



Editorial: Caring for students: New school health clinic gets an A

Published: Friday, January 28, 2011, 8:15 AM



By Paula Holmes-Greeley | The Muskegon Chronicle



Every day efforts are under way to improve our community. One major step in the last few months was the establishment of the new Teen Health Center at Muskegon High School.

Opened by Hackley Community Care Center in November, the high school clinic has been a success and a good partner of Muskegon's Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative, a collaborative effort of the school district and other community services to combat violence, substance abuse, behavioral and mental health issues.

Students also see the value of the new services. In the clinic's first 16 days of operation, 83 medical patients were treated for everything from sore throats to sexually transmitted diseases and from toothaches to depression. In December, 25 dental patients were seen.

The clinic serves patients ages 10 to 21 and offers a sliding-fee scale for those who don't have private insurance or Medicaid. Community donations and federal grants combined to furnish the clinic which is housed in two rarely used classrooms in the freshman wing of the high school.

The school-based clinic was a goal of Linda Juarez, HCCC executive director. She believed easier access to medical care would address some of the major health issues of Muskegon County teens, who have a troubling higher-than-state-average teen pregnancy rate. Juarez has said about 12 percent of the girls at Muskegon High School — about 80 students — either have children or are pregnant.

Also, in the last decade there's been a near doubling in the incidence of two sexually transmitted diseases among area teens.

Juarez believes health care and education officials have plenty of shared interests in the health of young people. Her agency has been running nonmedical clinics at Bunker and Steele middle schools to encourage healthy habits and lifestyle choices. Expanding to provide medical care seems like a natural extension of services.

With the growing emphasis on education as a way success in the new global economy, it's important for students to be healthy and ready to learn every day. Tight school budgets have eliminated the school nurse and other programs that might have helped students deal with illnesses and other health issues.

Parents also are scrambling to afford health care as they deal with unemployment or under employment.

The in-school clinic allows teens to seek treatment right away without having to wait until their parents can get a day off to take them to the doctor. Fewer days out of school due to illness means more lessons learned.

The school clinic also allows teens to seek help they might be reluctant to ask their parents about such as pregnancy testing or substance abuse treatment.

Because the clinic is at the school, other students in the neighborhood also can get treatment after 3 p.m.

Based on the positive experience at Muskegon High School, Juarez should continue her efforts to create a health center at another high school, possibly in Muskegon Heights. She has said she also is talking with officials in Fruitport, who have discussed the possibility of a health center for all students, from kindergarten through 12th grade.

Healthy students are focused students.

© 2011 MLive.com. All rights reserved.