

Diverse voices, one vision build new school-based health center in Forest Grove, Oregon

New center swings into action as a swine flu testing center

When the new school-based health center at Forest Grove High School in Washington County, Oregon opened its doors, it was the culmination of a two-year planning effort that embodied the principles of multicultural, multi-stakeholder engagement.

The school, education administrators, local hospitals and health centers, public agencies, business owners, non-profit organizations, parents and students worked together to develop the center, which serves all students in the Forest Grove, Gaston and Banks school districts, diverse communities that have some of the highest numbers of Latino residents and lowest median household incomes in Washington county.

“We are a community that knows its vision, and we believe in working together,” said San Juana Aguilar, a parent of a student at Cornelius Elementary School in the Forest Grove school district. Despite working full-time, Aguilar volunteers 30 hours a week in the school. She served as a member of the steering committee that assessed the need for and opportunity to open the school-based health center, and then took the recommendation to the school board.

Parents and youth were heavily engaged in the approval process. They contributed scores of hours attending community meetings to promote the proposed school-based health center, testifying at hearings, and convincing decision makers that a school-based health center would help students perform better in school and keep parents from having to take time off from work. Many of these tireless leaders then joined as members of parent and youth advisory groups to plan the ultimately approved school-based health center, including advising on service and funding models. With the



Together with a diverse group of parents, community members and youth, student Elizabeth Guzman and Deana Vanderzanden, a parent, worked together to help shape the new school-based health center.

center open, the advisory groups continue to be active, encouraging peers to use the center and advocating for increased support of the center.

Student health challenges impacting attendance

A 2006 survey of schools led by the Washington County Commission on Children and Families pointed to a growing concern among school principals about the health of their student population.

Too many students were at home sick, with no place to go for treatment. Students were missing school and it was impacting their grades. With 85,000 students in the county, and many without a primary care doctor or health insurance, the Commission created a coalition of more than 25 organizations, including school officials and hospital systems, to look at how school-based health centers could increase students' access to health care.

To learn more about school-based health centers, members of the coalition visited existing centers in the state. They concluded that school-based health centers could make a real difference in their community. “It’s a model that works. It’s evidence-based and helps students connect to health and mental health services,” said Bill Thomas, director of the Washington County Commission on Children and Families.

The coalition created a vision for the county that there be a school-based health center to serve every school district. High schools were identified as the preferred site for the centers because teens are less likely to seek medical care, may be engaging in high-risk behaviors such as sexual activity, drug or alcohol use, and are facing greater mental health issues as they struggle with adolescence.

Forest Grove High School was the second school in the county to participate in the planning and development of a school-based health center and advance the vision of the coalition. Former Forest Grove District School Superintendent Jack Musser believes the connection between health and education is clear and eagerly led the call for a school-based health center for his district: “The healthier students are, the better they will succeed in school. Their attitudes and behaviors are better when they feel well, and so is attendance.”

After presenting the proposal to the school staff, which immediately got behind the concept, a process to secure community support and school board approval was initiated.

High levels of youth and parent engagement

The school held a series of public meetings and forums to promote the idea to the community and to listen to their thoughts and concerns. Successfully engaging parental support for the proposed school-based health center was critical.

With a high Latino parent population, the Forest Grove School District takes extra steps to ensure that the typical barriers that prevent people from attending community meetings and voicing their needs and opinions are removed.

Ideas for engaging diverse audiences

- Engage business, health care and education communities together with youth, teachers and parents
- Engage youth on the steering committee and provide coaching and additional support to help them with complex topics prior to meetings
- Host meetings at times that coincide with the schedules of working parents and offer day care, meals, and transportation to remove all barriers
- Have parents and students reach out to other parents and community members to invite them to meetings
- Respect diverse audiences by hosting meetings in the preferred language of participants, or by employing bilingual interpreters so that multiple voices can be heard.
- Teach parents and students how to run effective meetings and help them prepare presentations for the school board or other governing bodies
- Charge students with the design of the school-based health center

Each meeting includes a bilingual liaison to help parents who want to speak in Spanish, and also be understood by all. Spanish-speaking parents all receive a reminder call from bilingual staff the night before a meeting. Sometimes, to encourage attendance at meetings, parents call other Spanish-speaking parents to invite them. An automated phone dialer with reminder messages is also available in Spanish.

School board members were engaged to solicit community support. “I grew up as a migrant worker with few bilingual health clinics. People like me... we see the value of bringing health care into schools,” said Anna Tavera-Weller, a school board member and parent of five. Tavera-Weller explained that taking time away from work to take a sick child to the doctor can cost someone his or her job; there’s not an adequate transportation system; and that culturally, Latinos may be less willing to seek help for medical or mental health needs. “It is apparent we needed this in our community, and we fought for it.”

Empowering community members to make informed decisions

The 17-person steering committee had extensive Latino community representation of both parents and students.

Connie Potter, director of communications for the Washington County school district and facilitator of the steering committee, worked diligently to ensure that all steering committee members, especially youth and parents, felt welcome. “It was critical that we engage all parents, all voices. We worked to make sure that happened by having bilingual interpreters, ensuring everyone had an opportunity to speak, and by making sure that we did not adjourn until we asked for comments from everyone,” she explained.

Despite working long hours, raising children and dealing with limited transportation, parents participated fully in the process. Aguilar added:

“This really helps Latino students who do not have health insurance. I know what it feels like to pay for medical expenses in cash.” She explained that the availability of health care on the school property is going to change lives. “Too many students go to school sick for days because they do not have health care to get better, or they do not play sports because they cannot afford sports physicals, which are required to play.”

Unique to the process was the participation of two students on the steering committee. The students, Leticia Sanchez and Elizabeth Guzman, both 11th graders at the time, attended all meetings, read all materials including legal and construction documents, and had an equal say in all proceedings. Ms. Potter held briefings to break down some of the more complex topics for the students prior to the steering committee meetings so that they were empowered to voice their opinions. “I am interested in the medical profession,” said Leticia,

“so I was happy to participate, although it was a very complicated process and a lot of work.”

At the meeting when the school board voted on whether to open a center, dozens of Latino families attended, and many spoke in support of the center, some testifying in Spanish.

Planning the Center

Leticia and Elizabeth enjoyed their experience on the steering committee so they volunteered for the advisory committee responsible for putting together development plans, including determining governance and structure, the financial model, and the program and service mix that would be offered.

“One of the best parts of the planning process was that students were involved,” said Elizabeth. In addition to participation at the leadership level, students in the school’s horticulture program are designing the landscaping, art

students painted pictures to decorate the school-based health center, and marketing students developed a marketing plan to promote the new center using posters, ads and T-shirts.

Now that the center is up and running, Leticia, Elizabeth and other students are serving on the center’s youth advisory committee. A community advisory committee meets every month. In addition, a Latino parent committee is actively advising the school district. They meet every other month, in the evenings when most parents are finished working. Committee members

Latino students comprise 42 percent of all students in the district. In Forest Grove, 16.9 percent of children under 18 live in poverty compared to 8.8 percent county-wide.

Key partners in developing the Forest Grove school-based health center

- Forest Grove School District, www.fgsd.k12.or.us/
- Washington County Commission on Children and Families, www.co.washington.or.us/hhs/ccf/
- Washington County Department of Health and Human Services, www.co.washington.or.us/HHS/
- Tuahly Healthcare, www.tuality.com/
- Virginia Garcia Memorial Medical Center which serves as the medical sponsor, www.viriniagarcia.org
- Oregon School-Based Health Care Network, www.osbhc.org

have received leadership training and support with learning how to advocate for school-based health care.

Financing for sustainability

Core to the coalition's vision for school-based health centers in Washington County was a commitment to a sustainable business model, one that focuses on maximizing billings to public and private insurers and securing private and philanthropic support rather than relying exclusively on public funding. Part of this strategy included partnering with a federally qualified health center, Virginia Garcia Memorial Medical Center, as medical sponsor. Tuality Healthcare, a hospital-based healthcare system, committed to underwrite any costs related to the school-based health center that cannot be billed to insurance, including those incurred by students who cannot pay for services.

A timely opening

Little did students know that the school-based health center would open in the midst of the H1N1 swine flu epidemic and that the site would serve as a testing center for the virus. To see whether the school had any cases, the school-based health

center staff conducted a random sample of 100 students. Fortunately, there were no positive cases in the school. "From daily needs to major epidemics, a school-based health center can help keep students in school and learning," said Potter. For example, knowing that there were no cases of the virus within the school population gave students the confidence to come to school.

With the center open and serving students, those who were involved in its creation are feeling satisfied. "Working on the school-based health center project has been an extraordinary experience for over two years, and finally being able to see it up and running every day as I go to school puts a smile on my face," said Elizabeth.

For Musser, who retired in June as district superintendent, the center is "a lasting legacy. The one thing I wanted to see through to the end."

Now it's up to the students and to the community to carry out that legacy. The youth advisory committee and the Latino Parent Advisory Committee will help sustain the center. "This center is for us. We had a role in creating the center and now it's up to us to keep it going. We'll all do better in school when we are healthier," said Leticia.

Snapshot: School-Based Health Centers in Oregon

Washington County now has three school-based health centers. In total, there are 53 state-certified school-based health centers in Oregon. The Oregon legislature allocated \$1.38 million in 2009 to help with planning and start-up costs for new centers, and to support the state's existing centers. Behind the effort to create more school-based health centers is Oregon School-Based Health Care Network, the collective voice to build a stable, effective and available health care system in schools where children spend their days.

The Oregon School-Based Health Care Network is one of nine recipients of multiyear funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation for its national School-Based Health Care Policy Program. Launched in 2004, the School-Based Health Care Policy Program aims to make quality care more accessible and sustainable for children and youth. A fundamental principle of the program is the promotion of a consumer-centered model of quality care—one in which local people, including youth, shape the content, quality, delivery, and financing of health care in their communities.

For more information, visit:

School-Based Health Care Policy Program
www.schoolbasedhealthcare.org

Oregon School-Based Health Care Network
www.osbhcn.org



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