

School-Based Health Centers: Reproductive Health

Executive Summary

School-Based Health Centers (SBHCs) play a pivotal role in improving adolescents' reproductive health by offering accessible, confidential, and developmentally appropriate services within school settings. These services—ranging from contraceptive counseling and STI screening to pregnancy prevention and sexual health education—have been shown to reduce risky sexual behaviors, lower teen pregnancy rates, and increase students' use of effective contraception. Research confirms that SBHCs improve reproductive health outcomes without increasing sexual activity, particularly among underserved populations that face systemic barriers to care.

Key Findings

- **Increased Access to Contraceptives and STI Testing:** SBHCs improve access to reproductive health services by offering no-cost or low-cost contraception, pregnancy tests, and STI screening on-site. Adolescents using SBHCs report higher rates of consistent contraceptive use (Ethier et al., 2018).
- **Reduction in Teen Pregnancy Rates:** Several studies show that schools with SBHCs providing reproductive health services experience significantly lower rates of teen pregnancy compared to schools without such centers (Kisker & Brown, 1996; Barnett et al., 2004).
- **Confidentiality Promotes Utilization:** Adolescents cite confidentiality as a major factor in seeking care. SBHCs are often perceived as safer and more private than external clinics, which increases students' willingness to seek reproductive care (Brindis et al., 2003).
- **Improved Knowledge and Health Behaviors:** SBHCs often integrate reproductive health education, which enhances students' knowledge of sexual health and increases the likelihood of engaging in safer behaviors (Dittus et al., 2015).
- **Equity in Access:** SBHCs serve a disproportionate number of students from low-income backgrounds and communities of color—groups that often face disparities in reproductive health outcomes. These centers reduce those disparities by offering equitable access to care (Mason-Jones et al., 2012).

Context

Why It Matters

Adolescents often face barriers—such as cost, transportation, stigma, and lack of confidentiality—when seeking reproductive health services. SBHCs reduce or eliminate these barriers by embedding services where youth already are. This model is especially critical in medically underserved areas, where adolescents may lack other sources of confidential and affordable reproductive healthcare.

Implications

SBHCs significantly contribute to adolescent health and public health more broadly by improving reproductive health outcomes. By offering integrated care in a safe and supportive environment, these centers reduce unintended pregnancies and STIs, promote healthy behaviors, and foster trust in healthcare systems. They are also an essential tool in addressing health equity.

Next Steps

- **Expand Access to Comprehensive Reproductive Health Services:** Ensure all SBHCs are equipped and authorized to provide confidential, adolescent-friendly reproductive health services, including contraception and STI screening.
 - **Strengthen School-Health Provider Collaboration:** Support partnerships that align SBHC services with school health education curricula to reinforce learning and encourage care-seeking.
 - **Monitor and Evaluate Outcomes:** Invest in longitudinal studies to track the impact of SBHCs on reproductive health over time, including contraceptive adherence, STI rates, and pregnancy prevention.
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Key References

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