

Rural, urban schools address medical needs with onsite centers

By Cathy Woodruff
SENIOR WRITER

Whether it's time for a routine sports physical or a tetanus shot, a wheezing episode that could signal an asthma attack or a sore throat that might be a strep infection, Laurens Central School students don't have to go far for medical attention.

Help is just down the hall. "It's quality health care right where the kids are," Superintendent Romana Wenck says of the district's School-Based Health Center.

The Laurens School-Based Health Center (SBHC) is among 19 operated by the Cooperstown-based Bassett Healthcare Network, the state's 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 gaining recognition as a way to reach rural children who otherwise would lack regular access to physical health care and mental health treatment.

"School-based health centers are truly one of my favorite school and healthcare reforms," said John W. Supple, director of the New York State Center for Rural Schools at Cornell University, noting that there's rarely any controversy about their value to students.

"Educators, 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," Supple said. "No longer is access to health care and health information a struggle for parents and children in these districts, but, rather, a seamless part of their school day."

Students made some 30,000 visits to Bassett school-based centers in 2012, according to Bassett officials. With fewer than 350 students, Laurens, which is in Otsego County, is the smallest of the 14 districts that host Bassett SBHCs. The largest, with close to 1,600 students, is Sherburne-Earlville in Chenango County.

The centers are physically indistinguishable from a typical doctor's office. They are staffed by nurse practitioners, nurses, dental hygienists, clinical social workers, medical

office assistants and consulting physicians.

In Laurens, the SBHC is adjacent to the office of the school nurse, who works collaboratively with the Bassett employees. Even though state law requires districts to have school nurses on staff, they are prohibited from providing many of the services that are independently operated medical office care.

"The services at the health center are far above what the mandates would provide," said Wenck.

There is no charge to children or their families for care provided at the centers. Insurance may be billed for visits, but no copays or other fees are collected from patients, and the staff can help families of uninsured children apply for coverage through New York's Child Health Plus, Medicaid or other sources. (Regular payment policies do kick in if a student is referred elsewhere for an x-ray, needs a prescription filled at a local pharmacy or requires other care beyond what can be provided at the school-based center.)

An SBHC can be the primary healthcare provider for a student or it can offer a backup option for those times when it's not practical for a student to get to the family's regular doctor. At Laurens, nearly 90 percent of students are enrolled at the school health center, which also offers mental health and dental hygiene services.

Dr. Chris Kjolhede, a pediatrician who is director of Bassett's SBHC program and the collaborating physician on the Laurens center staff, says it's typical for well-established programs to exceed 90 percent student enrollment.

"They may not all be users, but they are enrolled with us, just in case," he said.

Kjolhede said the conditions he treats run a gamut of pediatric practice, ranging from common conditions, such as strep throats, ear infections and ankle sprains, to rarer ones, such as anorexia. Last year, a student with Duchenne's Muscular Dystrophy began treatment at one of the centers. The condition already had been diagnosed, Kjolhede said, "but it wasn't being managed well."

Nearly a third of the care provided through the center is mental health treatment, said Jane Hamilton, a registered nurse and manager of the Bassett SBHC program. The mental health staff provides counseling and/or medication management for chronic conditions, such as depression, anxiety, At-



Dr. Chris Kjolhede, a pediatrician and director of Bassett Healthcare's School-Based Health Centers, gives Laurens Central School District kindergarten Roland Gardner-Olesen a physical exam. Gardner-Olesen, 5, is among nearly 90 percent of Laurens students who receive some of their routine health care at the center. Photos by Cathy Woodruff

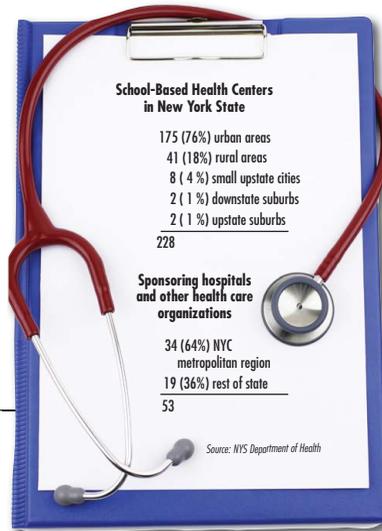
tention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and for crisis-prompted issues, such as grief.

SBHC clinical social workers work closely with the Department of Psychiatry at Bassett, Hamilton said, but being able to meet students in their schools greatly aids therapy and expands the potential benefits.

"There are children who struggle with issues that really affect their performance in school," she said. "Because we are in the environment the kids are in every day, we are able to make some of those observations that practitioners at outside clinics aren't able to make. That gives us some insight. We can give them (coping) strategies because we're right there."

Kjolhede, who works in multiple schools, said routine physical checkups and care visits also offer opportunities to spot hidden mental health issues. He had noted three cases of "cutting," a self-injuring behavior that can be a symptom of some mental disorders, in just the previous week, he said.

Concern about poor student access to



mental health care was what reinvigorated interest in establishing an SBHC in Richfield Springs, said Superintendent Robert Baraco. An effort several years ago stumbled because of lack of start-up funding, he said.

Supporters are hopeful that a \$150,000 Aid to Localities appropriation secured by Sen. James Seward (R-Oneonta) in this year's state budget will inspire others to contribute to the estimated \$300,000 cost of building and equipping a center at the school.

Bassett's entire SBHC program has an annual operating budget of \$3.6 million.

While Bassett administrators aim to come as close to breaking even as possible, the school-based health program usually does operate at a loss, said Dr. William F. Streck, Bassett President and CEO. In 2012, the difference between costs and revenue from grants and insurance coverage was \$152,000, and those losses were covered as part of Bassett's overall expenses, he said.

As a non-profit, Bassett subsidizes the school-based health program as part of its community service responsibility, Streck

said. But the greater motivation, he said, is that "it's the right thing to do. Most of these children otherwise wouldn't get the primary care they need."

National advocates say more funding is needed for school-based health care, and there are some signs that the message is resonating with state and federal officials.

The 2013-14 state budget includes \$15 million in competitive grant funding to encourage creation of "community schools" that offer social, health and after-school programs in distressed communities. One of the best-known models for such programs is the Harlem Children's Zone.

Meanwhile, the federal Affordable Care Act authorizes \$50 million in operating funds for SBHCs, according to the National Assembly on School-Based Health Care, but the money has not yet been included in the 2014 fiscal year budget.

Wenck, the Laurens superintendent, sees no good argument against expanding health



Laurens Superintendent Romana Wenck and Dr. Kjolhede chat in the Laurens SBHC entrance hall.

care in the nation's schools. Her own two sons are enrolled at the Laurens SBHC.

"Every single parent, in my opinion, should have their child enrolled in the School-Based Health Center," Wenck said. "It's like a safety net."

New York leads in SBHCs

New York leads the nation in the number of school-based health centers (SBHCs) and the amount state funding provided, according to a 2011 survey by the National Assembly on School-Based Health Care.

Eighteen states have state-funded SBHCs, according to the survey. Leaders in 2011 were New York, which spent \$21.76 million on 223 centers, Michigan, which spent \$16.5 million on 72 centers, and Connecticut, which spent at least \$10.7 million on 81 centers.

New York ranked near the middle of the group on another measure, however, with just over 4 percent of all its 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 Hammond. That reflects a 5.575 percent cut, he said, and the sources include \$9.8 million in state aid to localities and funding streams created by the federal Health Care Reform Act.

Financing the setup of one SBHC is like stitching together a patchwork quilt, according to Jane Hamilton, manager of an SBHC program run by Bassett Healthcare Network. It takes a lot of financial pieces, she said, and the particular pattern in each community will be unique.

Grants from foundations, local service clubs, businesses and myriad other donors often provide the main financial foundation for establishing a center, which can cost hundreds of thousands of dollars, said Hamilton.

Private donations and grants don't typically help with salaries and other operating costs, Hamilton said, but they can carry a large part of the financial burden for a district establishing a new center.

"If a district gets \$10,000 from the Kiwanis, that's going to buy a couple of exam tables," she said.

— Cathy Woodruff, Senior Writer

Major sponsoring hospitals - upstate urban

PS 99 STANLEY M. MAKOWSKI EARLY CHILDHOOD CENTER

Syracuse Community Health Center, Inc.

Whitney M. Young, Jr. HEALTH SERVICES Innovative Community Health Care

Stanley Makowski Early Childhood Center
9 centers in Buffalo

Syracuse Community Health Center
8 centers in Syracuse

Whitney M. Young Jr. Health Center
3 centers in Albany

Source: NYS Department of Health

Major sponsoring hospitals - rural

Bassett Healthcare Network

Carthage Area Hospital

The Children's Clinic

Mary Imogene Bassett Hospital/ Bassett Healthcare, Cooperstown
19 centers in 14 districts in Otsego, Delaware, Schoharie and Chenango

Carthage Area Hospital, Turin
9 centers in 7 districts in Lewis, Jefferson and St. Lawrence counties

North Country Children's Clinic, Watertown
6 centers in 3 Jefferson County districts

Source: NYS Department of Health