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At school center, families navigate the rough spots

By Grace Rauh, STAFF WRITER
Inside Bay Area

OAKLAND - MORE often than people would like to believe, young children in Oakland lose a parent, a brother, an uncle or a friend to violence, sending their world into a tailspin.

Most schools, however, are unequipped to deal with the trauma present in many of their students' lives, and it is not uncommon for concerned teachers or administrators to call an outside agency for help.

But at one elementary school in the Fruitvale district, putting a child into a counselor's chair doesn't even require a call.

"I just walk out onto the school yard," said Susan Sperber, principal of Education for Change at East Oakland Community Charter School, a new school that replaced most of Hawthorne Elementary last year.

On the edge of East Oakland Community Charter School's concrete play area are three unassuming portable buildings — home to the Hawthorne Family Resource Center, a vibrant community program serving students, their families and neighbors of the school.

The center, a program of the **East Bay Agency for Children**, runs a popular after-school program and adult education classes, and keeps its parent center stocked with children's books, clothing, food donations and informational fliers. One building is reserved for counselors who work with troubled students and their families.

A free on-campus medical clinic is frequented by recent immigrants whose children need physical exams and immunization shots before they can enroll in school.

"The school and the family resource center work together as one," said Sperber, who has been on the same campus for 23 years. "They help us deal with all the social and emotional issues of our students."

In many cities, schools serve as de facto community centers, providing parents and neighbors with a place to hold meetings, peruse bulletin boards and surf the Internet. It's more unusual, however, to find comprehensive support programs at the same place parents drop their children off every day.

But linking social and medical services with schools is an increasingly popular way to reach Alameda County families, according to Hawthorne program director Jamie Lopez.

The energetic 29-year-old, who elicits waves and hellos from students every time she crosses the school yard, often gives tours to individuals and organizations looking to create similar programs on other campuses.

By making such programs available right outside a classroom door, teachers can spend less time acting like social workers and more time focusing on their lessons, advocates argue. The location also makes it easy for parents to learn about available services and take advantage of them before, after and during their child's school day.

"We're seen kind of like a model. A structure folks want to emulate," Lopez said. "I think schools are more and more feeling like they have to address the things happening outside the classroom, so that kids can learn inside."

Lopez credits the success of Hawthorne's program with its many partnerships in the community. In addition to its close relationship with the Oakland school district, Alameda County and La Clinica de la Raza, which runs the medical clinic, it works with myriad organizations to keep the program afloat.

Earlier this year it was given the United Way of the Bay Area's Excellence in Community Collaboration award, and was praised for its community partnerships for helping families in a neighborhood where 26 percent of residents live below the poverty line and 81 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches.

"The idea of using the school ... is both ideal and makes the most sense. It's where children and families naturally convene," said Eric McDonnell, executive vice president of United Way of the Bay Area. "The opportunity to intervene kind of early and closer to where the challenges are happening is really key."

On Tuesday, the day before school let out for summer vacation, Maria Dolores Quintero practiced her typing skills on a center computer, while her mother, a petite 77-year-old from Mexico City, concentrated on the arc of the letter "U" on a handwriting worksheet.

Quintero said she tried to drop her mother off at an Oakland senior center when she first arrived in town, but she refused to stay.

"She said, 'You go to school? I want to go with you.'"

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