A healthy approach

Today's school clinic provides more than Band-Aids

By Charlie Bermant
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Chimacum High School Principal Whitney Meissner.

"This is convenient for both the students and the parents, who don't need to take time off work to drive them to the doctor."

The clinic, which is open from 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., is staffed by nurse practitioner Sara Kirkegaard on Mondays and Wednesdays and by mental health worker Julie Canterbury on Tuesdays and Thursdays. A similar clinic operates at Port Townsend High School. It is located in the gatehouse building across from the superintendent's office. In Port Townsend, a mental health worker is on duty from 8 a.m. to 12 p.m. Mondays and Wednesdays, and a nurse practitioner is there from 9 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Tuesday and from 10 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Fridays.

"This is a great program," said Jefferson County Public Health Department Director Jean Baldwin.

"It improves student access to mental health help and helps us combat issues like school absenteeism, while the mental health component helps kids deal with stress," she said.

Health: Clinics

Because what goes on inside the clinic is confidential, the fact that it connects to a large, open area is a drawback, Kirkegaard said. "With the commons right there, it can be hard to do confidentiality," she said. Meissner also is mindful of preserving privacy.

Kirkegaard said she wants to build awareness among the students that the clinic is about more than reproductive health and can deal with almost any day-to-day health issue. It's also vital for the sports program, since kids can get qualifying physicals without having to go to a doctor.

"The clinic is especially valuable for kids on the teams," said Port Townsend High School Vice Principal Patrick Kane.

Sliding scale

"A lot of the kids don't have their own doctor, and they can be treated on a sliding scale," Kirkegaard said. "I wish I had access to something like this when I went to high school," Kirkegaard said.

She said she tries to be a source of inspiration to the students and encourages them to seek a career in health care.

Anna Weark, a 2012 graduate of Chimacum High School, said, "I don't know what I would have done if the clinic wasn't here while I was in school." A lot of kids don't know where to get help and a lot of their families can't afford to take them to a doctor," Weark said.

Weark showed her appreciation for donating a painting she did as a senior project, which hangs in the clinic's lobby.

The painting portrays students seated under a tree doing homework, which Weark said symbolizes her experience at the clinic.

"I put them under a tree because I wanted to show how the clinic is a safe place," she said.