



Tending to **Student** and **Family Health**

How one district partnered with their health care provider to provide assistance to students and their families

Erin Green

What does a developmental molecular biologist at the University of Washington in Seattle know about student learning? It turns out, quite a lot. Professor John Medina, the author of *Brain Rules: 12 Principles for Surviving and Thriving at Work, Home and School* and director of the Brain Center for Applied Learning Research at Seattle Pacific University, has studied brain functioning, behavior disorders, and the effects of stress on learning for years.

According to Medina, two elements that have a strong effect on our capacity to learn are our ability to control our behavior and the emotional stability of our environment, whether that is at home, at school, or at the office. It turns out that stress actually alters the physical structure of the brain — and not in a good way.

At the Association of School Business Officials (ASBO) 2011 Annual Meeting in Seattle, Medina challenged participants to learn more about what impedes learning in their students. And seriously, what education leaders don't need to improve their knowledge in this area?

We know schools can provide an environment that supports students socially and emotionally. The ubiquitous “bully-proofing” programs and harassment policies in place across the country exemplify our efforts to stabilize the social environments for students. But how do we

affect an environment we do not control? Is there a way to improve the home environment?

■ Addressing the Family Factor

Without a doubt, the economy is taking its toll on families, many of whom face reduced wages, unemployment, foreclosure, and decreased — or nonexistent — health care benefits (see “Free or Reduced-Price Meal Eligibility” on next page). With this in mind, the Greendale Schools’ director of pupil services and I wondered whether we could offer the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) that’s designed for staff to students and their family members.

So early in 2011, we talked to the health care organization that provides our staff EAP about the possibility of extending it to students and their families. After the health care company put together a new busi-

ness model to test the waters last year, the Greendale Schools implemented the Student and Family Assistance Program (SFAP).

This program offers teachers, students and families assistance in myriad areas, including substance abuse and addictions; mental illness; behavior problems; relationship, marital, and divorce issues; legal issues; financial counseling; adoption issues; elder or child care issues; and stress management.

Students or family members call a toll-free number and the health care company’s screening services match the family member to the appropriate counselor and service at a nearby clinic. Any teacher or staff member can refer a student or family to the program by handing them a card with the phone number to call for an appointment.

Up to six face-to-face sessions are included per year, per type if necessary. If the issue is not resolvable in six sessions, the family’s insurance resources are tapped or other community resources are used.

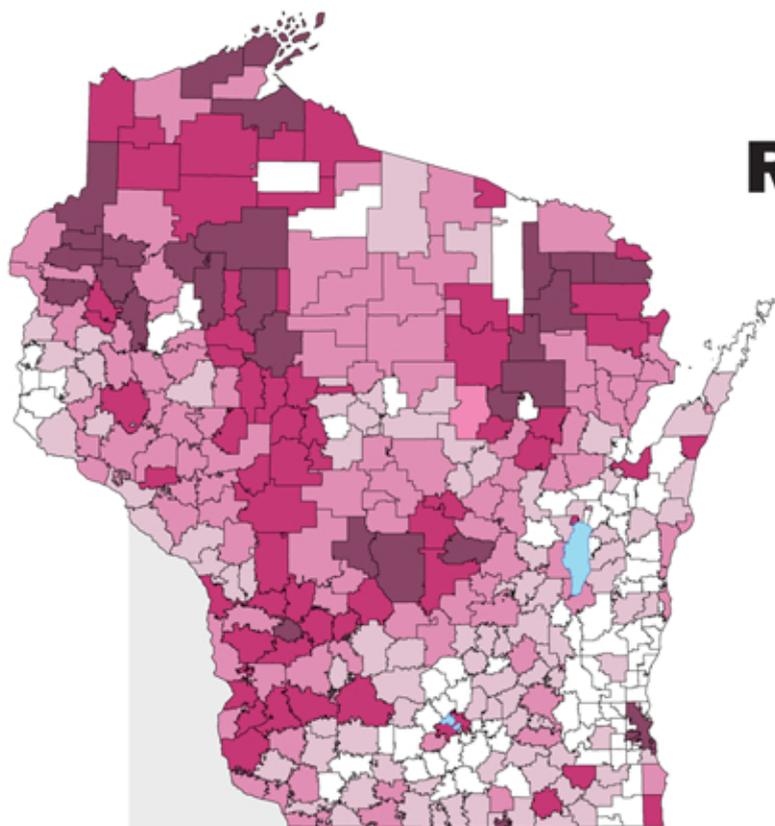
Our existing student services staff helped ensure a smooth implementation. The program is really an extension of what they do and a resource for their use.

We collect data regarding the types of services sought and whether a student or family is seeking help. We publicized the program

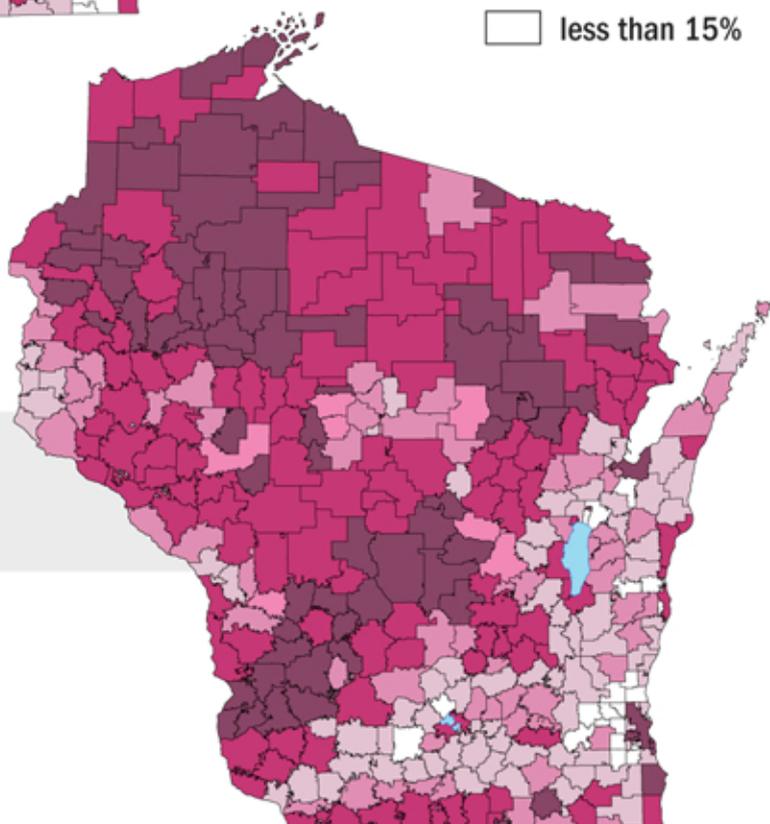
Free or Reduced-Price School Meal Eligibility

as an indication of economic status by school district

- more than 50%
- 35% to 50%
- 25% to 35%
- 15% to 25%
- less than 15%



2005



2011

SOURCE: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, March 2012



throughout the district and have been pleased with the response.

The SFAP serves our 2,600 students and their families for a set price per year, per student, similar to the pricing of the EAP for staff. In total, the cost for a district our size amounts to approximately one-third of the cost of a professional staff member.

■ Removing Barriers to Wellness

A recent study by the Association of School Nurses showed that one in every four to five youth in the United States meets the criteria for a mental disorder. Our SFAP is one way we can address the barriers to learning that Medina discussed at the ASBO

Annual Meeting. The program removed the cost barriers for services that may have hindered families seeking help. It also made it easier for families to find appropriate services.

To complement the behavioral or mental health aspect of these services, the school district also has a nurse practitioner from the health care company on board to address physical health. She is on site three days a week and serves our entire staff, their dependents, and our student population. She can diagnose minor illness, spot signs of impending major illness, monitor chronic diseases, provide health coaching to improve lifestyles, and write prescriptions.

Not only does this service bring

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primary health care to the local level, it also saves our health plan the cost of numerous office visits. Our staff members enjoy the convenience and fast service because they don't need to wait in doctors' offices or find subs (another cost) while they are gone.

We hope the SFAP will allow families and students to obtain the professional help they need so students have a safe, healthy learning environment at school and at home. ■

Green is the interim superintendent of the Greendale School District and a past president of the Association of School Business Officials.

MAKING THINGS HAPPEN

■ Greendale parent/student group helps organize positive activities and programs

The Greendale School District's Student and Family Assistance program was made possible partly by another positive initiative taking place in the district. The district's Partners for Community Action (PCA) program brings together students, parents and community partners to support and develop a variety of programs and activities that benefit the district and community.

According to the Greendale School District's website, PCA is "the framework under which Greendale Schools and identified partners collaboratively work to map, identify, create, reflect and evaluate programs and initiatives geared toward improving the odds for success in school, work and life for Greendale youth."

PCA was built around the principles of Ready by 21, a national challenge that is aimed at helping communities make sure its youth are "ready by 21" – ready for college, work and life. The challenge, which is facilitated by The Forum for Youth Investment, offers participating community groups innovative ideas, strategies and partners to strengthen solutions for young people.

The Greendale School District was introduced to this framework by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), which sought to establish peer work groups across the nation that wished to participate in

the Ready for 21 program. The Greendale School District accepted the challenge to join this prestigious group, aimed at developing opportunities for youth.

With that, the Greendale School District's PCA was formed and its work began. Among other activities, PCA seeks to encourage relationships that support a strong community network; provide youth a forum to express their vision of civic responsibility; and identify, link and promote access to community resources that foster positive youth development.

One of the biggest achievements of the group is helping to establish the district's Student and Family Assistance Program described in this article. Since then, the group has helped organize dozens of other activities. PCA recently held its first Parents as Partners Conference. More than 140 Greendale parents and guardians participated in discussion opportunities on topics related to raising today's youth and attended sessions on a variety of topics from Parenting with Love and Logic to Understanding Your Child's EXPLORE Test Results. Other activities organized by PCA include fun physical activities for students, a science and math night, and a fun run/walk. ■

