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North Vallejo will welcome health center soon

By **TONY BURCHYNS/Times-Herald staff writer**

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A Vallejo public school in a low-income neighborhood soon will open its own health center, district officials said.

The center, coming to Elsa Widenmann Elementary School, will be a community hub, with resources from more than 20 area service providers.

"North Vallejo has been identified as one of the highest disadvantaged areas in Vallejo as far as economic need," said Vanita Finney, coordinator of student health services for the Vallejo City Unified School District.

The community faces barriers to services - the closest clinic is three or four miles away, Finney said.

"Can you envision a mother with three or four children trying to get them on a bus to take them there? The health center becomes a bridge for who lacks health insurance or are low-income," Finney added.

When it opens - the target date is

Jan. 10 - the center will be the district's fourth school-based clinic. Pennycook Elementary and Vallejo High have part-time clinics. And Bethel High School has a Kaiser Permanente-run center on its campus.

All have opened in recent years.

But the Widenmann center will offer many more resources, including mental health services and links to a variety of county social programs.

It also will bring school-based health services closer to families at Widenmann, Dan Mini and Loma Vista elementary and Solano Middle schools.

"We always wanted Widenmann to be the hub for the north Vallejo community," principal MaBella Gonzales said. "We are in an area

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where there aren't a lot of services."

According to the district, 10 percent of residents in the area are living at or below the federal poverty level. And 67 percent of Widenmann students qualify for free and reduced price lunches.

In fact, more than 60 percent of all district students receiving free and reduced lunches attend Widenmann, Dan Mini and Solano Middle, Finney said.

Better health services could help the district boost test scores under the pressures of No Child Left Behind, officials said.

More importantly, proponents hope the center results in healthier and happier kids.

"It is not as simple as just having good teachers," said Deanna Niebuhr, director of school health initiatives for Bay Area Partnership For Youth. "There are other needs that students face. If health

issues aren't addressed early, they become major problems."

Access to services is the key, she added.

"If I don't have to go across town, take three buses, take my child out of school, to have a medical issue addressed, that's increasing my chances I will get help," Niebuhr said.

Agencies committed to providing services include Fighting Back Partnership, First 5, Children's Nurturing Project, Kaiser Permanente and the Solano Coalition For Better Health. Solano County's Mental Health and Substance Abuse divisions are part of the collaborative.

Gonzales, who's also board president for the nonprofit Children's Nurturing Project, said the center will help catch physical and mental health issues early.

"Then you can intervene immediately so catching up is not so hard, Gonzales said.

A district nurse practitioner and employees from the various partner organizations will staff the center.

It will be open to all district students and their pre-school age siblings. Appointments may be granted based on economic need, Finney said.

Hours will be afternoon to early evening on Tuesday and Thursday. Summertime hours, while not planned, could be added in the future, according to the district.

A modular unit that once housed Student Nutrition Services is being retrofitted to house the center. Rick Damelio, the district's state-appointed administrator, recently awarded the \$287,900 construction contract to Lamom

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Major funding is provided by United Way Bay Area and the S.H. Cowell Foundation. Other funding sources are the North Vallejo Health Collaborative and the 1997 voter-approved Measure A.

A \$450,000 Healthy Start grant awarded in 2007 supported planning efforts. Another \$400,000 portion of the grant is pending state review of the project, district officials said.

• E-mail Tony Burchyns at tburchyns@thnewsnet.com or call 553-6831.

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