

School-based health clinics: part solution, part problem

By Teresa A. Parsons

Diocesan agencies that five years ago helped to defeat a plan to offer family planning services in city high schools fear they may have another battle on their hands.

Health clinics are springing up in schools across the country in an effort to improve health care for adolescents. Many are offering confidential birth-control counseling to students.

A coalition of three local health care agencies hopes to establish health clinics and day-care centers in two yet-to-be-determined Rochester city schools next year by winning a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The coalition is comprised of Threshold Center for Youth Services, Strong Memorial Hospital's Division of Adolescent Medicine and the Anthony Jordan Teen Center.

"The primary focus of the clinics would be to provide general health services," said Dr. Lisa Handwerker, Threshold's medical director.

"The logistics have not been decided at all," she added.

But diocesan officials who have been grappling with the problem of teen pregnancy are concerned that the clinics will include birth-control counseling and promote the use of contraceptives.

The coalition, known as Community Adolescent Services (CAS), requested that the Rochester School District apply for funds

from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's School-Based Adolescent Health Care Program. The program will provide individual grants of up to \$600,000 in as many as 20 cities, beginning in June, 1987. Those proposals that include day-care centers are eligible for an additional \$300,000.

In June, the school board authorized School Superintendent Peter J. McWalters to submit a general letter of intent to apply for the funds from the foundation. Final proposals are due by November 1, 1986.

"My understanding is that the major thrust of the program is research that shows children in the pre-pubescent ages, 12-21, ... do not receive medical care with any great care," said Rochester School Board President Rachel Hedding. "That's especially true in urban centers, where going to the doctor is often not done."

While school board officials say it's too soon to tell what specific services the clinics would offer, the foundation's guidelines require that proposals include "effective preventive services aimed at pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases," along with other high-risk conditions, such as drug and alcohol abuse.

Foundation spokesman Shirley Gazi explained that effective preventive services would be "something that has in the past proven to be worthwhile and has worked."

"I would say that would include a full range of programs, including all the things

that would prevent pregnancy," she said. "It is somewhat open-ended. We want people to define and craft different programs for themselves."

School board member Nancy Padilla pointed out that the clinics would serve a much broader array of needs than just family planning services.

"The fact is that young adults need these services," she added. "If there is any counseling or preventive service we can provide, how can you say no to that?"

"The fact is that students or young adults right now have that option (to seek birth control counseling and contraceptives) from a number of agencies," she said. "I don't think the district would be serving as a site for dispensing them, but my belief is that students would be referred to the appropriate agencies," she said.

The foundation's guidelines further state that "students will not receive services at the project unless a parent or guardian executes a consent form approved by school authorities," and that the project "be planned in consultation with a broadly representative community group, including parents, churches, youth and family service agencies."

"We are in the process of developing a community advisory group," Handwerker said. "We are hopeful that this will win support from the community ... That's why we're starting out so early."

"My understanding was that the superintendent intended to have a broader group ... that the proposal would be arrived at with the help of the (school) administration and the community," Hedding said. She believes that would encompass the same group that helped develop the city school district's family life curriculum.

CAS has invited nearly 40 agencies, including settlement houses, community centers, the Department of Health, Action for a Better Community, the Ibero-American Action League and such ministry groups as the Genesee Valley Office of Social Ministry, to send representatives to a closed planning meeting on August 11, at which their input will be solicited on the project.

But Handwerker pointed out that "these funds are not going to the county, they are going to a private agency."

"We would love to have community support. But people are not going to be voting on this," she added.

If a battle over the clinics ensues, it won't be the first time. Five years ago, the city health department was awarded funds by the Daisy Marquis Jones Foundation to expand existing health clinics in several schools. Students who underwent routine physicals to obtain work permits or to participate in athletic programs would have been questioned about whether they were sexually active. Based on their responses, they would then be referred to counselors located at the school.

A group that included diocesan social ministry officials, opposed the proposal on the grounds that the connection between work permits or athletics and sexual activity was "artificial," and that the proposal violated students' rights to privacy and usurped the rights of parents.

The proposal was dropped, and instead, the Monroe Coalition on Teen Pregnancy was established. It includes representatives of 35 agencies. "We worked together for five years and held forums to determine what parents, teachers and professionals felt was

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