Student thrives with support from School-Based Health Center

This fall Laura* will attend Endicott College, with plans to major in Accounting and Business Administration. She credits her success to the staff of the School Based Health Center (SBHC) at Lynn English High School for helping her build confidence and find her voice.

Laura’s journey has not been easy. She and her family came to the United States from Haiti when she was 12 years old. Her last two years of middle school were spent learning to adapt to a new language and culture. The oldest of three daughters, her parents were happy that she was able to get a good education, but they lived a very isolated life, and were fearful of allowing Laura to engage in any outside activities.

“By the time I got to high school, I was so shy and scared, I didn’t know what to do,” says Laura. “I really needed someone

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Donna Coe, NP, at Lynn Vocational Technical Institute. She has been working with Lynn students for more than 25 years.

Matt* had a goal. He wanted to play football in high school and be the first person in his family to go to college. He knew it would be tough, especially as a first generation American. Even more challenging for Matt was the fact that he suffered from a severe case of asthma that had caused him to miss many days of school during his elementary and middle school years.

Despite his challenges, Matt was an “A” student when he entered Lynn Vocational Technical Institute. A good athlete, he made the football team and felt hopeful about his future. Unfortunately things began to unravel during the second football practice of the season when breathing trouble made it impossible for him to finish.

Matt turned to Lynn Tech’s SBHC where Donna Coe, RN, recognized the early signs of an acute asthma attack and helped him administer his medication thereby preventing another trip to the emergency room.

Allison Kilcoyne, NP, serves students at Lynn English High School. Over 500 students come to English SBHC each year.

College dreams realized after student and family learn to control asthma

Matt shared his dreams of playing football and going to college with Coe, and asked her for help. “Matt knew that to realize his potential he needed to stay healthy,” she says. “The first thing we did was to make sure he knew how to recognize the early signs of an attack, and that he knew how to use his inhaler. It turned out that even after all these years he was not doing it quite right.” Donna also worked with Matt and his coach to create workouts and routines that would help him build up his strength.

“Things got better after that,” she says, “but he was still missing school and practice because of his asthma. His grades began to suffer, and he was at risk of being kicked off the team.”

Coe knew there was still a piece missing. She coordinated a home visit to determine if there were any factors that might be contributing to Matt’s struggle. The family had no idea that household allergens hiding in carpets and mattresses were aggravating Matt’s asthma. Coe worked with the family to remove rugs and install mattress covers. The improvement in his home environment was the final piece to fall into place. Matt’s grades improved, and by the end of freshman year he was hardly ever absent. Matt continued to improve, both physically and academically, and today is attending college on a scholarship.

“Working at a SBHC and helping students like Matt is an incredible experience,” says Coe. “We are truly a part of the school community, and can address the physical and emotional needs of students in ways that would be impossible in a traditional doctor’s office.” Coe’s work with Matt demonstrates how successful this model can be.

*Student’s names have been changed to protect their privacy

Learn more about School-Based Health Center’s on page 3.
“We get more information because it is so easy to ask. SBHCs unique opportunity.

Phoebe Jean began coming to the School Based Health Center when she was a freshman. Until that time she had gone to a private practice, but she needed a physical the summer before school started and her doctor’s schedule was full. She decided to visit the SBHC and stayed. “I love coming here for my care,” she says. “It is so much more personal and we get so much more attention.”

Jean also likes the feeling of independence that she experiences at the SBHC. Although parents are required to sign a consent form for students to receive care at a school-based health center, they are not required to accompany the student on visits. “Kids can come here to talk to the nurse practitioners when they have questions or problems,” says Jean. “It is more casual than asking a parent to make a doctor’s appointment for you. I think we get more information because it is so easy to ask.”

Jean became such an advocate of her school-based health center that when a student seat opened up on the health center’s Board of Directors she was invited to fill it. Over half of Lynn Community Health Center Board Members are active users of our services, ensuring that we are responding directly to the needs of our community, of which the School-Based Health Center Program is a vital part. Students provide a unique perspective on the board.

“This is a rare and amazing opportunity,” she says. “I know I want to go into either medicine or public health when I get older, and this gives me the chance to see just how many people are behind the care we receive.”

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to talk to. One day I was sick and stopped by the clinic. I can honestly say that this changed my life. I got so much more than medicine. I found people who were on my side.”

“Like so many students we see, Laura needed services that extend far beyond traditional primary care,” says Allison Kilcoyne, NP, site manager at Lynn English SBHC and Laura’s primary care provider. “She needed a combination of medical and social services to address the complex issues that immigrants and their children face.” Like many young immigrant women, Laura’s family’s instinct was to protect her, but this led to a severe restriction of her movement and activities. Laura wanted to learn how to be a teenager, but her family was terrified.

Laura began seeing Kilcoyne and Community Health Worker Sue Lunden regularly. They worked with her family to help them understand the value of allowing Laura to participate in after-school activities. They arranged for her to get a YMCA membership so that she would have a safe place to be with her friends. They discovered that she was the victim of bullying behavior, and worked with the school’s conflict resolution team to resolve the issues. Over the next year they watched with pride as Laura began to thrive in school. Most recently they cheered as she was honored as a “Strong, Smart, and Bold Girl Hero” by Girls Incorporated Lynn, an incredible transformation from the shy quiet girl who first arrived at the SBHC.

“It is amazing to see how far Laura has come over the past four years,” says Kilcoyne. “I know she will go a long way!”
What is a School Based Health Center (SBHC)?

School-based health centers provide the same comprehensive care children receive in a traditional pediatric environment, with several distinct advantages:

- **Increased access to care**: Parents, especially those who work low wage jobs without any paid leave, often struggle to find time to take their children to the doctor. Consequently, routine care is often put off, and sick visits delayed until there is an emergency. In-school clinics allow children access to primary care without the need for parents to take time off from work.

- **Reduced absenteeism**: If students don’t have to leave campus for doctor visits, they spend less time travelling and are more time in class.

- **Collaboration with school staff**: SBHC medical and behavioral health staff work closely with the school nurse, the guidance staff, adjustment counselors, teachers, and administrators. This is especially important with issues related to managing discipline, peer pressure, bullying, and suicide prevention.

It is important to note that SBHCs do not replace school nurses, who continue to provide important services to the entire school community.

School nurses and school-based health centers work together, and school nurses often refer students to school-based health centers because their clinicians’ training and credentials enable them to treat, diagnose and resolve student health problems.

*Donna Coe, NP at Lynn Vocational Technical Institute.*

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### Integrated care helps students access vital behavioral health services

In addition to primary care, Lynn SBHC’s place a strong emphasis on the integration of primary and behavioral health care. Each of the health center’s SBHCs has licensed therapists, social workers, and psychiatrists available in the schools for students and their families.

In addition to convenience, the incorporation of behavioral health into pediatric primary care can make it easier for families to accept and deal with a diagnosis. Federal statistics show that one in ten children exhibit behaviors that indicate a serious mental health problem, but only about 50 percent of them get treatment.

Traditionally the burden has been on families to find a therapist and make an appointment. Often these appointments are booked weeks or even months in advance. These barriers, plus the perceived stigma that often accompanies a behavioral health diagnosis, can make it difficult for families to engage.

In an integrated practice, a trusted pediatrician or nurse who is well-known by the family makes a personal introduction to a therapist or counselor. Treatment is provided at the same location, making it feel like it is just one more aspect of good pediatric care.

“All integrated care in the schools is an amazing way to provide care,” concludes Cindy Moore, NP, Clinical Director of SBHC’s. “We are working with students during a time when they will experience some of the most important physical and emotional changes in their lives. Earning their trust in small ways helps us assist them when bigger problems arise.”
Lynn Superintendent testifies about the importance of SBHCs

In January, Lynn School Superintendent Catherine Latham was one of 13 featured speakers to testify at the Massachusetts State House about the importance of School-Based Health Centers. She spoke about the positive impact that in-school primary care has on learning, acknowledging that it is difficult for students to pay attention in school when their ears, teeth, or throat hurt. She also stressed the importance of integrated behavioral health services, and its role in helping students and their families cope with issues that include depression, ADHD, substance abuse, and domestic violence.

Her conviction that such care is good for learning has led her to advocate expanding the number of SBHC’s from six to eight as an important part of the overall strategic plan for the district. “Part of our turnaround plan for two Level 4 schools [those designated as significantly underperforming according to Massachusetts standards] includes opening two new school-based health centers. Meeting students’ unmet health needs can help them to be fully engaged while at school and achieve to their utmost ability. We are excited about our collaborative work with the Lynn Community Health Center, which has been so responsive to our needs and requests for help,” she said.

Lynn Community Health Center’s first school-based health center opened in 1991 at Lynn Vocational Technical High School. Students have been among our strongest advocates, with one high school student testifying at another legislative event about why she thinks school-based care works so well. “Most teens don’t talk to anyone besides a friend when it comes to their problems,” she said. “But when you see the SBHC nurse during your normal school day you begin to see her not just as a nurse but also as a friend you can trust.”