

Bringing Health Care to School



TOPIC: HEALTH SERVICES

DISTRICT: GARFIELD COUNTY 16

LOCATION: PARACHUTE, COLO.

INTRODUCTION

When students at the Grand Valley Center for Family Learning need medical attention, they don't even have to leave the building. They can just walk down the hall to the Grand River Student Health Center where a full-time nurse practitioner is on duty eight hours a day, five days a week.

OUR STORY

In 2002, school board members and administrators in Garfield County School District 16, located in Parachute, Colo., decided to move all of the district's early childhood and kindergarten classes into one building, a former high school. The Grand Valley Early Childhood Literacy Center was designed to serve both young children and their parents, many of whom needed access to educational services such as English as a Second Language classes. In 2006, voters approved a \$35 million bond issue to help pay for an addition to the original building, and when completed it was renamed the Grand Valley Center for Family Learning.

Because many of the district's students came from families that were either uninsured or underinsured, district leaders included a school-based health clinic in the redesign. But because it lacked funding, the clinic sat empty

for several years. In 2010, the Grand River Hospital District, based in nearby Rifle, received a \$400,000 grant from the Colorado Health Foundation to finally open the clinic. Since November 2010, the Grand River Student Health Center has served more than 100 Garfield students for a variety of physical and mental health issues, and interest in the clinic is growing.

"The idea," says clinic director Lois Kame, "is that by providing students with access to medical care, they'll be healthier overall, and there will be fewer absences. The goal is to keep the kids in school and keep them learning."

Although Parachute is located on busy Interstate 70, it is relatively isolated—Glenwood Springs is about 45 minutes to the east, Grand



did you know...

... that studies have shown that uninsured students who visit school-based health clinics use less emergency care and are more likely to receive preventive care such as shots and checkups than other underserved children?

Junction about an hour to the west—and much of the population is transient because of the boom-and-bust oil and gas industry. Several years ago, when things were booming, says Superintendent Ken Haptonstall, Garfield was the fastest-growing school district in the state. But since then, the district has lost 220 students, or about 20 percent of the student population, “and now we’re probably the fastest-shrinking district in the state.”

Many Parachute residents travel as far as two hours away for work, making it difficult to schedule medical appointments in Rifle, Glenwood Springs or Grand Junction during normal business hours. “Even if you have insurance,” Haptonstall says, “you may have to wait for a week to see a doctor if your kid has a fever. So one benefit of having the school clinic is access to medical care. Parents can take their kids to the clinic when they drop them off at school in the morning or pick them up in the afternoon. It’s convenient.”

SOLUTIONS

The clinic is available to all students (and employees) in the district, provided they have a signed consent form from a parent or guardian. Families without health insurance pay a \$20 fee per visit, but even that is sometimes waived. “We don’t want to turn anyone away who needs medical help,” says Rebecca Ruland, principal of Grand Valley Center for Family Learning.



... that research shows that school-based health centers impact educational success by improving health status, reducing absenteeism, decreasing discipline referrals, increasing parental involvement and improving readiness to learn?

The clinic has two exam rooms, a reception area, two nearby bathrooms and an office area. Nurse practitioner Jean Lein treats students for the usual ailments: colds, coughs, flu symptoms, injuries, infections and such. She also conducts physical exams and manages treatment for chronic conditions such as asthma and diabetes. If a doctor is needed, she can refer students to a nearby family clinic in Battlement Mesa, which is also operated by Grand River Hospital District.

The clinic is especially convenient for a group of teen mothers enrolled in an alternative high school program at the Grand Valley Center for Family Learning. The mothers, some as young as 15, bring their babies to the clinic for medical care and parenting advice.

In addition to Lein, the clinic employs a full-time receptionist, a part-time school nurse and a part-time social worker. The Foundation grant pays for most salaries, and the hospital pays for supplies and equipment. Grand River Hospital District also pays Kame’s salary; she manages several other clinics in the area for the hospital.

“The great thing about the Parachute clinic is that it was already built before we got involved,” Kame says. “That’s a huge asset. We didn’t have any building costs.”

RESULTS

More than 100 Garfield students have used the clinic's services since it opened in November, for a total of 278 visits. About half of those visits have been for mental health reasons, including depression, relationship problems and attention deficit disorder.

"That's been a real surprise," says Kame. "We thought only about 25 percent of visits would be for mental health. What this tells us is that there's a huge issue of access to mental health care in Colorado, especially in rural areas."

Sarah O'Brien is enrolled in the Garfield program for teen moms. When she suspected that her baby son Connor had pinkeye, she dropped in at the clinic to make an appointment. Lein saw Connor right away and sure enough, he had pinkeye and an ear infection, too. A few weeks later, O'Brien herself was diagnosed with the same conditions.

O'Brien lives in Rifle, and her regular doctor is in Glenwood Springs. "It would have meant a 40-minute drive to take my baby to Glenwood," she says, "but with the clinic here at school, I could just stop in between classes. It's really convenient."

Kame says that more than 200 students have already enrolled to use the clinic, and the numbers are rising. The goal is to have 75 percent of Garfield's students enrolled by year four of the grant.

"We just knew there were a lot of kids who were not getting health care because their families couldn't afford it," says Kame. "Our numbers so far indicate that we're providing an important service."

It's too early to tell if the clinic is having an impact on student absences, but Kame says the district is tracking the data.

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WHAT'S NEXT

Because the health center is located in the Garfield Center for Family Learning, about half of the students who have visited the clinic so far have been under the age of 10. But Kame wants to see more older students using it, so she's looking at the possibility of having Lein make weekly scheduled visits to the district's high school, middle school and two elementary schools.

"I need to come up with some kind of traveling bag for medical supplies," says Lein.

Lein has seen several patients for chronic conditions such as asthma and diabetes, and she would like to see more families taking advantage of the clinic's services for those kinds of ongoing medical issues. "I think there are probably some kids who could benefit from the clinic who aren't using it," says Lein, who hopes that will change as more students and families learn about the health center.

While funding for the clinic is set for the next four years thanks to the Foundation, future funding is less certain. "I don't think these clinics can ever be self-sustainable," Kame says. "Outside sources of funding,

from foundations and other entities, are essential. In-kind support from the district is important, but it's not enough. I think we're going to have to continuously look for grant funds to help us sustain the clinic."

Superintendent Haptonstall agrees. "If we had to take it over and run it ourselves," he says, "there's no way we could pay for it. We're looking at a 10 percent budget cut next year, which is about a million dollars. If it comes down to keeping teachers in the classroom and keeping the clinic open, I'm probably going to go with the teachers. I think you always have to have a partnership for this kind of a school-based health clinic."

ABOUT US

District: *Garfield County 16*

Location: *Parachute, Colo.*

Number of students: *1,194*

Percentage of students who qualify for free or reduced lunch:

50 percent

BEFORE AND AFTER

Before: Limited access to medical and mental health services in Parachute area. Students going without medical care because of a lack of health insurance or distance to the nearest emergency room.

After: Medical and mental health services available five days a week for all Garfield students enrolled in the health clinic.



DOING IT FOR FREE

Convene a steering or planning group to assess readiness for opening a school-based health center. Download the Colorado Health Foundation's assessment tool at www.coloradohealth.org/sbhc_apply_deadlines.aspx.

ADVICE

What makes for a successful school-based health clinic? According to the Colorado Health Foundation, it requires medical oversight and a relationship with a community health care system. Grand River Student Health Center clinic director Lois Kame offers these suggestions:

- Involve medical providers. "You really need to have a medical sponsor."
- Secure buy-in from school leaders and the community. "You need to have strong support from district leaders and the community."
- Get extra help. "Hire a consultant who specializes in school-based clinics to create a business plan and help write funding grants."
- Visit other clinics. "If you've never done it before, you may have certain ideas about how things should work. But you don't know unless you see how a clinic actually does things. We learned a lot by visiting clinics in Montrose and Basalt."

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- Lois Kame, Clinic Director
Grand River Student Health Center

MORE HELP

Colorado Health Foundation School-Based Health Care Resources

www.coloradohealth.org/sbhc_resources.aspx

Visit this Colorado Health Foundation website for a resource guide to school-based health care.

Colorado Legacy Foundation's Best Practices Guide in Health and Wellness for Colorado School Districts

www.colegacy.org/guide_2009/default.php

Find data; best practices for school districts; and action steps for administrators, school board members, parents and the community. Topics include health education, nutrition, physical activity, school health services and workplace wellness.

National Assembly on School-Based Health Care Road Map

www.nasbhc.org/site/c.jsJPKWPFJrH/b.5109369/k.86DA/SBHC_road_map.htm

Explore the National Assembly on School-Based Health Care's Road Map, an online tool for districts that are considering opening a school-based clinic.





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