

The Vital Role of School-Based Health Centers in Creating a Violence-Free School Environment

By Terri D. Wright

In April 2009, 17 year-old Eric Mohat committed suicide after being tormented by bullies at his high school. That same month, 11year-old Jaheem Herrera hung himself because he was tired of being bullied. Constantly taunted and harassed at school, 11year-old Carl Joseph Walker-Hoover also ended his life in April. More violence has occurred in recent months: Honor roll student Derrion Albert was brutally beaten to death by a group of teens while walking home from school. 15 year-old Michael Brewer was burned on more than three quarters of his body after a group of five teenagers doused him in rubbing alcohol and set him on fire.

Violence leads to so much pain for children and adolescents. How much have we failed as a society and as responsible adults when we allow bullying and other forms of violence to lead to so much suffering for children?

Sadly, many young people today are confronted with violence. Besides bullying, they experience or witness aggression at schools or in their neighborhoods. Some live with the consequences of war, seeing family members and friends deployed and either killed, injured, or suffering emotionally. Others have experienced catastrophic events such as floods, hurricanes, and other natural disasters.

In neighborhoods across the country, children live in an environment of fear. Kids are told to play indoors to avoid gangs and other threats. Glass barriers protect the cashier at the neighborhood convenience store. Armed guards patrol subway stations. All reinforce for young people that “it’s not safe.” This perception of danger and violence is exacerbated in schools. Students are often greeted with metal detectors, bars on windows, security guards, and surveillance cameras that create a feeling of insecurity and an atmosphere of mistrust.

Youth violence refers to harmful behaviors that can start early and continue into young adulthood. The young person can be a victim, an offender, or a witness to the violence.

Youth violence includes various behaviors. Some violent acts—such as bullying, slapping, or hitting—can cause more emotional harm than physical harm. Others, such as robbery, assault, or rape, can lead to serious injury or even death.
-Centers for Disease Control

Exposure to violence often causes more emotional harm than physical harm for young people. Whether real or perceived, violence can lead young people to feel tense, anxious, and afraid, and it can breed feelings of hopelessness and despair. This mental distress may foster unhealthy behaviors, including aggression, substance abuse, eating disorders, and suicide. It can also affect students’ ability to succeed in school.

Young people are unable to learn if they feel anxious, unsafe, or depressed. Students who report being victims of violent crime are twice as likely to receive mostly C’s than to

receive mostly A's or mostly B's.¹ In research conducted by the U.S. Department of Defense, six out of 10 military families said that their children have increased levels of fear and anxiety when a parent is sent to war. One-third of these families report that the child's grades and behavior in school have suffered as a result.²

Many students either drop out of school or are pushed out because they are too afraid to go to school. A 2007 survey by the National Center for Education Statistics found that 5.5 percent of children and adolescents did not go to school on one or more of the 30 days preceding the survey because they felt unsafe at school or on their way to or from school.³

The Role of School-Based Health Centers in Creating a Safe Environment for School Success

Fear and violence clearly disrupt the learning environment and student success. Fortunately, school-based health centers can play a catalytic role in preventing youth violence and facilitating school wellness. They are strategic partners in the school and community response to violent events through the provision of early intervention programs and services. They are

School-Based Health Centers in Action

Across the country, school-based health centers are playing a vital role in addressing the impact of violence on young people and creating safe school environments:

- In **Watertown, New York**, a school-based health center has increased access to mental health services for military children struggling with the deployment of parents and siblings. The center was able to provide these services because it secured an agreement with the military insurer Tricare for reimbursement of services.
New York Coalition for School-Based Primary Care
www.nystatesbhc.org
- In **New Mexico**, the youth advisory group for the Laguna-Acoma Teen Center pursued and secured state funding for a peer-to-peer suicide prevention program for Native American youth. The teens are now advising in the implementation of the program in area high schools.
New Mexico Assembly on School-Based Health Care
www.nmassembly.org
- In **New Orleans**, the need for mental health services has been exacerbated post-Katrina. School Health Connection, which is leading the rebuilding of school-based health centers in metropolitan New Orleans, has partnered with local human services departments and the Seton Resource Center for Child Development to provide mental health services in five area schools, including trauma intervention therapy and violence and bullying prevention.
School Health Connection
www.lphi.org
- In **Massachusetts** three school-based health centers are implementing the Safe Schools Ambassadors program, a national program that provides students with training and skill development in nonviolent communication and intervention to stop bullying and violence among their peers.
Massachusetts Coalition of School-Based Health Care
www.mcsbhc.org
- In **Worcester, Massachusetts**, high school students participating in their school-based health center's youth advisory group implemented a school-wide Respect Campaign. The campaign engaged peers, teachers and school staff with the goal of promoting positive relationships and a sense of unity within the school.
Massachusetts Coalition of School-Based Health Care
www.mcsbhc.org
- In **Calais, Maine**, teen members of the school-based health center's youth advisory group received instruction on how to start their own peer mediation program in the school. The assistant principal now turns to these peer mediators to respond to student conflicts, rather than implementing the school's disciplinary policy.
Maine Assembly on School-Based Health Care
www.measbhc.org

¹ Bauer, L., Guerino, P., Nolle, K.L., and Tang, S., "Student Victimization in U.S. Schools. Results from the 2005 School Crime Supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey," *NCES 2009-306* (October 2008). National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, Washington, D.C.

² Zoroya, G, "Troops' kids feel war toll," *USA Today*, June 25, 2009.

³ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Youth Violence: Facts at a Glance," Summer 2009.

a critical ally in restoring safety and calm for school-aged children who have been victimized or have witnessed violence.

School-based health must be reframed so educators understand the critical role that centers can play in the prevention of violence and school dropout. By providing vital health and mental health services in schools, school-based health centers help young people prevent violence, manage the emotional impact of violence, and connect troubled youth to the resources needed to help them heal. They can partner with students and school personnel to identify the issues and offer strategies and programs to resolve them before they affect learning and school retention.

School-based health centers could have led the anti-bullying and anti-violence programs that may have saved the lives of Eric, Jaheem, Carl Joseph or Derrion.

School-based health centers are ideally positioned to be a catalyst for creating a healthy school for young people, and are much more likely to begin mental health services for adolescents than any other types of providers. Students with access to an SBHC are more likely to receive mental health and wellness screenings and counseling than those enrolled in Medicaid or with private insurance, and students report that they trust the confidentiality afforded by school-based health centers.

What School-Based Health Centers Can Do to Improve the Learning Environment, Prevent and Address Youth Violence, and Keep Kids in School

In addition to providing health services, school-based health centers can make a number of valuable contributions toward the goal of making schools violence-free, including:

- Introduce programs that have a proven and positive impact on the school environment (see list of resources below).
- Partner with school staff to develop and implement a school safety plan, including incorporating safety into school wellness plans, developing safe routes to school, and establishing school discipline policies that aren't detrimental to students' education.
- Engage students in improving the physical and emotional school environment and implementing peer-to-peer prevention and intervention programs that help students address violence and mental distress.
- Provide support services and programs such as mediation and conflict resolution, bullying, gang and suicide intervention and prevention, and after-school programs and activities that provide students with safe places to play.
- Advocate for safe school legislation at the school district, tribal, state, and federal levels.

School-based health centers *must* take action now by being the catalysts for healthy and safe school environments. Through their services, programs, and advocacy, school-based health centers can enhance the safety, school success, and overall well-being of all children and adolescents.

Let's not have another Eric, Jaheem, Carl Joseph, Derrion, or Michael.

About the Author

Terri D. Wright, MPH, former program director with the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, recently joined the American Public Health Association as the Director of the Center for School, Health & Education Policy where the School-Based Health Care Policy Program is now housed.

Resources for School-Based Health Centers

The following resources are available to support school-based health centers in addressing youth violence and creating healthy school environments:

- **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention**, *Preventing Youth Violence: Program Activities Guide*—strategies for prevention and early intervention.
www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention
- **Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice**, *Early Warning, Timely Response: A Guide to Safe Schools*—a guide to violence prevention and intervention and crisis response in schools.
www.cecp.air.org/guide
- **Safe Schools Ambassadors Program**—a national program to reduce bullying, improve student-adult engagement at school and improve the school climate.
www.community-matters.org/safe-school-ambassadors
- **Stop Bullying Now Campaign (HRSA)**—resources to help children and adults address bullying.
www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov
- **Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative**—a discretionary grant program from the U.S. Departments of Education, Justice, and Health and Human Services that provides students, schools, and communities with federal funding to implement an enhanced, coordinated, comprehensive plan of activities, programs, and services that focus on promoting healthy childhood development and preventing violence and alcohol and other drug abuse.
www.sshs.samhsa.gov/initiative/default.aspx
- **National School Safety Center**—information and resources highlighting school safety research, practice, strategies and trends.
www.schoolsafety.us
- **After School.gov**—connects after-school providers to federal resources that support children and youth during out-of-school hours.
www.afterschool.gov
- **Be Safe and Sound in School, National Crime Prevention Council**—a program model that addresses school safety problems by evaluating physical conditions as well as cultural and social variables such as bullying, violence, and vandalism that may promote an unsafe environment.
www.ncpc.org/programs/be-safe-and-sound-campaign
- **National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center**—a central source of information on prevention and intervention programs, publications, research, and statistics on youth violence.
www.safeyouth.org
- **National Youth Gang Center (NYGC)**—provides resources for addressing community gang problems.
www.iir.com/nygc