Humboldt Independent Practice Association
EUREKA, CA

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CREATING EMPOWERING, PEER-LED SPACES ON CAMPUS

Numerous schools team up with community health care organizations to establish and maintain school-based health care centers (SBHCs) as integral parts of broader strategies aimed at nurturing student well-being.[1] By locating care in the place where youth spend more of their time, SBHCs advance health equity for children and adolescents who might otherwise experience systemic barriers to accessing health care, especially those in under-resourced communities.[2]

The health care offered by SBHCs leads to better health outcomes and health literacy for students, school staff, and the community. It also plays a crucial role in fostering positive educational outcomes, such as lower absenteeism, fewer disciplinary actions and suspensions, and improved graduation rates.[3] In addition to offering physical health services, SBHCs support the social, emotional, and mental health of students and their families. Statistics also show that the vast majority of youth who receive mental health support are accessing these services at school. SBHCs have a unique ability to provide mental health care and wellness services in a confidential and destigmatized environment.[4]

Humboldt Independent Practice Association (IPA), a physician-sponsored organization that works to provide their local community with high-quality health care, partners with area schools to fund and staff 10 school-based wellness centers across Humboldt County. The school-based wellness programs offer a range of services, including education about sex and puberty, drop-in hours, wellness presentations in classrooms and at community events, brief interventions, conflict mediation, and empowerment groups. Although the inaugural program began as a school-based health center at McKinleyville Middle School, the focus on social–emotional needs prompted staff to shift the focus toward wellness during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Key Features of Effective Youth Empowerment Groups

Youth empowerment groups are essential to Humboldt IPA's wellness programming, promoting the social, emotional, and physical well-being of students so that they can better achieve their academic goals. Currently, more than 35 empowerment groups operate at various sites, providing voluntary peer support for middle and high school students. These groups are designed to help participants develop strong leadership and communication skills in a supportive environment. Facilitators use evidence-based curricula, viewing youth participants through an asset lens. They also employ motivational interviewing strategies and emphasize positive youth development. Among the current empowerment groups offered are the following:

- Young Men's Council, which fosters a supportive environment on campus for male-identifying individuals
- Girls' Group, which provides a safe and confidential space for female-identifying individuals to build friendships and engage in honest conversations
- Pride Group, which is open to people of all genders and explores the intersection of ethnicity, sexual orientation, and culture
- Multicultural Group, which advocates for all multicultural students on campus

There are three particular elements that make the Humboldt IPA's youth empowerment programs so successful.

Peer educators are trained to serve as co-facilitators.

Humboldt County IPA has five trained peer educators to co-facilitate the empowerment groups at Arcata High School, Sunny Brae Middle School, Peninsula Elementary School, and Pacific Union School. As peer educators, Charlotte and Sky co-facilitate Girls' Group at different school sites. Along with using evidence-based facilitation strategies in the meetings themselves, the peer educators work with adult mentors to choose the material for each group meeting. This inclusion of youth perspectives and voices in the design and facilitation of the empowerment groups is an example of Humboldt County IPA's positive youth development model put into practice.

> I would've never thought that I would open up to people like that. ... Now people are seeing a different side of me, and it makes me happy.
>
> SKY
> Peer Educator

Adult mentors value youth voices and reflect the identities of students.

The empowerment group facilitators are vital in creating the friendly environment that allows young people to relate to one another and feel comfortable sharing their ideas. The groups are led by volunteer mentors who share the identities and lived experiences of participants. For example, Vanessa Vrtiak, Director of Humboldt IPA School-Based Wellness Centers, also co-facilitates Girls' Group with Charlotte and Sky. Research about culturally responsive and sustaining youth programming reveals that it is critical to hire staff who value youth voices and want to affirm, celebrate, and support youth as leaders.[5] Humboldt IPA staff guide—rather than seek to control—students, collaborating with them to determine group rules, agreements, and topic areas for each empowerment group.[6] Vanessa described how she followed the students' lead when it came to youth outreach, supporting Charlotte's idea of developing and managing an Instagram account.

> Sharing feelings, sharing space, sharing vulnerability ... promotes some level of healing, not only for the person speaking, but then for the young person sitting next to the person speaking. It's helping us all heal.
>
> VANESSA VRTIAK
> Director of Humboldt IPA School-Based Wellness Centers

Empowerment groups offer an affirming space for youth to connect with similar peers.

The empowerment groups offer a welcoming and protective space for youth to connect with peers who share similar identities. These spaces are also known as *affinity groups*, and evidence suggests that these groups have a significant impact on the psychological safety of students who may feel disconnected or marginalized on campus, including students of color and LGBTQ+ students.[7] Because these students are less likely to receive mental health care, affinity groups can play a crucial role in supporting students to share their experiences in a healing environment.[8] Both Charlotte and Sky reflected on the power of talking to other young women about the issues they are facing, including how they are coping with stress, navigating the pressure of postsecondary decision-making, and relating to parents and family members.

> It's really great to know that there are other people going through the exact same feelings and emotions and stress that you're going through all at the same time.
>
> CHARLOTTE
> Peer Educator

Number of students	17,624
Geographic setting	Rural
Grades served	TK–12

Student Demographics	
White	54.5%
Latinx	19.0%
Multiracial	9.4%
Native American/Alaska Native	8.8
Asian	6.5%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	3.3%
Black	1.5%
Socioeconomically disadvantaged	58.7%
English language learners	7.1%
Homeless youth	4.1%

Data sourced from the Humboldt County Office of Education.

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Consider while you listen . . .

- What affirming, empowering spaces exist within your school(s) for students to connect with peers who share similar identities? How might your school or district partner with youth, adults, and other community members to strengthen the groups that already exist and/or to create new groups?
- What can staff in your community learn from Humboldt IPA's adult mentorship approach to their youth empowerment groups? What might it look, sound, and feel like at your school for staff to emphasize youth voice and collaboration?

References

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