

Spotlight on Riverbank High School: A Student-Led Effort to Increase Health Access

Riverbank High School opened a school-based health center in 2009 based on the desire and input of students. The following is a description of how it happened.

The City of Riverbank is a growing community in the heart of California's agricultural Central Valley. Many communities in this region 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-based health centers (SBHCs) help schools and communities address 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 former 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.”

In 2006 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 an SBHC that could address all these challenges.

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 an SBHC, 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-based health center.”



Riverbank High School students & staff tour a school-based 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 an SBHC, they began researching models and involving the community in the decision process. The California School-Based Health Alliance provided information about installation, partnering with medical providers, and financial planning.

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

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

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groups so that parents understood that it was 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.

Students Learn to Advocate for the Community

In April 2007, Riverbank students testified in Sacramento before the Senate Education Committee about their budding start-up process, sharing what they had discovered about their community’s needs. This testimony supported SB 564 (Ridley-Thomas), which was later signed into law and created a grant program (since unfunded) for SBHCs.



Riverbank High School students and staff traveled to Sacramento to testify at the Senate Education Committee.

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 2008 the Riverbank Unified School Board passed a resolution to allow the school district to engage in negotiations with Golden Valley Health Centers to

start the SBHC, which opened to students in 2009.

This process created tremendous changes in the Step-by-Step participants at Riverbank High School. The original group of seven students nearly tripled in a year. The students had the opportunity to identify a need and shepherd a concept through a process, which was enormously empowering for them.

Social worker Nancy Perez was particularly impressed by the transformation she saw 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-based health center movement. It also highlights the great deal of research, communication, community involvement, and planning that goes into starting a new SBHC.

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