



**CSHC Spotlight on
Riverbank High School
6200 Claus Rd.
Riverbank, CA 95367**

The City of Riverbank is a growing community in the heart of California's agricultural Central Valley. Since the beginning of the 2006-2007 school year, Riverbank High School has been developing its vision for a new school health center. The school is poised to become a leader and example in the movement to expand school health centers in the Central Valley.

Many of California's Central Valley communities face a serious lack of access to health care services. A greater proportion of adolescents lack health insurance in the Valley than in the state as a whole. Teen birth rates are well above the state average as are the rates of sexually transmitted infections. School health centers are a promising approach to addressing these adolescent health issues.

"We are in a suburban and rural setting, and we have only one or two primary health providers in our community. Many of our students and their families do not have ready access to transportation to get to the adjacent community of Modesto where most health care providers operate," explained Riverbank High School principal, Ken Geisick. "We find that simple medical appointments keep students out of school for an entire day. In some cases, high school students are expected to provide day care (thus missing school) while parents take younger children to appointments in Modesto."

What makes the school health center start-up effort unique at Riverbank High School is that it has been a student driven effort. It began when school Social Worker, Nancy Perez, developed a peer helper program to organize and mobilize students to improve school climate. An early project of the Step-By-Step Peer Program was a student survey, which demonstrated the multiple health and social issues that concerned students. Specifically, obesity, teen pregnancy and alcohol and drug abuse were the main problems that students wanted help coping with. The peer helpers began to envision a center where all these issues could be addressed.

Maria Garnica, who was a Riverbank High School senior and participant in the peer helper program at the time, said "We realized that a school health center would really help our students have a better everyday experience at school."

Once students clearly expressed their need and desire for a school health center, the school administrators quickly

supported the effort. Nancy Perez explained that "I have had the opportunity to hear first hand from youth the struggles they are faced with daily due to lack of access to health care. When the youth speak of how problems and challenges would be alleviated if they could have direct access to medical care, I can relate to the hope they hold for a school health center."



Riverbank High School students & staff visit Edison High School's school health center to gather information.

Geisick added, "Providing onsite health care for adolescents will increase the likelihood that high school age students will access the health center for medical appointments, medical education and prevention."

Once Riverbank High School students, staff and administrators agreed on the concept of a school health center, they began researching models and involving the community in the consideration. Geisick and Perez reached out to the California School Health Centers Association for more information and technical assistance on school health center start-up. CSHC Field Coordinator Hector Lara provided Riverbank students with information about installation, partnering with medical providers and financial planning.

"There are almost as many models for school health centers as there are school health centers! CSHC helps schools navigate the sometimes confusing process of opening a new site and helps schools find the model that best fits their community." said Lara.

Riverbank High School students then presented their survey findings, research and ideas to the Riverbank Community Collaborative where the idea of the health center was well accepted.

Principal Geisick emphasized that they “intentionally engaged members of the community and the Riverbank Unified School Board from the very beginning.” The peer group made presentations to a variety of groups so that parents understood that this is a student driven project.

“We have a very supportive team that has been meeting at the guidance and direction of our Healthy Start Coordinator, Esther Rosario. We have maintained open channels of communication with our School Board, city, and community, which helps overcome and address some of the challenges involved in starting a school health center,” Nancy Perez said.

In April 2007, CSHC invited the Riverbank students to testify in Sacramento before the Senate Education Committee about their budding start-up process. This testimony supported SB 564 (Ridley-Thomas), which would help fund school health centers. The students formally stated what they had found and had been working on over the past three months.

Janette Ruiz, a Riverbank student, described her experience in Sacramento by saying that “The Senators saw that we really wanted a health center on our campus, and maybe they were a little surprised about that.”



Riverbank High School students and staff with CSHC staff take a break in Sacramento before testifying at the Senate Education Committee hearing.

Maria Garnica said that testifying in Sacramento was amazing. She explained “I got to see how the world around me works and how a small school can make a difference in a community. It’s not just larger cities making those differences!”

In May 2007, CSHC’s Hector Lara introduced Riverbank High School students and staff to the school health center at Edison High School in Stockton. Riverbank students and staff toured the school health center and saw how it supported the needs of the high school student population.

This past August the Riverbank Unified School Board passed a resolution to allow the school district to engage in negotiations with Golden Valley Health Centers to start a school health center at the high school. Riverbank High School is continuing its effort to open a new school health center. Soon the students and community may have a new location to access health care.

This process has created some tremendous changes in the Step-by-Step participants at Riverbank High School. The original group of seven students has grown by approximately 20 more students. The students have had the opportunity to identify a need and shepherd a concept through a process, which has been enormously empowering for them.

Social worker Nancy Perez is particularly impressed by the transformation she has seen in the students. She said, “The Step-By-Step participants constantly describe and demonstrate growth in many ways ranging from their individual self-esteem, to feelings of empowerment, and understanding the importance of having a voice within their community. The commitment I see coming from these students is immense, and the skills and experiences they are developing throughout this process is priceless. They are learning how to express in very articulate and organized ways their needs and opinions, and they understand the importance of gathering facts and information to support their arguments. Many of the students have expressed how they now feel capable of creating changes for themselves and their community.”

“This experience has taught me that when you have a drive, there are things you can do, and if you keep going forward, you can really make a difference in people’s lives,” said Maria Garnica. “It’s just amazing knowing that as a small school, we’re doing something so big.”

This student-led effort is an inspiring story of youth involvement in the school health center movement. It also highlights the great deal of research, communication, community involvement, and planning that goes into starting a new school health center. Part of CSHC’s mission is to help make this process more clear so that more schools may open a center. CSHC applauds the staff and students at Riverbank High School and wishes them the best in this endeavor – and will welcome Principal Ken Geisick to the CSHC Board in March 2008!

- Cynthia Harding

The California School Health Centers Association provides leadership and technical assistance for the expansion of school health centers in California. For more information, please visit our website at www.schoolhealthcenters.org.