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How wellness centers help troubled S.F. students

By Jill Tucker, Chronicle Staff Writer

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Evander Williams walks the halls of Thurgood Marshall high school with Principal Guillermo Morales.

Photo: Michael Macor / The Chronicle

As a dyslexic, African American male growing up in San Francisco's notorious Hunters Point neighborhood, the odds were far greater that Evander Williams would drop out, die or go to jail than graduate high school.

Well over half the city's black males don't make it to graduation day on time, according to state data.

Williams did, collecting his diploma from Thurgood Marshall Academic High School

last week.

The 18-year-old credits his family, his faith and friends. But he also credits the support he found behind the door at the end of his high school's first-floor hallway.

The small sign on the outside simply says "Wellness Center."

Inside, Williams, like hundreds of other students, found courage, comfort and the mental, physical and emotional support it took to get him

through the really bad days.

The center, one of 15 such offices at city high schools, offers students mental health support, reproductive services, referrals to physicians, a school nurse, and staff members who are there to listen.

"It was hard, though," Williams said. "I had a lot of challenges."

Hard is an understatement.

Endless bullying

Born with an extra finger on each hand, he was bullied and beaten up in elementary school nearly every day. He was held back in fourth grade as he struggled academically.

On his way to sixth-grade summer school, he was mugged at gunpoint. He considered suicide as a seventh-grader, he said, demonstrating how close he came to doing it by holding an invisible blade

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above his wrist.

Surgery corrected the defects on his hands in the eighth grade, but it didn't stop the bullying. He was taunted and teased by classmates who thought he was gay or because the churchgoing teen carried a Bible in his backpack. He was even harassed because he had both his parents at home. He doesn't resent those tormenters.

"I know they're crying on the inside," he said.

At home, the sound of gunfire was common at night, with one shootout sending bullets ricocheting off his bedroom walls and into his sister's room.

At least once a month, his middle school went into lockdown, sending students scrambling away from windows in case someone started shooting outside.

Victims of such street violence were sometimes neighbors or friends.

Williams recounted the friend he knew from elementary school who was gunned down. He had heard the gunshots that killed Johnisha Tucker.

"Usually in our neighborhood (the sound of gunfire) doesn't bother us until we find out who it was," he said.

Suffering flashbacks

In his high school classes, these memories frequently overwhelmed Williams. He'd suffer flashbacks, which he called, "a big old headache of bad memories."

When he couldn't function anymore, he headed to the Wellness Center. Initially, he wasn't sure about the place.

"I didn't like coming here just talking about my feelings and stuff," he said. "It seemed so girly."

He quickly changed his mind. He found solace behind that door down the hall, and later guided other bullied and struggling students there.

Several traumatized

Many students at the school have suffered great trauma and are fragile, even broken, said Marshall Principal Guillermo Morales.

"The Wellness Center has a lot of Super Glue," Morales said.

Yet, there is less glue than there used to be.

The wellness services aren't a top priority compared with public education's three R's. With budget cuts hitting

schools hard, the budget for the wellness centers has dropped by nearly 10 percent in three years. The centers received \$4.5 million this last school year.

The Department of Children, Youth and Families covered \$3.3 million of the operating costs, with the school district supplying the rest through the city's voter-approved Proposition H Public Education Enrichment Fund.

Marshall's Wellness Center, which gets about \$300,000 per year, served 500 of the school's 750 students at least once. But the cuts have resulted in reduced staffing, meaning about 100 students couldn't get time with the school nurse this year.

Critical to success

The school's wellness coordinator, Wendy Snider, believes the services are critical components to academic success.

"Clearly students aren't going to learn if they have mental health issues," she said.

Trauma is too common in the community, she said. Many students simply need a place to go

when they can't focus or stay awake because of circumstances in their home life, she said.

"There were several students sleeping under their beds because there were bullets flying through windows," Snider said.

Williams, she said, showed up at the center every day for the last six months of school, sometimes looking for nothing more than a hug.

"I honestly don't know how he did it," Snider said.

Williams now has his sights set on college, where the odds, once again, are stacked against him. For every three black men in the United States in college, four are in prison, according to the U.S. Department of Justice.

With \$20,000 in college scholarships, he plans to attend the San Francisco Academy of Art University to study video game design.

He is determined not to fall on the wrong side of those odds.

"I think some of us are kind of influenced by the wrong things," he said of his black male peers. "I strive for a different life."