

Health clinic to open soon at school

Facility will be second in Middletown system

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MIDDLETOWN — Debi McGrath came to this city because she wanted to work in community health.

Starting next month, she'll have all the community she can handle — more than 660 middle school students' worth.

McGrath has been hired as the nurse practitioner for the health clinic scheduled to open next month at Woodrow Wilson Middle School. And while to some an academic building still seems an odd place for a checkup, McGrath considers it ideal.

"For [many] kids it's difficult to get health care otherwise," McGrath said, citing the burdens of time-strapped parents and limited transportation. "[This] is a way to get kids where they are."

Such is the philosophy behind the more than two dozen clinics started in recent years with state money. Funded with a \$100,000 state grant, Wilson's center will be Middletown's second; an elementary school clinic opened at Macdonough in 1993 and has enrolled more than three-quarters of the school's students. The services provided by the clinics are free to the students.

Macdonough's clinic offers services ranging from physicals to group counseling; Wilson's is expected to offer a similar mix of medical and mental health programs. Final renovations are

to be completed this week while students are out of the building for February break.

"The kids need to be provided with coping skills, self-discipline," Wilson Principal Frank Balsciano said.

School board money already pays for a full-time social worker, a full-time nurse, and a half-time psychologist at Wilson; still, Balsciano says, student needs require more help. Surveys taken in the past academic year showed as much as a third of the school's youngsters sometimes feel life is not worth living, and about a fifth reported being drunk within the previous two weeks.

"This is going to be a real added strength," Balsciano said of the clinic. The city's Community Health Center operates the two clinics; no children

may be served at either unless parents sign an enrollment form. The middle school clinic will not offer contraception or contraceptive counseling, school officials have said.

Center Vice President Margaret Flinter said she expects the Wilson staff to use the few months before school ends to introduce the clinic's staff and services to parents, students and teachers.

McGrath will play a key role in raising awareness. The former director of health services at the University of Hartford, she also has extensive experience as a nurse manager of a neighborhood clinic in Boston.

The goal, McGrath said, is to create enough of an impression "so that by September we can really, really me

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