



Creating an Asthma-Friendly School

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[NARRATOR] Sixteen school days. When other kids were getting on the bus heading to class, MacKenzie stayed home. Sixteen days when other kids were learning math and English and playing at recess, MacKenzie stayed home. Sixteen days when other kids were joking around in the cafeteria, forming friendships, because of asthma attacks, MacKenzie stayed home.

[MACKENZIE] I was, like, about to die. Like, 'cause I couldn't breathe at all. And so, when that happened, I keep yelling, "Mom! Mom!" 'Cause it didn't feel good at all.

[MACKENZIE'S MOTHER] The breathing was very difficult for her. It was frightening.

[NARRATOR] Her mother didn't like keeping MacKenzie out of class. She just didn't know if the school could respond to her child's asthma. Would they recognize the symptoms? Would they even take MacKenzie seriously if she said she couldn't breathe?

[MACKENZIE'S MOTHER] I think a lot of times they would question, you know, if it was really an asthma attack or if she was just wanting to get out of class or something like that.

[NARRATOR] How did missing so much school make MacKenzie feel?

[MACKENZIE] Left out, 'cause everyone else was doing it. Like, they're moving on, and it feels like I haven't done anything at all.

[NARRATOR] Charlotte Middle School student Klayton Kraft missed several days of school as well.

[KLAYTON] It's really scary. I mean, when you can't breathe, it's really scary.

[NARRATOR] No one at the school knew how to handle the attacks or what was causing them in the first place.

[KLAYTON'S MOTHER] It was very hard at first to get people to cooperate. They didn't understand how life-threatening it was for Klayton, that it literally shuts him down.

[NARRATOR] What was happening? Why were students like Klayton and MacKenzie getting so sick? Why were they and so many students with asthma missing so many days of school?

[ANTHONY BUCCI, CHARLOTTE SCHOOL ASSISTANT SUPERINTENDENT] I think there was a great surprise around asthma as a leading cause of absenteeism.

[SARAH MERKLE, CDC HEALTH SCIENTIST] Ten percent of children and youth in the United States have asthma. So this is over 5 million kids in the U.S. and if you think about that, in an average classroom, it'd be three students in every classroom of 30.

[NARRATOR] Officials in Charlotte began looking for solutions. They decided what their school district needed were asthma-friendly schools.

[MERKLE] Having an asthma-friendly school means having a school that supports students with asthma and helps them better control their asthma.

[NARRATOR] Charlotte-Mecklenberg Schools began using the American Lung Association's Open Airways program. MacKenzie was one of the first students to enroll.

[MERKLE] Really important is to make sure that students with asthma know what asthma is, how to manage it, you know, what to do to keep their asthma under control.

[BETH BURTON, CHARLOTTE SCHOOL TEACHER] Every elementary school in our district teaches a class to students with asthma.

[NARRATOR] A local respiratory therapist also comes into the school to do weekly checkups on the students with asthma.

[MACKENZIE'S MOTHER] They're able to call us and say, "We're hearing something here." We're gonna administer medication that she has there at school."

[NARRATOR] This kind of case management, along with ensuring that students with asthma have immediate access to quick-relief inhalers at school, are important parts of being an asthma-friendly school.

[MACKENZIE'S MOTHER] And it has made a huge difference.

[MACKENZIE] And I can play with my friends. 'Cause when I was sick, I couldn't do it anymore.

[NARRATOR] But for Klayton, asthma was affecting him not only physically, but emotionally, as well.

[KLAYTON] I was afraid to say that I had asthma, 'cause I didn't know if they would like me or if they'd consider me weird.

[NARRATOR] School nurse Glenna Cook decided the answer was education. All students, whether they have asthma or not, learn about airways, about medication, about triggers.

[COOK] Can asthma be cured? Raise your hands -- "Yes." Can asthma be cured?

[NARRATOR] Some exercises build empathy in the students who don't have asthma.

[COOK] Who can have asthma?

[STUDENT] Anybody.

[COOK] Anybody.

[NARRATOR] Classes like these have been helpful in schools all over the country.

[OREGON SCHOOL TEACHER] And they had that disease called asthma. What you're gonna do is you're gonna close this in your mouth. You can only breathe through the straw.

[NARRATOR] In Oregon public schools, for instance, teachers use a straw to help students without asthma understand how asthma feels.

[STUDENT] That's hard.

[NARRATOR] They learn this is what it feels like when you're having an asthma attack. You want more air -- you just can't get it. This demystifies asthma for students. It helps them realize that it doesn't make you strange or different or scary.

[MERKLE] I think, like anything, once you understand it, you're not as scared of it.

[NARRATOR] Back in Charlotte, nurse Glenna Cook has begun to see the payoff. While it once felt like it was just her looking out for the students like Klayton and MacKenzie, she now has dozens of eyes watching out for them.

[COOK] That is great. That is teamwork. Because then we can work together. They're alerting me to situations that I need to know about.

[NARRATOR] Meanwhile, Klayton realized that asthma was nothing to hide.

[KLAYTON] You have to get over the fear. And you just have to go and get through it and make sure that people know and that they can help you.

[NARRATOR] But no matter how good his medicine, no matter how much support from the other students and staff he got, Klayton kept having problems with his asthma. Something at the school, an unknown trigger, was causing Klayton to have severe asthma attacks.

[KLAYTON'S MOTHER] There was so much anxiety just going to school on some days because worried what was gonna happen at school.

[NARRATOR] Working together, his parents, doctors, and the school discovered the problem. Aerosol sprays used by the school janitor, and sometimes other students and teachers, were behind Klayton's most acute attacks.

[COOK] One of the biggest challenges that we faced at school helping Klayton was to convince other students and teachers not to spray aerosol sprays in the classroom.

[NARRATOR] By taking a close look at the possible irritants and triggers in and around his school, his principal was able to prevent indoor air-quality problems. In Klayton's case, it was aerosols. But for a child with asthma, the trigger could be almost anything. Tobacco smoke, dust mites, diesel exhaust from school buses. Schools can reduce asthma triggers by adopting policies that create a safe and healthy environment.

[MERKLE] I think teachers, depending on where they teach and the sorts of things they have in their room, may need to make changes based on the individual students they have.

[NARRATOR] Once his school stopped using aerosols, Klayton's asthma attacks also stopped. Detroit, Michigan. Today it's the teachers, counselors, and coaches at Detroit City High School who are taking a class.

[ASTHMA TRAINER] We need to talk about their triggers.

[NARRATOR] Here they learn how serious asthma can be and how to handle it.

[ANITA TOTTY, DETROIT SCHOOL TEACHER] I didn't know that it affected kids as much.

[FREDERICK HODGE, DETROIT SCHOOL COUNSELOR] To me, the main thing is that I know what's going on now, I know a lot of the triggers, and I know where to go when there is a crisis.

[NARRATOR] And if a teacher or coach has any doubt about who has asthma and what to do, this single sheet of paper has the answers. This is Deshauna Barber's asthma action plan. This plan, developed by her doctor and given to the school by her parents, is a big part of the constant flow of information between students, parents, teachers, school nurses, and health-care providers to ensure that Deshauna and other students with asthma are well managed at school.

[GWENDOLYN HORNE, SCHOOL NURSE] It tells the teachers what to look for, you know. Everyone is not real knowledgeable about asthma. If they have an emergency, they just pull this out of their files.

[NARRATOR] All of Deshauna's teachers, all her coaches, get a copy.

[HORNE] It also tells them the steps to follow for possible asthma emergencies. It tells them about looking for difficulty breathing, walking, talking, blue or gray discoloration of the lips or fingertips. Failure of medication to reduce, or worsen, symptoms.

[NARRATOR] Making sure students know where to go is also crucial.

[MERKLE] The school nurse is really a critical person in successful asthma management at schools.

[DESHAUNA] Hey, Nurse Horne.

[HORNE] Hey, Deshauna. How you doing?

[MERKLE] If they have an episode at school, if they have a question about how to manage their asthma, if they're just feeling down about having asthma that day, there's a person they can talk to, to get help.

[DESHAUNA] I mean, she's like another auntie. If I ask her for something, she'll do it for me. We'll sit down and talk, be friends and whatever. She's a nice person.

[NARRATOR] Just like in Charlotte, the Detroit Public School District teaches students with asthma about their disease from an early age.

[HORNE] What's the first part of our airway?

[STUDENT] Nose.

[HORNE] Nose.

[NARRATOR] But some of the classes are led not by adults, but by other students -- high school students. They talk about the facts, but also about the emotions that come with asthma.

[SHAVELLE COLEMAN, STUDENT ASTHMA TRAINER] You said that you feel bad about having asthma? Don't feel bad at all. You know, don't feel left out.

[NARRATOR] This program is called Easy Breathers. These kids listen, in part because almost all of the high school students who teach them have asthma as well.

[COLEMAN] Kids look up to us 'cause we're the teenagers, we're cool.

[DELOREAN REDD, STUDENT ASTHMA TRAINER] A lot of kids ask me, "Why is it that I have it?" I really can't even explain it. But the only thing I can say is, "You can't really change it. Just make the best out of it."

[NARRATOR] Some students with asthma have what's called exercise-induced asthma. Hard physical activity along with rapid breathing, particularly when the air is cold, can and sometimes does cause problems for them. But shutting them out of physical education class or other sports activities is not the answer.

[MERKLE] For students with asthma, it's really vital that they participate in physical activities. It's really important to exercise your lungs whether you have asthma or not.

[NARRATOR] Instead, physical education teachers need to keep an eye out for their students with asthma and be ready to respond when symptoms do happen -- all this while promoting physical activity.

[PHYSICAL EDUCATION INSTRUCTOR] If you have asthma and you need to get your inhaler, I would go to the office right now and get it 'cause we're gonna be doing our mile run today.

[NARRATOR] Encourage and remind them to use their medication before and during activities when they need to. Give them extra time to warm up before starting any physical activity and extra breaks when they need them. MacKenzie not only participates fully in her P.E. class, but she takes karate lessons on the side, as well. And Klayton found out he's a pretty good gymnast.

[KLAYTON'S FATHER] You find out that if you are careful and if you take certain precautions that he can do those things.

[GYMNASTICS INSTRUCTOR] All the way up. There you go.

[NARRATOR] Thanks to the help from their schools, Deshauna feels no different from any other student. MacKenzie feels safe now and didn't miss a single day of school in the past year. Klayton realized he didn't have to hide his asthma and that it didn't have to limit him.

[KLAYTON'S FATHER] And so, I'm just really proud of him for what he has done to take care of himself and how he's handled himself when an attack has occurred.

[KLAYTON] I've learned a lot. And that you need to let people know, or else it's just gonna get worse.

[NARRATOR] Thanks in large part to their schools' commitment to being asthma-friendly, Deshauna, MacKenzie, Klayton, and countless other students with asthma don't ever again have to feel like asthma is in their way.

[MERKLE] Those kids can go from being a student who feels unable to participate fully in school to a student who can do everything they dream of. And isn't that what we all want? Whatever we can do working together to help students manage their asthma and participate in all the things that they want to. I think we can make a huge difference.

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