Support Your School Nurse

School nursing has existed in the United States for more than 100 years, but the scope and definition of the nurse’s role has changed greatly. Today, the school nurse plays a key role in supporting school attendance and learning by children with disabilities, chronic medical conditions, and complex mental health issues, as well as those affected emotionally and physically by changes in family structures, health care, or economic stresses. Many schools recognize this role in budgeting for school nurses in their buildings. In addition, federal regulations mandate that schools provide nursing services for qualified students with special needs. However, having a health professional in an educational setting can be a managerial challenge for principals. How do you supervise a staff member whose discipline is outside of your expertise? How can you provide professional support?

Here are some specific ways principals can build a positive professional relationship with school nurses:

**Acknowledge nurses as professionals.** "Nurse" is their appropriate job title—not “health aide” or “health clerk.” Nurses are professionals who are usually required to hold an RN and bachelor’s degree, and must participate in continuing education to maintain nursing licensure. In addition, many states require specialized school nurse certification. Listing the school nurse with other professional staff in your school directory, rather than with office staff, indicates to parents that their children are receiving professional care.

**Ensure adequate staffing ratios.** The National Association of School Nurses recommends at least one full-time school nurse per building and no more than 750 regular education students per nurse. Special education students usually require more intensive nursing services.

**Utilize their health expertise.** When developing health, safety, wellness, nutrition, or crisis management policies, seek your nurse's input. When interviewing a new nurse, include a current nurse on the interview and hiring committees.

**Use nurses only for nursing.** Do not assign your school nurse to bus duty, lunch counts, or attendance phone calls. Unlike teachers, nurses do not have scheduled blocks of uninterrupted time or planning periods. Even if not actively working with students, there is always follow-up work and medically related paperwork to tend to.

**Encourage nurses to attend team meetings.** This includes special education, faculty, and other staff meetings. Nurses need to be aware and informed of what is going on in the school in order to best serve the students.

**Allow your nurses to team with other district nurses.** It is challenging to function as the only health professional in a school building. The support and information of other nurses is crucial. Arrange for your nurse to attend district nursing department meetings. Doing this also creates consistent health services across the district.

**Provide adequate workspace.** At the very minimum, the nurse’s office should be equipped with a handicapped-accessible bathroom, a sink with hot and cold water, a small refrigerator with a freezer, a phone with an outside line, cots, a desk, a computer, and a quiet, enclosed area for health screenings or confidential conversations.

**Pay your nurse as you would a teacher.** Nurses require the same level of education as teachers and have additional credentials as well. Their salaries should also reflect nursing experience in other settings.

**Keep communication channels open.** Observe nurses and provide them with feedback just as you would for teachers. If you are not sure how to address nursing concerns, work together with your nurse. Your priorities are the same—to support and encourage the educational process while meeting the needs of students and their families in every way possible.

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