

Spotlight on the Safety Net

*A Community Collaboration
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Assessment, Support, and Counseling Center

Adolescence introduces physical and psychological changes that pose a challenge to some people in this age group. The Assessment, Support, and Counseling (ASC) Center at Watauga High School is a community collaborative effort created to help fill a gap in behavioral health services provided to adolescents in the rural community of Boone, North Carolina.

In 2006, Angela Quick, who was then the principal of Watauga High School, joined Kurt Michael, a professor of psychology at Appalachian State University, in discussions about the unmet behavioral health needs of local students. Although Boone had a good community health system in place, the needs of many adolescents in the area were not being served. Of particular concern to Quick and Michael were students whose adverse behavior (eg, substance use) and/or mental health status affected them academically. The ASC Center was created with the goal of using community resources and specialized attention to help students modify their adverse behavior and improve their academic performance.

This partnership between the university and the high school provides a much needed service to the school system and a valuable training opportunity for future clinicians. Michael has experience working with schools and with training mental health professionals. With the support of Quick, Michael began providing assessments to students at the high school. A full-time licensed clinical social worker was hired, and graduate students, who connect well with younger students, were brought in from Appalachian State University under the supervision of clinical faculty. Supervisors were available to help graduate students with more-complex cases and to facilitate referrals to community-based mental health agencies.

Jennifer Wandler is the provisionally licensed clinical social worker hired by the Watauga County School District to coordinate services through the ASC Center. She works at Watauga High School full-time and believes that her onsite presence helps make the program work. She advocates for students from an insider perspective and is in her second year in the position.

The ASC Center is currently operated through a collaboration involving Watauga County High School, the Institute for Health and Human Services at Appalachian State University, and New River Behavioral Health Care (the local management entity). The staff consists of a multidisciplinary team of more than 20 people, including social workers who possess a bachelor's or master's degree, as well as marriage and family therapists. During weekly team meetings, the principal, a resource officer, the school psychologist, and others (eg, teachers and counselors) discuss cases and find the most appropriate help for students.

The ASC Center provides short-term and solution-focused services. Counselors play the primary role in helping students enter or exit the behavioral health system. The average number of visits among students receiving assistance in the program is between six and seven. Students participate in an individualized transition process, moving from services provided at the ASC Center to guidance provided by a counselor, to whom a student is assigned for follow-up through grade 11. Wandler is available to consult with other school staff and to ensure a stable and timely transition to other services. Parents are notified of the plan, and follow-up with school counselors is prearranged.

If the ASC Center cannot meet a student's need, the student is referred to an outside agency for assistance. ASC Center counselors have developed a framework for medical consultations and can therefore help with referrals ranging from active treatment to aftercare. For students who require consultations,

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counselors endeavor to avoid in-house duplication of services provided by community-based mental health agencies, in some cases, simply provide support and transition care until the consultation is completed. The ASC Center does not operate during the summer. At the final staff meeting of the school year, team members review the cases of students who might need services over the summer, to ensure the students' transition to community-based agencies that provide appropriate services.

As the 2010-2011 school year resumes, ASC Center counselors have more tools to help them provide behavioral health services to students at the high school. Near the end of the 2009-2010 school year, the ASC Center administered its first student-satisfaction survey. The results are being compiled and will help the team understand even more about their students. Preliminary findings were very positive. One student expressed thanks to the counselors for saving her life and helping her mature. This student, who had a history of self-mutilation and attempted suicide, came to the ASC Center in need of anger-management counseling to help her manage difficult relationships. After a long course of interaction with counselors at the ASC Center, she improved relationships with her parents, interactions with her peers, and communication with authority figures. She also enhanced her academic performance, increased her self-respect, and created personal goals, concluding that if she had lacked "someone to talk to and process this stuff," she would likely be making "the same wrong decisions."

The ASC Center is making a difference in the lives of Watauga High School students and the Boone community. Provision of these services in the school eliminates barriers to health care access, such as lack of transportation. The founders of the program believe that the model can work for many large high schools. As the new school year begins, students at Watauga High School are greeted by morning announcements with the reminder that "If you need help, just ASC."

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