APPLYING RACIAL JUSTICE AND EQUITY IN SCHOOL-BASED HEALTH CENTERS: EXAMPLES OF TRANSFORMATIONAL HEALTHCARE DELIVERY MODELS & YOUTH LEADERSHIP

Executive Summary

The purpose of this document is to provide concrete examples of how School-Based Health Centers can meaningfully embed racial justice and equity into their care delivery model. The Massachusetts Department of Public Health's (DPH) School-Based Health Center (SBHC) Program is committed to advancing these principles to improve health outcomes for children and adolescents. Recognizing that experiencing racism has a significant impact on health, the program incorporates racial justice and equity into its Quality Standards and Resource Library, which informs the operation of the SBHCs that receive funding from DPH

Practical examples from existing DPH funded SBHC sites demonstrate how these standards can be effectively implemented:

- Doherty High School SBHC in Worcester, operated by Family Health Center of Worcester, focuses on mental health support and leadership development. Behavioral health clinician Joseph M. Forson Jr., MSW, LICSW, validates students' cultural and racial experiences and empowers them through initiatives like the Black Student Union.
- Boston Day and Evening Academy SBHC, operated by Whittier Street Health Center, provides a welcoming environment with strong staff-student relationships. The center focuses on creating a supportive space while aiming to expand on-site behavioral health services.

These case studies below highlight how SBHCs can foster equitable health environments and empower the next generation of leaders, serving as models for new and startup SBHCs to follow.

Racial Justice and Youth Leadership: Core Values for School-Based Health Centers.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recognizes that experiencing racism is a core determinant of a child's health, and a significant driver of health inequities. The chronic buildup of stress hormones from repeated experiences of racism can lead to increased rates of chronic illness, anxiety and depression, and maternal/infant mortality. However, a strong and positive sense of racial identity, free from shame or internalized oppression, can improve health outcomes (The Impact of Racism on Child and Adolescent Health | Pediatrics). This aligns with DPH's strategic plan to advance racial equity, which addresses the deeply-rooted systemic inequities that negatively impact health outcomes across diverse communities. This action-oriented roadmap aims to transform public health practices by integrating racial equity in all facets of DPH's work, from emergency preparedness toworkforce development, thereby aiming to create a more equitable health landscape throughout the state.
More details on the plan can be found here.

Building on DPH's commitment, the SBHC Program is committed to supporting SBHC sites across the Commonwealth with building cultures of racial justice and equity. This is a core value of the SBHC Program and is reflected in the DPH School-Based Health Center Program's Quality Standards and Resource Library for SBHC Startup Sites. This includes integration of a racial justice lens, both *externally,* in community-facing services, and *internally,* in organizational structure and governance. All SBHC sites are required to ensure their staff are trained in racial equity frameworks and the traumatic impact of racism and discrimination on young people and how to talk about it. Additionally, while training serves as a foundation, the DPH SBHC Program works to support SBHC sites in applying racial equity frameworks, facilitating their integration into daily care delivery and interactions within the community. This commitment is fundamental in fostering meaningful and impactful

practices across all SBHC sites.

Continuing this focus, the SBHC program at DPH requires funded SBHCs to directly collaborate with youth when designing their service delivery model, recognizing youth and young adults as crucial contributors with expertise derived from their own experiences. By integrating youth and young adults in the design of services, our initiatives are not merely reactive but actively transformative. This method prioritizes the voices of students, ensuring that services not only validate their identities but also equip them to adeptly navigate the intricate social determinants of health. Additionally, this strategy enhances resilience, promotes a sense of belonging, and cultivates trusted adult relationships, all of which are vital for comprehensive well-being. Our investment in these principles is foundational in building a healthier, more equitable future and in developing a new generation of leaders who are dedicated to creating positive change in their communities. Therefore, melding a youth leadership model with a racial equity lens is essential in devising programs that foster favorable health outcomes, particularly for youth of color.

So, how do SBHCs achieve this? Where do they begin? DPH is proud to showcase two standout programs from Worcester and Boston, which exemplify the seamless integration of racial equity and youth leadership. These programs have cultivated deep and enduring trust with the young people they serve. They represent just a fraction of the many SBHCs across the state committed to acknowledging and affirming the cultural, identity, and racial experiences of young people. Detailed descriptions of these exemplary programs can be found below.

Doherty High School SBHC
Operated by Family Health Center of Worcester
This case study is based on a site visit and interview with Joe Forson, MSW, LICSW and five Doherty High youth who have used SBHC services.

Doherty High School is one of six Worcester Public High Schools, serving 1,400 young people in grades 9-12. Doherty serves a diverse student population, from a multitude of backgrounds, socio-economic status, cultures,and ethnicities. Fifty-one percent of Doherty students have English as a second language, 57% are consideredlow-income, and 65% are considered “high needs” (Doherty High School Profile). The Doherty SBHC is a small office space shared by the school nurse team, behavioral health provider, nurse practitioner, and community health worker. The SBHC team is very excited to be moving to a brand-new high school building in the fall of 2024 where they’ll have a larger health center, allowing them more space to care for the youth and young adults they serve.

Joseph M. Forson Jr. MSW, LICSW (he/him) is the full-time behavioral health clinician at the Doherty SBHC, where he sees nearly 7-8 patients per day, including both scheduled appointments and walk-ins. Joe also supports a panel of 37 students, providing them ongoing behavioral health support. Currently, there is a waiting list of 25 students. Joe hopes to see behavioral health services expand in the future so the SBHC can better meet the existing need, including the potential to run groups and connect youth with each other to provide peer support for their mental health and wellness. Joe describes himself as a “touchstone,” often providing students with their first experience and introduction to counseling and therapy.

Joe's objective is to consistently reinforce with young people that they are the experts on their own stories. In discussing his role at the SBHC, Joe emphasized how his work actively validates and respects the cultural, identity, and racial experiences of his students. Joe is dedicated to empowering individuals by fostering their leadership skills and acknowledging their unique perspectives.

As a Black and Puerto Rican man, I bring that into the space working with kids. It's something I can't change... I regularly have conversations with students about how their race and ethnicity impacts their relationships with teachers. We talk about those aspects of power that play into why things are the way they are. We use a social justice lens of how you can take back power and understand the history so you're knowledgeable and can see things not as random events, but within systems of power and oppression... For many students, they've never had a therapist of color, never had a teacher of color, even though we are in the heart of Worcester.

I work with a lot of young ladies. And we really talk about the intersections of what it means to be a young woman, a young woman of color, a young woman of color who lives in public housing... and all of those things that impact how things go in our day. We talk about how people can judge us because of how we dress. We talk about what is radical versus what is respectable. We talk about how bodies are looked at from the perspective of someone who identifies as a cis male. And we have those conversations to show that these things aren't random. They are done purposefully and structurally. It's not just now, it's been throughout time

Joseph M. Forson Jr. MSW, LICSW
Behavioral Health Clinician

Joe also oversees the Black Student Union (BSU) at Doherty, where he is deeply committed to empowering students as leaders. Within the BSU, the students take charge of the sessions, actively shaping each meeting. Joe provides essential support, helping them to realize their ideas for promoting Black culture within the school community. This includes initiatives like this year's Juneteenth celebration, where their vision and leadership were prominently showcased. In the therapy space, Joe consistently seeks feedback, asking how he can better support the youth and how the sessions are progressing. He empowers the young people by encouraging them to take charge of their therapeutic journey, reminding them, "If I'm not the right person for you, fire me. If I'm not meeting your needs, let's find someone who will." This approach has fostered a palpable sense of trust between Joe and the young people he serves, demonstrating his commitment to their well-being and autonomy.

The youth and young adults we spoke to at Doherty High discussed at length the racism and sexism they experience in their school and community. They spoke extensively about how Joe, their therapist, helps them process the impact of these systemic issues on their mental health by providing an understanding of historical context, systemic oppression, and structural inequalities. Key findings from the round table discussion with students within Doherty are highlighted in the graphic below.

As noted, students voiced concerns about the lack of teachers of color at their school, underscoring the critical need for racial equity and representation. Joe leveraged this moment to build trust by acknowledging how this lack of diversity deeply affects students' sense of belonging and identity. He initiated powerful discussions on relationships and sexuality, normalizing queerness, promoting body positivity, and emphasizing consent. Joe

also educated them on the historical contexts of sexism and patriarchy, linking these issues to broader systemic inequities. These conversations were designed to validate students' experiences, address racial and gender inequities, and empower them to feel heard and less isolated. As a result, students felt less alone, understood they were not at fault, and recognized the strength and importance of their identities in advocating for racial equity and inclusive youth engagement. This approach not only supported their mental health but also fostered a stronger sense of identity and resilience, essential for their growth and empowerment.

The students at Doherty provided two key suggestions for improving services at the school-based health center (SBHC).

1. Students emphasized the need for **increased awareness among students that they can access therapy services at school**. Many were unaware that regular counseling was available until they faced a crisis, suggesting that the SBHC should enhance its advertising and outreach efforts.
2. Students expressed the need for **support to transition to a new therapist after graduation**, as the SBHC services are limited to currently enrolled students at Doherty. While they were nervous about finding new therapists on their own, they appreciated Joe's support in facilitating a smooth transition by providing resources for a warm handoff to new providers.

It is important to note that SBHCs must balance expanding awareness with existing capacity. For example, since Joe already has a wait list, it would be important that any outreach efforts are paired with strategies to increase capacity and meet the growing demand. Simply raising awareness could overwhelm the system without the necessary resources in place to support additional students.

Additionally, supporting students as they transition to new therapists after graduation is vital for ensuring continuity of care. SBHC providers can facilitate this process by offering tailored resources such as referral lists for in-network providers, assisting with insurance verification, and conducting direct handoffs when possible. For students attending trade schools or colleges with on-site health or behavioral health services, providers can guide them in exploring these low-barrier access options as an alternative to finding external providers. Ongoing navigation support from the Community Health Worker (CHW), including help with understanding how to initiate care at their new institution, ensures that students maintain uninterrupted access to behavioral health services beyond high school.

All five students we spoke with had powerful visions for their community and their families. Their futures included heading to college in the fall and aspirations of becoming teachers, social workers, computer scientists, nurses, and/or psychologists. They credit much of their success to the confidence and empowerment they gained from working with Joe and the SBHC team. Their stories underscore the transformative impact of racial equity and youth engagement in shaping the next generation of leaders and change-makers. By balancing outreach, capacity, and long-term support, the SBHC has played a pivotal role in fostering their growth and setting them on the path to leadership and success.

Boston Day and Evening Academy SBHC
Operated by Whittier Street Health Center
This case study is based on a site visit and interview with Dena Vicente, Nurse Practitioner and Thomas Cater, CHW, and seven Boston Day and Evening Academy youth who have used SBHC services.

Boston Day and Evening Academy (BDEA) is an in-district Horace Mann public charter high school serving 368 students with an innovative academic model designed to help them earn their high school diploma and

pursue post-secondary education or gainful employment. At BDEA, a competency-based approach places students in 11-week courses according to their skill levels, ensuring no one fails and progression is based on demonstrated competence. The students at BDEA are driven and serious about their education and have struggled in more traditional school settings. Many come from families who have navigated challenges such as poverty, homelessness, complexities with immigration, and historical disinvestment in their communities. The BDEA community is dedicated to supporting these youth by providing essential resources such as access to food, clothing, laundry facilities, showers, and other social services, ensuring they have the foundation to thrive academically and personally, empowering them to leverage their resilience and experiences for their future success.

The SBHC at Boston Day and Evening Academy is sponsored by Whittier Street Health Center, and it is one of the first start-up sites ever funded by the DPH SBHC program. Funding began in July 2022 and the SBHC successfully opened their clinic doors 15 months later in October 2023. The SBHC is an open concept converted classroom that features a small waiting area, two exam rooms, and a compact lab situated in the corner. While it was originally built as a classroom, the SBHC has been beautifully transformed by Whittier Street Health Center into a fully licensed satellite clinic. This transformation exemplifies the strength of SBHCs: the ability to turn non-traditional spaces where youth are most present into welcoming and functional clinical environments, minimizing barriers and making healthcare accessible.

Upon entering the SBHC at BDEA, you are immediately greeted by warm colors and an inviting atmosphere. The walls are adorned with plants, posters, and youth-friendly messaging, creating a comforting and inclusive environment. In the waiting area, students often engage with jigsaw puzzles thoughtfully provided by Thomas, the Community Health Worker (CHW). Snacks and water are readily available to ensure that basic needs are met.

The SBHC is bustling with activity, as students drop by to say hi, check in, make an appointment or share something positive that happened in their day. From urgent medical visits to casual check-ins and grabbing a bag of chips, all interactions within the SBHC are critical to building trust and creating meaningful care opportunities. By fostering these engagements, the SBHC ensures that students have a consistent, reliable adult presence throughout the school day and year. This supportive atmosphere addresses both simple and complex needs, making the SBHC a place where students feel valued, heard, and empowered.

Thomas and Dena, staff members from Whittier Street Health Center, have built incredibly strong relationships with their collaborative partners at BDEA, including the school nurses, staff, and administration. Their strong rapport reflects the collective commitment to, and value placed on the SBHC by the BDEA community. The welcoming, collaborative, and supportive atmosphere at BDEA has been instrumental in the successful establishment of the SBHC over the past year. Thomas and Dena truly believe that everyone at BDEA shares a unified vision for healthy youth and justice. Thomas and Dena share more about their experience working in the SBHC in the graphic below.

The fact that they feel free to come and talk to us about any type of issue… with anyone, but particularly with young people, if they know you really care about them, they'll be able to trust you.

This is one of the best places around. It's the interactions with the young people, and it's just so different from [a typical doctor's office]. We're here, really focused on having young people excel and be successful and all the social supports they need to do that, not just their education.

Thomas Cater
Community Health Worker

[A student*] met with me, extremely tearful…. Their mom doesn't support their LGBTQ identity. Substances helped with the stress. They said, "I feel comfortable with you, I know you understand me because I'm Black. There's things I don't have to say that you just get." They're not receiving services right now for mental health and they really want someone from the queer community. So we're working on that.

Education is how I empower. Education is how I give them leadership to make their own decisions in healthcare.

*Identifying information has been changed to protect student identities

Dena M. Vicente, MSN, FNP-BC
Nurse Practitioner

The students of BDEA reinforced the importance of the SBHC, speaking at length about how comfortable and accessible it is. They discussed their strong relationships with Thomas and Dena, the benefits and positive impact of the SBHC, and some ideas they had for improvement. More details from that conversation can be found below.

The students at BDAE provided two key suggestions for improving services at the SBHC:

1. Students emphasized the need for a **behavioral health provider within the SBHC to offer therapy services on-site.**
    a. Thomas and Dena agree that the current vacancy of a behavioral health provider is a significant barrier to the SBHC reaching its full potential. Referring out for therapy services

is inconvenient and often creates accessibility challenges. They hope to fill this position before the 2024-2025 school year to ramp up behavioral health services and address the clear need. This will also fulfill the DPH SBHC program requirement for a full-time, in-person behavioral health provider, a mandate established because of the recognized value of a holistic care model with integrated on-site behavioral health services.

2. The students enthusiastically mentioned that they would also love to have **more snacks and a coffee machine!**

The BDEA SBHC is still in its early stages, and Dena and Thomas are diligently refining various aspects of their operations, including specimen collection, birth control supply, role clarity, and outreach efforts. Their commitment extends through the summer, as they will provide services on-site to support summer school students. With these improvements underway, they are optimistic that Year 2 will surpass the successes of the first year, further enhancing the support and care provided to the students.