

Discussion Paper: School Health and Credentialed School Nurses

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A. SCHOOL HEALTH ISSUES

“Much of the focus of the current school reform movement to improve the scholastic achievement of students has been on implementing new standards, curriculum, teaching techniques and other practices that focus directly on academics. However, too many students come to school with a variety of health-related problems that make successful learning difficult. In order to continue improving students’ academic achievement, attention must be directed toward removing health-related behavioral and environmental barriers to learning” (California Department of Education 2005).

Growing numbers of students today have health conditions that affect their school attendance and performance. Some suggest that, at present in the United States, one child in four is at risk of failure in school because of social, emotional or health handicaps (Romano). Many of the health challenges facing young people today are different from those of past decades, putting added pressure on school health programs to improve the health status of young people. A majority of elementary school children are obese. An increasing number of children and adolescents are developing Type 2 diabetes, a disease usually diagnosed in adults aged 40 years and older. Asthma has become a leading cause of school absences and hospital admissions. For example:

- 26.5% of California’s 5th, 7th & 9th graders are considered overweight.
- In California, 1 in every 300-600 children, or approximately 15,000 school-aged children is diagnosed with diabetes.
- An estimated 13.7 % to 16.3% of California children between 6-17 have been diagnosed with asthma, representing approximately one million children.
- In 2001, nearly 136,000 California adolescents with asthma missed one or more days of school per month.
- In regular classrooms throughout California numerous children have special needs including gastronomy feeding tubes, oxygen administration, tracheal suctioning and monitoring for seizures.
- An estimated 3-8% or up to 541,000 children in California are estimated to have severe food allergies where accidental ingestion or exposure can lead to an anaphylactic reaction.

School Districts and schools are required, under law, to provide for the health of students under their care. Section 49400 of the California Education Code states “the governing board of any school district shall give diligent care to the health and physical development of each pupil...” In addition, Section 504 of the Federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973 specifies that students with disabilities have the right to receive a free appropriate public education, which includes reasonable accommodations required for the management of chronic medical conditions. The National School Boards Association notes “schools have a duty to help prevent unnecessary injury, disease and chronic health conditions that can lead to disability or early death...schools cannot achieve their primary mission of education if students and staff are not healthy and fit physically, mentally, and socially.”

B. SCHOOL HEALTH MODELS

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has developed a model for a comprehensive school health program which includes eight components:

- A **healthy environment** that provides students and staff with a positive physical, social and emotional climate.
- **Comprehensive health education** that includes classroom instruction on avoiding risky behaviors, such as tobacco and alcohol use, that adversely affect students' health.
- **Physical education** that promotes overall health and well-being.
- **Health services** that include diagnosis and prevention of students' health problems and referrals for acute and chronic conditions.
- **Counseling, psychological, and social services** to support students' learning.
- **Nutrition** that promotes students' healthy nourishment.
- **Staff health** that leads to healthy role models for students and better overall morale.
- **Family and community partnerships** that support students' health and academic achievement.

It has been suggested that, although many school administrators think of nutrition and physical activity programs as optional pieces of a school's curriculum, ignoring student health is shortsighted. An investment in health is an investment in better academic performance. Numerous studies dating to the 1980s have shown that healthy kids perform better academically and districts that implement a coordinated school health program decrease risks for children and increase opportunities for achievement (Satcher).

Additional impetus behind the development of school health programs and policies has been the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004. Section 204 of this law requires school districts participating in the National School Lunch Program to develop a local wellness policy that addresses student wellness and the growing problem of childhood obesity by July 1, 2006. As required by law, a local wellness policy, at a minimum, shall include (USDA):

- Goals for nutrition education, physical activity and other school-based activities that are designed to promote student wellness.
- Nutrition guidelines selected by the local educational agency for all foods available on the school campus during the school day.
- Guidelines for reimbursable school meals.
- A plan for implementation of the local wellness policy, including the designation of 1 or more persons at each school charged with ensuring that each school fulfills the district's local wellness policy.
- Community involvement including parents, students and representatives of the school food authority, school board, school administrators and the public in the development of the school wellness policy.

C. THE ROLE OF THE CREDENTIALLED SCHOOL NURSE

Since the early 1900s, nurses have played a significant role in the health and well-being of school children. As the health concerns of our children and youth becoming more prevalent and complex, there is an increased need for school health services managed by a professional with the appropriate knowledge, education and expertise. In California, a credentialed school nurse:

- Is a Registered Nurse (R.N.) with a Public Health Certificate (PHN)
- Has a Bachelor's Degree
- Has additional post-graduate education related to school health issues
- Is credentialed by the Commission on Teacher Credentialing (a nursing credential, not a teaching credential).

School nursing is considered a specialized practice that advances the well-being, academic success and life-long health and achievement of students. The Federal Government's document, "Healthy People 2010" notes, "School nurses assess student health and development, help families determine when medical services are needed, and serve as the professional link with physicians and community resources. Nurses manage care and provide services to support school attendance and academic achievement. For children with disabilities, the nurse is an essential resource. These children are dependent on daily medication, nursing procedures, or special diets for normal function." (Taliaferro). The roles and responsibilities of a school nurse are broad ranging and include the following (see Appendix A for more detail):

- Health assessment of students
- Case management for students with specific health needs
- Health counseling
- Health education
- Health screenings
- Prevent & control communicable diseases

The credentialed school nurse is uniquely positioned to take a lead role in implementing and monitoring comprehensive school health programs due to their education and expertise.

D. STAFFING LEVELS

Across the country and particularly in California, schools face a severe shortage of school nurses to meet the needs of students and staff. The National Association of School Nurses, American Academy of Pediatrics, the Centers for Disease Control, the American School Health Association and others **recommend a nursing ratio of 750:1 in regular student populations and 100:1 in special needs populations.**

Despite the widespread recognition of the critical need for school nurses, essential public health investments in school nursing have declined in many school districts in **California**. During the 2002-2003 school year, there were 6,244,403 children in the public schools and 2,466 school nurses, a **ratio of one credentialed school nurse to every 2,532 students.**

In July 2002, the American Federation of Teachers adopted a resolution calling for a full-time school nurse in every school building. Similarly, the National Association of Elementary School Principals advocates for a school nurse in every school. In May 2005, the California State PTA endorsed a resolution calling for adequate funding to provide appropriate health services by credentialed school nurses in California's schools. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends and supports the continued strong partnership among school

nurses, other school health personnel, and pediatricians to promote the health of children and youth by facilitating the development of a comprehensive school health program.

E. IMPACT OF SCHOOL NURSES & SCHOOL HEALTH INITIATIVES

In addition to fulfilling goals relating to the importance of safeguarding the health and safety of California students, investments in school nursing may pay off both financially (by reducing absenteeism, controlling liability risk and increasing revenue) and in academic achievement, as research shows connections between improved student health and gains in student achievement. The following are some key points from the research literature on the impacts of various school health initiatives, including school nursing:

- A study of 22 schools enrolling over 10,000 students found that a full-time school nurse reduces the number of students who leave school because of medical complaints (Allen).
- School nursing interventions that targeted students with histories of high rates of absenteeism proved effective in decreasing the number of days absent from school (Maughan).
- A school nurse's teaching of hand-washing skills in an elementary school led to a decrease in absenteeism due to illness (Maughan).
- In a two-year longitudinal study of children receiving a substance abuse intervention curriculum, five years after the program, participants had higher overall academic achievement scores on the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills than their national peers (National Governors Association).
- Students whose parents had received personal phone calls from the school nurse were more adequately immunized than students whose parents only received a flyer with information (Maughan).
- A study of secondary school nurses' targeted education efforts for students with chronic tension headaches and depression led to positive changes in the severity and frequency of the chronic conditions (Maughan).
- Schools that offer intense physical activity programs see positive effects on academic achievement, including increased concentration; improved mathematics, reading and writing tests scores; and reduced disruptive behavior, even when time for physical education reduces the time for academics (Symons).
- One study found that in school districts with smaller nurse-to-student ratios, there were fewer violent deaths among teens, fewer teen births, and increased high school graduation rates (Maughan).
- A study of two middle schools in Florida which had adopted the Florida Department of Education's Coordinated School Health Program to promote student health and academic achievement reported that the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) math scores improved by an average of 11.5 points and their FCAT reading scores by an average of 15 points. Student attendance also increased at each school (National Governors Association).
- Schools with the highest percentage of students who engage in any physical activity have the highest API scores. API scores go up as physical activity goes up (California Dept. of Education).
- An overall review of 15 studies found that school nurses do have an impact on school performance including reducing absenteeism through the management of chronic diseases as well as through health instruction (Maughan).

- A 1996 study found the availability of school health programs has an important influence on student health status and academic success (Stock).
- A literature review of outcomes of school nursing interventions documented positive results including increased student knowledge of health concepts and sexuality issues; decreased student smoking rate; increased early identification of students with eating disorders; improved student management of asthma; increased immunization rates; increased student physical activity; decreased inappropriate visits to school nurse; improved hygiene; improved student self-esteem; and increased knowledge of tobacco smoke hazards (Stock).
- A survey of school health leaders, including school nurses, identified key positive outcomes of school nursing services including: physically & emotionally healthy children; health care of children with chronic conditions is managed; school environment is nurturing and healthy; decreased visits to hospital emergency rooms; decreased accidents in schools; decrease in tobacco use; obesity reduction; decrease in HIV infection; decrease in teen pregnancy; readiness to learn; improved attendance; and academic success (Stock).
- A 3,000 student high poverty school district in Mississippi implemented a coordinated health program including health and wellness centers in each of the district's five schools; hiring full-time registered nurses, full-time mental health counselors and social workers; focusing on health education; offering more nutritious choices in school meals; banning junk food; requiring physical activity for all students. The School District reports that the number of 2nd grade students reading at grade level went from 11% to 82% in 4 years with the school health initiatives. They also experienced reduced dropout rates; a 10% increase in graduation rates; and reduced suspensions and disciplinary actions (Satcher).

F. CONCLUSIONS

Researchers note that it is difficult to definitively link school nursing interventions to educational outcomes due to the difficulties of conducting such research and the impacts of other variables. There is a need for increased levels of data collection and analysis on the outcomes of school nursing and comprehensive school health initiatives. However, anecdotal data clearly illustrates the multitude of positive impacts of school nursing and other school health programs.

Schools and school districts have a clear legal responsibility to attend to the health and safety of students under their care. It has been suggested that in addition to the improved performance of healthier students who attend school regularly, schools/districts may realize financial benefits due to a decreased level of absenteeism and therefore, a higher level of Average Daily Attendance (ADA) revenue as a result of investments made in school health initiatives. Similarly, attention to staff wellness may result in reduced expenditures for substitute teachers or other staff replacements.

A former Surgeon General of the United States notes, "Building a coordinated school health program is a long-term process, but it pays off with both measurable and immeasurable results. Districts should keep in mind that not all coordinated health programs look exactly alike. The unique needs of individual districts should be considered, and programs should be developed based on community needs and available resources. But what should remain the same, however, is a strong commitment to making both our children and our schools healthy. A comprehensive approach to child and adolescent health can assure that no child will be left behind as school districts developed coordinated health policies with the goal of improving student performance. Health does equal achievement" (Satcher).

RESOURCES

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APPENDIX A: Credentialed School Nursing: Roles and Responsibilities

Preparation/Education Requirements

A Credentialed School Nurse must complete the Health Services Credential in addition to a Bachelor of Nursing Degree. This is a higher level of education than that for the hospital, clinic or public health nurse positions. The Credentialed School Nurse falls slightly below the Master Degree level of education preparation, such as the Nurse Practitioner, although many programs are now moving to a Master’s degree. As School Based Health Services are expanding nationally, Nurse Practitioners are increasingly being used for their services within the school settings.

Roles & Responsibilities of Credentialed School Nurse	Preparation Credentialed School Nurse	Preparation Registered Nurse
<p>Health Assessment of Students:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Special Education Students • Learning Difficulty • Poor Attendance • Emotional & Behavior Concern • Drug & Alcohol Abuse • Injured or Ill Student & Staff • Pregnancy, Sexually Active 	<p>Preparation includes all areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comprehensive Health Assessment Skills • Neurological Assessment for Special Education • Educational Assessment Tools • Communicable Disease Training • Child Abuse Training 	<p>Preparation includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health Assessment Skills • Child Abuse Legal Information
<p>Case Management Health Needs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interpretation Findings • Determine Plan of Care • Monitor Treatment, Progress • In-service Involved Staff • Train & Supervise Procedures • Administer Treatments • Facilitate Services • Communication with Physician & Parents • Reduce Barriers to Health Care 	<p>Preparation includes all areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Case Management Skills • Nursing Diagnosis & Care Plan • Health Education • Communication • Education Code Requirements for Specialized Health Care Needs • Community Health • Family Structure & Function • Nursing & Community Health Theory 	<p>Preparation includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nursing Diagnosis • Nursing Care Plan • Communication
<p>Health Counseling:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crisis Intervention • Teen Sexuality Counseling • Drug and Alcohol Addiction • Emotional and Mental Health Assessment • Coping Skills Assessments • Resiliency Promotion 	<p>Preparation includes all areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comprehensive Mental Health • Child Growth and Development • Communication Skills • Crisis Intervention • Contracting • Community Resources • Teen Sexuality Legal and Developmental Information 	<p>Preparation includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication Skills • Basic Child Growth and Development • Crisis Management

Roles & Responsibilities of Credentialed School Nurse cont'd	Preparation Credentialed School Nurse cont'd	Preparation Registered Nurse cont'd
<p>Health Education:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resource for School Staff • Interpret Medical Information • Client Education • Specialized Procedures • Health Curricula Implementation • School Safety Planning • Classroom Instruction 	<p>Preparation includes all areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health Education • Teaching Strategies • Educational Plans • Nursing Diagnosis and Procedures • Crisis Response Planning • Classroom Management • Community Health Education 	<p>Preparation includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nursing Diagnosis & Procedures • Patient Teaching
<p>Health Screenings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Audiometry • Visual Acuity • Scoliosis • Neurological & Developmental • Dental 	<p>Preparation includes all areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Audiometrist Credential • Required State Screening & Referral Procedures • Medi-Cal Billing Procedures 	<p>No preparation in these specific screening procedures</p>
<p>Prevent and Control Communicable Diseases:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Immunizations • Communicable Disease Exclusions and Case Management • Client, Community and Staff Education 	<p>Preparation includes all areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community Health • Reporting Laws and Procedures • Health Education 	<p>Preparation includes basic disease information</p>
<p>Source: California Department of Education ~ California School Nurses Organization</p>		