Rural, urban schools address medical needs with onsite centers

By Cathy Woodruff

Whether it’s time for a routine sports physical or a tunes session, a whooping episode that could be appendicitis or a sore throat that might be a strep infection, Lackawanna County schools can’t just send you home. They don’t have to go for medical attention.

It’s just done for the elementary schools.

“It’s quality health care right where the kids are,” Superintendent Ron Reusch, Winfield, says of the district’s School-Based Health Centers.

The Laurens School-Based Health Center, one of 19 operated by the Cooperstown-based Bassett Healthcare Network, is the largest provider of school-based health care in rural communities.

In all, there are 228 SBHCs throughout New York, with three-quarters of the centers operating in urban areas, according to the state Health Department. But the centers also are growing in popularity as a way to reach rural children who otherwise would lack regular access to physical health care and mental health treatment.

“School health centers are truly one of my favorite school and healthcare reforms,” said John W. Sipple, director of the Cooperstown-based Bassett Healthcare Network’s School-Based Health Centers. “Students made some 30,000 visits to the Pine Tree School-Based Health Center here in New York State School Boards Association | www.nyssba.org

SBHCs have been established in 14 districts in Otsego, Chenango and Delaware counties.

“Mental health care was what reinvigorated the program here in Richfield Springs,” said Superintendent Robert Bar-rone. “An effort several years ago instigated because of lack of start-up funding, he said.

Evaluators, parents, nurses and physicians all agree that this is a tremendously efficient and valuable way to remove the many health-related factors that can keep children from reaching their full potential,” Sipple said, “but it wasn’t being managed independently.

There are children who struggle with behavior that can be a symptom of some mental disorders, in just the previous week, he said.

There are signs that the message is reaching the money has not yet been included in the 2013-14 state budget, which is up $15.7 million from 2012. New York is funding the middle of the road on another measure, however, with just over 4 percent of all public schools receiving state-directed money for SBHCs.

New York has budgeted $17.7 million to support SBHCs in this fiscal year, said Health Department spokesman Jeffrey Hamblen. That reflects a 57 percent increase from the year before, and the centers include 194 million in state and localities and funding streams created by the federal Health Care Reform Act.

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