



CSHC Spotlight On

Manual Arts High School's Youth Health Action Board



While the health center at Manual Arts High School looks pretty typical in many ways, what makes this school health center special are the students who help with everything from overseeing teen pregnancy prevention and nutrition programs, to spearheading student outreach, to facilitating meetings and working on policy briefings for local and state policy makers. “We really rely on the energy of the students to get the word out on campus about our services and programs,” explains Matthew Moyer, project coordinator at Manual Arts Health Center. “And when the clinic was in danger of closing, it was the students who rallied and did everything they could to save it.” When the medical sponsor at the time withdrew their funding for the center, Childrens Hospital Los Angeles limited the funds needed to support the medical services offered at the clinic. Staff were laid off and the clinic was threatened with closure. That’s when the students got together to alert the entire campus.

The school’s Human Rights Club organized a petition that was signed by a thousand students. A mock cemetery was created in the middle of the school to emphasize the health threats students would face if they lost medical services. Students also contacted local legislators and called the office of Senator Mark Ridley-Thomas, a strong supporter of school health centers, for help. Through their efforts, the senator’s staff talked to the hospital director and found a way to reduce clinic operations until another provider could step in. In December 2008, St. John’s Well Child and Family Center took over medical services for the clinic. “It was the students who really stepped up and saved their health center,” says

Moyer. “Staff couldn’t get involved since we are employees of the sponsoring organizations. The students really took over and did everything they could to show they wanted and needed this health center to stay open.”

Student involvement continues today. The school’s Youth Health Action Board (YHAB) was initially created to bring together student leaders in the health center under one umbrella. The board consists of 15-20 students who assist the school’s pregnancy prevention and nutrition programs. Students are recruited at the beginning of the school year to serve on the board. Others come to the health center, see what’s happening there and want to become involved. With so many unintentional pregnancies among their friends, it’s not hard for students to recognize why it is so important to get information on this topic out to their peers. Also, as obesity rates continue to climb, students see the need for better nutrition and more physical activity all around them. Besides working on issues that are really important to the students, they also earn community service hours needed for graduation.



YHAB members show off certificates of commendation.

The YHAB is divided into two groups: Teen Pregnancy Prevention (TPP) and the Teen Nutrition Team (TNT). The TPP group is currently working on getting more condom access on campus and finding teachers who might be willing to be involved in distribution and education. The TNT group is focusing on getting healthier foods into the school cafeteria, producing a student magazine, and educating students on how to change the food system. YHAB members are also involved in providing peer education in the classrooms and conducting lunch meetings for all students to discuss relevant issues. In addition, YHAB members meet monthly to report on their projects and update other board members. The meetings also include guest speakers who address such topics as how to fill out college applications, and weightier matters such as dealing with depression and suicide.

In addition to the school-based projects, student board members are also nominated to participate in statewide programs. Three students are now in the Policy Leadership Program (PLP) sponsored by the California Center for Civic Participation. Other students are nominated to serve on the Statewide Youth Board on Obesity Prevention (SYBOP). Last year, other students worked with the California Adolescent Health Collaborative which provided student leaders with valuable opportunities to collaborate, learn the basics of policy work, and take on community projects. Other benefits of participation are learning public speaking, facilitating meetings and trainings, and gaining leadership experience. This year's PLP project for YHAB members is a policy briefing put together with the assistance of three other local high schools. Students are planning a youth-led coalition to advocate for school health centers and adolescent health issues in Los Angeles. The goal is to hold a policy briefing event for policymakers in Los Angeles county at the end of February. The event will feature state Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell.

The outstanding work of the Manual Arts students is being recognized by local officials as well as professional organizations. Not only has the board been used as a model for other schools, but YHAB members have also been invited to speak at the conference of the Association of Pediatric Medicine, and were recently honored with a certificate of commendation presented by LA City Councilmember Jan Perry.

Youth board success stories are numerous. "I went from failing grades to working hard to catch up," says one YHAB board member. "Now I'm passing every class with good marks." Others report a newfound desire to attend college or pursue future careers in policy and advocacy work. Still others have learned valuable skills for job interviews, doing formal presentations, and communicating clearly. "Now I'm able to stay calm when people disagree with me," reports another YHAB member. "And, I'm teaching others that I have a voice." Getting involved, finding their voice, becoming empowered—students at Manual Arts High School are gaining experience that will stay with them for a lifetime.

By: Aileen Olson

- ✓ Started: 1997
- ✓ Location: Center of school campus
- ✓ Services: Medical services, reproductive health services, prevention education programs
- ✓ Staff: Medical doctor, physician's assistant, medical assistant, project coordinator, health educator, receptionist
- ✓ Sponsors: St. John's Well Child and Family Center, and Childrens Hospital Los Angeles