

**North Country HealthCare Bringing Healthcare to Kids at School**  
**By Eric Henley, MD MPH**

School-based health centers (SBHCs) were created to provide better access to healthcare for children from kindergarten to high school age by providing health services in schools or on school grounds. They have focused mainly on children and teens that are medically underserved. While we usually think these groups are quite healthy, we often underestimate their health needs. In a time where both parents are often working, it may be difficult to get kids to care during the school day for acute, chronic, and preventive services.

By now, there are over 1900 of these school clinics across the US; in fact, there were some in Flagstaff over a decade ago, and the acceptance is overwhelmingly positive. SBHCs typically offer primary care services such as care for acute illnesses and injuries, chronic diseases that are acting up, and preventive services like immunizations. They work to link students back to their usual source of care when they have one. They provide health education in the clinic and, sometimes, in the classroom. They may also provide behavioral health services. SBHCs require parental consent for children to receive services, and are particularly useful at reaching adolescents who often highly value confidential care and have difficulty getting to medical offices during the school day.

As Director of Maternal-Child Health services for the Albuquerque Area Indian Health Service in the 90s and Chair of a Family Medicine Department at the University of Illinois in the 2000s, I have been involved in all facets of SBHCs including funding them, starting them, and working in them. I have seen firsthand the value they have for underserved children and their families and the support they provide to school teachers and administrators who now have access to medical care for their students in their schools. There is evidence that school-based health centers can lower absentee rates and improve immunization rates.

A year ago, North Country HealthCare initiated discussions with FUSD administration and their Board to apply for funds to initiate school-based health services. We were successful in our capital grant application and last week accepted delivery of a new medical mobile unit, a beautiful “2 exam room clinic on wheels,” to provide school health services. At the discretion of the FUSD Board, on July 23<sup>rd</sup> we commenced care at Killip elementary school and will begin providing care to Kinsey, Thomas, Project New Start, and the Family Resource Center when the rest of the district begins on August 13<sup>th</sup>. Additionally, we will be assisting the Head Start programs associated with these schools in getting the necessary medical exams and immunizations for their children.

Our SBHC mobile clinic will be staffed by experienced nurse practitioners, a program supervisor/medical assistant, and a patient relations representative/driver. We will use North Country’s electronic health record, share information with private physicians whose patients we may see, and provide 24/7 telephone access to our on-call providers. North Country is responsible for the operation of this mobile clinic, including staffing and financing.

We are excited to bring school-based health services back to Flagstaff and look forward to working with teachers, administrators, parents, and the rest of the medical community to bring care to these schools. If you are interested in enrolling a child that attends one of the four schools please call 928.213.6161 for more information so your child can receive care when they need it.

*Eric Henley is the Chief Medical Officer for North Country HealthCare*