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Jeanee Weiss of Building Bright Futures



Dr. Kristine McVea



Healthy Future

Six new health-care centers will open in Omaha Public Schools this fall to bolster the health objectives of Building Bright Futures

Story by Niz Proskocil.

Some schools usher in a new year with new desks, new teachers and new textbooks. When the first day of school arrives in August, six Omaha Public Schools will start the year with new health-care centers offering students a variety of services.

As many adults can attest, it's not easy to focus on even the simplest task when suffering from a migraine, toothache, anxiety or other ailment. When students don't feel well, it's hard for them to pay attention in the classroom and stay motivated to learn.

Good health supports successful learning. That's the idea behind the Healthy Futures initiative of Omaha-based nonprofit Building Bright Futures. In addition to the group's education-focused programs, Building Bright Futures aims to help make health care accessible to school-age children in underserved areas of the community.

The Healthy Futures program includes the development of school-based health centers, where students will have onsite access to basic health care for acute and chronic illnesses. The six Omaha schools are King Science and Technology Magnet Center, Belvedere, Indian Hill, Kellom, Liberty and Spring Lake elementary schools. With parental permission, children will be treated regardless of whether they have health insurance.

"Research shows if kids aren't healthy, they're not going to learn," says Jeanee Weiss of Building Bright Futures, who serves as the group's Healthy Futures director. "We see the health center being a portal to quality care."

Construction on the OPS centers is taking place this summer. The centers will span about 300 to 350 square feet and feature an exam

room, lab space, intake area and an office for mental/behavioral health counseling. Supported by a combination of public and private funding, each center will be staffed by a physician's assistant or nurse practitioner and a medical assistant who is cross-trained as a medical technician. A medical director (physician) will be hired and responsible for oversight of all six health centers. Staff will work in collaboration with the school nurse and families to improve access to health-care services, promote prevention and early intervention, and establish a medical home and primary care physician.

The program involves partnerships between Building Bright Futures, local schools, area hospitals and community health organizations. Charles Drew Health Center is the provider for the health centers in the three north Omaha schools. The provider for the three south Omaha schools is OneWorld Community Health Centers.

Dr. Kristine McVea is chief medical officer at OneWorld and is part of a Building Bright Futures task force that includes several physicians, medical directors, attorneys, OPS personnel and others. When children are unhealthy and lack access to care, she says, they can miss out on preventative measures, early diagnosis and treatment of problems. They risk developing health and social problems that can result in missed classes, poor grades and more.

"Being healthy affects your ability to concentrate and ability to learn, and it affects absenteeism," McVea says.

As health-care costs continue to rise, many parents find themselves unable to afford insurance. Others may lack time or transportation to take their child across town to a doctor's office. Oftentimes, a

physician will see a child for a physical at the start of the school year but then not see them return for a long period of time.

Weiss and McVea say school-based health centers aren't intended to replace relationships between children and their doctors. They're meant to complement existing care and provide access to services and care that some students may not receive in a timely manner - or at all.

"I recognize that some physicians may feel threatened that this is taking their patients away or detracting from their ability to provide a strong medical home," McVea says. "This isn't about competing with people who are already doing a good job to serve the kids in the community."

A focus on health is part of Building Bright Future's overall mission to improve academic performance, raise graduation rates, increase civic and community responsibility, and ensure that students are prepared for post-secondary education by developing partnerships with existing providers and creating new evidence-based programs to develop a comprehensive, community-based network of services.

McVea says she enjoys being part of the effort and is excited to see the program expand. She commends Building Bright Futures for embracing the concept of school-based health centers and examining what has worked in other communities.

"I really appreciate their looking at the whole picture and seeing the link between health, mental health and school performance," she says.

The program has seen success in other cities around the country, says Linda Juszczak, executive director of the National Assembly on School-Based Health Care in Washington, D.C. About 1,900 school-based health centers are operating nationwide.

Because school is where children spend most time away from home, providing care where they already are makes sense, Juszczak says. Children don't have to miss school in order to get health-care, and parents don't have to leave work and possibly put their job in jeopardy.

"They eliminate all these potential barriers," Juszczak says. "We go where the kids are." ☺

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