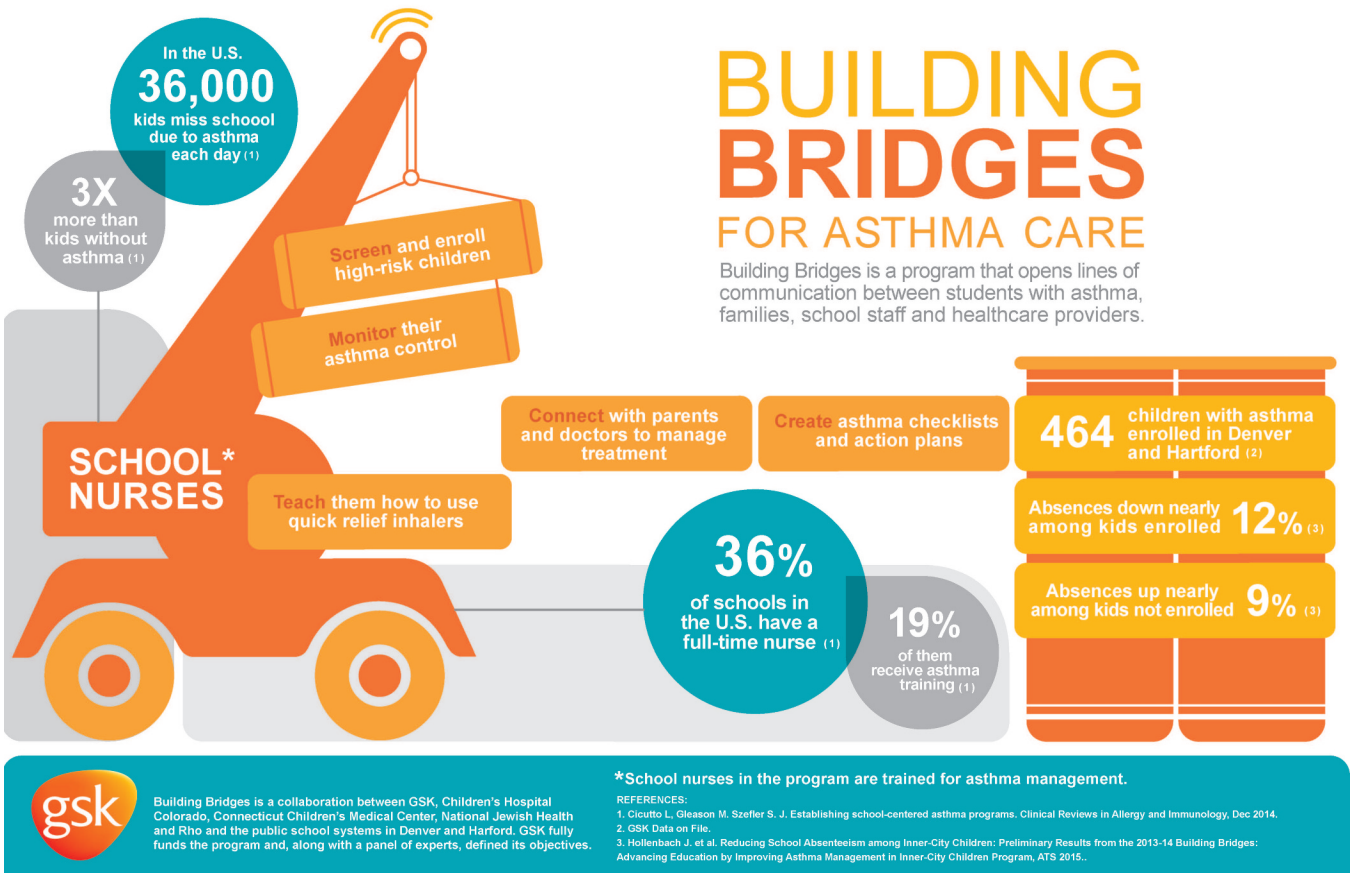
In preparation for the back-to-school season, school nurses help get the families and healthcare providers organized with an asthma control checklist and school health forms to be returned during registration.

Fewer absences, fuller classrooms

New data from three Hartford schools was presented at the 2015 Annual Meeting of the American Thoracic Society showed nearly a 12% drop in school absences among children enrolled in the program, compared to an 8% increase in children with asthma of comparable severity not covered by the program.

Since enrolling in Building Bridges, Countess hasn't missed a single day of school due to asthma. She is happy, more confident than ever and her asthma is under control. Her mother has found that the Building Bridges program provided her with the tools and a network of professionals to help monitor her daughter so that she could remain healthy and in school. She has a new job, and hasn't had to rush her daughter to the emergency room. All of the needed healthcare team is in place and appropriate treatment plans have been developed.

Although the absenteeism data are preliminary and from one school district for the first of two years, these data provide compelling evidence that school absenteeism rates can be significantly decreased by a program linking school nurses more closely with families and primary care providers. The program was expanded to a total of 28 schools in the 2014-2015 school year and further data is expected to bring new insights into this issue.

The results of this program are encouraging. We at GSK look forward to the continued success of the Building Bridges program, but, more importantly, to the positive changes in the lives of children like Countess.

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