

## Health Impact Review Building Bridges for Dropout Reductions February 1, 2007

### Executive Summary

**Background and Introduction:** In Washington State, only 74% of the 2005 high school class graduated on time. Moreover, minority and low-income students have higher than average dropout rates and lower than average on-time graduation rates. In an effort to improve graduation rates, the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) seeks funding for the Building Bridges for Dropout Reductions Program. The Building Bridges Program will provide grants for school districts or partners to build partnerships that will provide dropout prevention services to identified at-risk students. The purpose of this review is to analyze the Building Bridges Program to determine if its implementation would either increase or decrease health disparities in Washington State.

**Methods:** To conduct this review, Board staff relied on discussions and information provided by staff from OSPI and the Department of Health, conversations with community health advocates interested in the health and education of minority populations, data from the OSPI website, limited analyses of OSPI data, and a limited review of the published literature. In addition, Board staff developed a conceptual model of how the program may ultimately impact health disparities to help guide this review and analysis.

**Results and Discussion:** Overall, there is little rigorous evaluation of dropout prevention programs in the published literature. Nonetheless, there is some evidence in the literature to support components of the Building Bridges Program, such as partnerships, mentoring, alternative schooling, early intervention, and the use of intervention specialists. There is a growing body of literature substantiating the link between increased length of education and improved health outcomes. If the Building Bridges Program is successful in reducing dropout rates, the program may also have a positive impact on the health of the students served by the program. To reduce health disparities based on race and ethnicity, however, the Building Bridges Program would need to improve student retention and graduation rates for students of color at a disproportionately higher rate than for White students. The current proposal would give grant priority to schools and school districts with above average dropout rates, which would help target the program to minority students because they are disproportionately represented in these schools. If grant priority is given to low-income schools, or low-income schools with above average dropout rates, the program would have more focus on students of color because these students are more disproportionately represented in low-income schools than in schools with above average dropout rates.

**Conclusion:** Building Bridges has the potential to decrease health disparities in Washington. The program is most likely to reduce health disparities if it is designed to reach a disproportionately high number of minority students and uses evidence-based interventions that are effective with minority students.