Partnering with School-Based Health Centers: What Schools Need to Know

Collaboration between Schools and their School-Based Health Centers
Frequently Asked Questions

The success of a School-Based Health Center (SBHC) is directly linked to the quality of the partnerships it has developed with the school and the community. Certain guiding principles must be embraced by all parties in order to effectively work together. Both the school and the SBHC must understand and respect the fact that education and health care organizations are often guided by different sets of rules and regulations. They must be committed to finding ways to compromise in order to reach the common goal of ensuring that all students are ready to learn. Through regular meetings, clearly defined policies and procedures, frank dialogue, and a willingness to be flexible – solutions can always be found. The following are frequently asked questions that are often at the center of many SBHC and school discussions and can hopefully inform discussions at your school.

1. **How does the SBHC determine the hours of operation?**

   It is recommended that the hours of operation be determined jointly by the school and the SBHC’s sponsoring agency. This may require compromise from both parties. Negotiations are often necessary in order to reach times that maximize student access to the SBHC and minimize loss of classroom time as well as taking into consideration the human resource requirements of the sponsoring organization. It is important to note that hours of operation should be reviewed periodically.

   It is critical that the SBHC and school develop a communication plan for informing each other of any changes to the schedule, such as when a provider is absent, a professional development day for school or SBHC is scheduled, or there is a modified class schedule. This plan should identify who needs to be informed and the means of communication. For example, in some schools the SBHC is asked to notify the head of security when the SBHC plans to be closed. In other schools, the SBHC informs the main office as well as putting up a sign on the health center door.

2. **Who is responsible for the administration of medication at school?**

   The administration of medication to children at school is the responsibility of the school and should comply with the Chicago Public School (CPS) policy “Administration of Medication during School Hours”. The school and SBHC may jointly determine that the SBHC is in the best position to administer a student’s regular medication, but this will require discussion and agreement between the school administration, school nurse and SBHC staff. If it is determined that the SBHC will dispense the medication, then they must follow the CPS policy for medication administration. The same would be true for a student who is self-administering medication. If a SBHC is administering or overseeing the administration of a student’s medication, protocol needs to be established in the SBHC for ensuring that the student is seen in a timely manner in order to decrease their time away from the classroom. In addition, the SBHC will need to make the necessary arrangements for the student to receive the medication if they will be closed or unavailable during school hours.

3. **What is the role of the SBHC in our School Crisis Intervention Plan?**

   Each school is required to have a crisis intervention plan which articulates the roles and responsibilities of school staff during a crisis. SBHC staff can be key partners in executing specific elements of the plan. It is recommended that you and your SBHC clarify and document each other’s roles to avoid confusion in the event of an emergency. The following are some examples of ways that schools and SBHCs have delineated these roles.
• **In the case of a suicidal student**
  
  o If a school staff has reason to suspect that a student is suicidal, the school staff should follow the school’s crisis intervention plan. If the school staff makes the determination to handle the situation, the school assumes the responsibility for determining and implementing the plan of care and following up with the student. If it is determined beforehand that the school can refer a suicidal student to the SBHC, the student should be escorted to the SBHC by the school staff who then makes contact with the identified SBHC staff. The SBHC staff will follow the SBHC protocol for suicidal ideation which includes contacting the appropriate authorities and parents while providing a safe environment for the student. If an ambulance is called to transport the student, the appropriate school authority must be notified that an ambulance is coming to the school. SBHC cannot accompany the student as it will leave the SBHC unattended in the event of another emergency.

  o If a SBHC staff has reason to believe a student is suicidal during a contact with a SBHC staff, the SBHC protocol for suicidal ideation will be followed which includes ensuring that proper authorities are contacted (school liaison such as principal, parents and Screening, Assessment and Support Services (SASS)) and the student is provided a safe environment. This may include contacting school security if there is a risk the student may flee. If an ambulance is called to transport the student, the appropriate school authority must be notified that an ambulance is coming to the school. SBHC cannot accompany the student as it will leave the SBHC unattended in the event of another emergency. The SBHC bears the responsibility to follow up with student.

• **In the case of a medical emergency**
  
  o If a medical emergency occurs on school property, school staff should call 911 first and then the SBHC staff. SBHC can be first responders and provide first aid until the emergency personnel arrive. In the event the person is transported via ambulance, SBHC should not accompany the individual as it will leave the SBHC unattended in the event of another emergency.

• **In the case of reporting suspected abuse**
  
  o All school staff are mandated reporters, including SBHC staff. It is important to define roles and responsibilities of school and SBHC staff before an incident occurs to avoid confusion during a case of suspected abuse. The staff who initially speaks with the child and makes the determination of suspected abuse should follow protocol for contacting the authorities. This means that the staff person hearing the report of abuse MUST make the hotline call, not someone else.

  o The school and SBHC can work in collaboration in the event of a report if roles have been previously defined. If a SBHC staff makes the initial report, it should be determined beforehand if the principal needs to know about all reports made or if they only need to know about reports where investigators will be coming to the school. If a school staff makes the report, they may want to check with the SBHC to see if the student has been followed in the SBHC or if a report has already been made to the authorities.

4. **What if a parent calls the school with a question or concern about the SBHC?**

   In the event a parent has a complaint about the SBHC, the SBHC has developed a protocol under the guidance of their sponsoring agency to deal with the concern. If the parent contacts the SBHC with a complaint, this protocol will be followed. If a parent contacts the principal with a complaint, the principal should refer the individual to the SBHC who will follow the existing protocol.
5. **What if our community has concerns about reproductive health services being provided by the SBHC?**

Whenever there is a concern about the services that a SBHC is providing, it is necessary to allow the SBHC and community the opportunity to discuss the concern. Information can be shared in a variety of ways and may include:

- Community involvement in the SBHC advisory board which meets on a regular basis.
- Regular SBHC participation and reporting at the local school council meetings or other parent or community meetings.
- School or SBHC sponsored educational sessions for parents about services provided at the SBHC and relevant health and mental health information that may impact their children.
- Newsletters sent to parents which include information on services provided at the SBHC and relevant health and mental health topics that may impact their children.

6. **Should our SBHC be seeing community members? Can the SBHC see our school staff?**

Some SBHCs see community members and others have decided not to. This is a discussion that the school and SBHC need to have upfront. Seeing community members is often important to the SBHC sponsoring agency because it may be a means to be self-sustaining or is part of their mission. SBHCs can define community in several different ways. Some, in particular SBHCs managed by Federally Qualified Health Centers, see all members of the community. Other SBHCs define community as the family members of students in the school.

If your SBHC sees community members, it is important to address certain considerations, including safety, confidentiality of students in the school, and ensuring that students remain the primary client of the SBHC. It is recommended that SBHCs have a separate community entrance to address the safety issue and that SBHCs create appointment schedules that respect the busiest access times for students and allow separate times of the day and week for the SBHC to see school versus community clients.

Even if the larger community is not served at the SBHC, it is recommended that the SBHC provide outreach to the community in the form of parent education sessions or episodic services such as tuberculosis skin testing for parent volunteers or flu shots. The SBHC can work with their sponsoring agency or other community organizations to provide these services. This does much to promote awareness of SBHC services in the community.

There is no one standard policy related to SBHCs providing services to school staff. Some SBHCs are hesitant to see staff because of concerns about student confidentiality. Others are comfortable with providing services as long as staff has appropriate insurance. All SBHCs will see staff in emergencies. The decision whether or not to provide services to staff members needs to be made by the SBHC in tandem with the school. Whether staff can use the SBHC or not, it is highly recommended that the SBHC provide some type of wellness promotion for school staff. This may be an annual health fair where health screenings and education are offered, a walking group organized by the SBHC, or flu shots.