The Role of the School Nurse

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Part I: A Philosophy of School Nursing

School nursing is a dynamic and multi-faceted role. It is a science, which requires a broad knowledge base, excellent assessment skills, and an evidence-based approach. It is also an art that requires exceptional interpersonal skills, resourcefulness, and a caring spirit. An effective school nurse must demonstrate skill in both the art and the science of nursing, while providing multiple levels of care to a diverse population. By providing high level nursing care within the school setting, the school nurse helps to improve the quality of health not only for the students he/she serves, but for the community as a whole. Good introduction

The School Nurse's Toolkit

The school nurse functions as an independent, advanced practice professional within the school setting. In order to be effective in this role, the school nurse requires specialized training in the form of a health services credential and master's level education. This advanced education provides him/her with the unique skills required to perform school-based health assessments and screenings and develop and implement plans of care appropriate to the school setting. It gives the nurse the background to understand and apply research-supported, evidence-based principles to his/her practice. It also prepares the school nurse to assume a leadership role and to hone vital critical thinking and decision-making skills. As a community-based practitioner, the school nurse should also have a working knowledge of public health principles and practices.

In addition to specialized education, the school nurse must possess a host of attributes and qualities to be successful and effective in his/her practice. He/she must possess a high level of cultural competency and demonstrate respect for differences in
cultural beliefs and values, religious practices, and health-related practices of all students and families. The nurse must be an effective communicator and be able to form collaborative relationships with students, families, staff, and community members. He/she should act as an advocate for student and community health. He/she should utilize resources effectively, efficiently, and creatively to meet the needs of a diverse population. Most importantly, the school nurse should employ a caring and compassionate approach in all areas of practice.

**Multiple Levels of Care**

As a public health role, the scope of school nursing practice extends beyond the treatment of illness and injury. The school nurse's practice should be aimed at facilitating the promotion, protection, and improvement of the overall health and well-being of individual students and the school community that he/she serves. This requires implementation of interventions at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels of healthcare and disease prevention.

**Primary prevention.**

As a healthcare provider working in a setting primarily comprised of healthy individuals, the school nurse has a tremendous opportunity to implement primary prevention strategies to promote optimum health and prevent disease. The three key elements of health promotion in the school setting are health education, healthcare access, and immunization. The school nurse should provide health education to individual students, staff and families; provide classroom instruction; and be involved in designing and implementing a developmentally appropriate health curriculum. The school nurse also promotes health by providing access to care--assisting families to obtain health
insurance for well-child visits and regular dental care. Additionally, he/she should promote health and wellness for students and the community at large by monitoring students' immunization status, and maintaining immunization records.

**Secondary prevention.**

The focus of secondary prevention is in identifying potential health issues and providing early and appropriate intervention. The primary services the school nurse provides in this area are mandated screenings for vision, hearing, and scoliosis. In addition to these mandated screenings, the nurse should be regularly assessing and implementing interventions for other serious health factors that could negatively impact education; such as mental health issues, obesity, and bullying.

**Tertiary prevention.**

The focus of tertiary prevention is in minimizing the effect of disease or injury once it has occurred. In the school setting, this takes the form of direct care services by the nurse, as well as his/her role in monitoring the ongoing needs of students participating in special education. It includes providing first aid, assessment, and/or emergency care for injuries sustained at school. It also includes administering medication or physician prescribed treatments at school and monitoring and providing care for students with chronic health conditions. As the only licensed healthcare provider in the school setting, the school nurse is uniquely qualified to assess these students' needs, communicate with other healthcare providers to develop individualized healthcare plans, and monitor the effectiveness of treatment.
Relationship Between School Nursing and the Community

The school nurse should be mindful that the students and school communities that he/she serves do not exist in a vacuum, but as part of a larger whole. They are subject to and influenced by both external environmental factors and the influence of their surrounding community. In assessing the health needs of students, the nurse should take into consideration environmental and community factors that could have a significant impact on student health. In order to maximize his/her effectiveness in providing access to care, the nurse should develop relationships with other healthcare providers and organizations within the community and be aware of available community resources. The school nurse must be aware of the politics, cultural diversity, socioeconomic factors, strengths, and challenges present within the community and how they impact the overall health and well-being of students. The nurse should also recognize that the interventions he/she implements to improve the health of students (particularly those aimed at primary and secondary prevention) impact the health of the entire community.

Part II: Existing School Nurse Role

School nurses have the potential to provide tremendous benefit to the students and communities they serve yes!. This potential is being realized by nurses who prioritize relationship-building and collaboration with other community agencies to improve student health. School nurses are also highly involved with special education to ensure that the healthcare needs of this vulnerable and growing population are met at school. The ability of the school nurse to provide safe and efficacious care, however, is impacted by factors such as nurse-to-student ratios and the subsequent delegation of nursing tasks to unlicensed school personnel. These are issues that each school nurse must address
within his/her own individual practice and as a member of the collective practice of school nursing. \textit{Good point}

\textbf{School Nurses Making Connections}

Recent studies have shown how school nurses are maximizing health outcomes for students and communities by addressing health concerns specific to their school communities and acting as a bridge to connect students and schools with community resources. Beginning in 1998, school nurses in the ethnically diverse and financially distressed urban community of Yonkers, New York participated in a collaborative pilot program targeting students with asthma (Byrne, Schreiber, and Nguyen, 2006). The nurses partnered with a local hospital, public health department, and community stakeholders to reduce the frequency of emergency room visits and students being sent home from school due to asthma symptoms by providing nebulizer treatments at school. Besides the obvious health and educational benefits to the students receiving treatments at school, the program has benefited the larger community through reduced healthcare costs.

A program in Vermont involved collaboration between the local health department, physicians, and school nurses to provide education to students and schools about asthma management and increase communication between physicians and school nurses. (Frankowski et al., 2006). The program resulted in a 44\% increase in the number of students with current asthma action plans at school. There was also an observed increase in utilization of available community resources by the school nurses and awareness amongst physicians about the necessity for asthma action plans at school.

\textit{Good use of reference to make your point}
The School Nurse's Role in Special Education

The number of children with developmental disabilities who are attending school has increased dramatically over recent years due to medical advances, increased preterm birth rates, and the rising rate of children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (Dang, 2010). The school nurse's role in providing assessment, planning, and interventions for students in special education has expanded to meet the needs of this growing population. School nurses act as a resource for school staff by providing information about medical conditions and realistic expectations for students' abilities. They advocate for students with special needs to ensure that these students are included, and that their physical and educational needs are met (Bigby, 2004).

Nurse-to-Student Ratios

Many school nurses working within the community and in the special education population currently face dismal nurse-to-student ratios. The National Association of School Nurses recommends a minimum ratio of 1 school nurse per 750 general population students, with reduced ratios for students with special health needs, and a full-time registered nurse in every school building (NASN, 2006). Unfortunately, according to a nationwide study conducted by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) only 40.6% of schools met or exceeded the 1:750 RN-to-student ratio recommended by NASN (Brener, Wheeler, Wolfe, Vernon-Smiley, and Caldart-Olson, 2007). The study did not take into consideration the number of students requiring specialized nursing care, or those who had chronic health conditions or received special education services.
Nurse-to-student ratios and itinerant status have a direct impact on the level and type of care the school nurse is able to provide. A study from North Carolina, in which nurse-to-student ratios range from 1:451 to 1:7440, found that nurses in schools with lower ratios were more effective in addressing a variety of health issues. These nurses were able to provide more care to students with chronic conditions, counseling services, and better follow-up for mandated screenings (Gutu, Engelke, Swanson, 2004).

School nurses can work toward protecting and improving nurse-to-student ratios by increasing their visibility within the school and larger community, actively participating in the lobbying efforts of NASN around this issue, and enlisting the support of parents in the community. A study by Kirchofer, Teljohan, Price, Dake, and Ritchie (2007) indicates that parents of elementary students not only perceive the school nurse’s role as being important, but that they would actually be willing to pay additional taxes to have a full-time school nurse present in their child’s school.

**Delegation to Non-Medical School Personnel**

The fact that so few schools currently have a full-time nurse on-site necessitates that certain nursing tasks be delegated to non-medical, unlicensed personnel. The CDC study determined that 66.4% of schools allowed non-medical school personnel to administer medication to students under the delegation of a school nurse or physician (Brener et al., 2007). This raises concerns for school nurses about adequate supervision and training of unlicensed personnel. According to McCarthy and Kelly (2000) the rate of medication errors is 3.1 times greater for non-nurses than nurses. The same study reported that the time provided for training school personnel in medication administration was typically less than two hours. As delegation is an integral part of the itinerant school
nurse’s practice, it is essential that school nurses assess the appropriateness of delegating specific tasks, provide proper training, and monitor competency of non-nursing personnel. The issue of delegation can also be addressed through policy development. Johnson and Hayes (2006) point out the importance of policies in helping to establish standards of practice, especially in regards to the supervision and training of unlicensed personnel in districts with limited nursing resources. Addressing these issues is an important aspect of the school nurse's leadership role.

**Part III: Philosophy In Action**

School nurses are uniquely qualified to assess health concerns specific to the populations they serve, develop a plan of action to addresses those needs, and collaborate with other professionals within the school and outside community to ensure those needs are met. One health issue of particular concern in the Roseville City School District is the large number of students diagnosed with life-threatening food allergies. A recent informal review of the student database revealed that there are currently over 120 students who have been prescribed epinephrine auto-injectors by their primary healthcare provider, the majority of these are for severe food allergies. As a school nurse serving this population, I recognize food allergies as a very serious, potentially fatal health issue. I also understand that my role is to ensure the safety of these students by researching best practice standards for the prevention and treatment of severe allergic reactions, working with administrators to develop policies based on best practice, educating staff, students and families about managing food allergies, and enlisting the support of healthcare providers and community organizations to address this issue. I will be developing and implementing a comprehensive, evidence-based plan for dealing with severe food
allergies which will address interventions at all three levels of disease prevention:

- primary prevention of allergic reaction (through education about allergen avoidance),
- secondary prevention (through early detection and treatment of symptoms), and
- tertiary prevention (through emergency preparedness training).

**Part IV: Projections for Future Directions in School Nursing Practice**

School nurses, by the very nature of their role, are independent practitioners. They work diligently within their schools and communities to ensure the health and safety of students. However, in order to advance their profession and maintain a high standard of care for their students, school nurses will need to look beyond their individual practice settings and focus on research and leadership roles.

School nurses make a difference in the lives of their students and communities by providing quality care in the school setting, linking families with community resources, and advocating for the healthcare and special education needs of students. Though most school nurses and school communities know this to be true, there is, unfortunately, a dearth of research specific to school nursing and its impact on student achievement, academic outcomes, and improved school and community health. It is imperative that school nurses initiate and participate in research, not only to demonstrate the positive impact of quality school nursing, but also to explore ways of improving school nursing practice. This is particularly true in relation to the school nurse's role in meeting the needs of our most vulnerable student populations including those with physical and developmental disabilities, chronic health conditions, students who are medically fragile, and those living in poverty.
During the current times of recession and educational cutbacks, school nurses must assume leadership roles within their school communities and beyond. They must maintain a strong presence in the political arena, through their professional organizations and relationships with their local administrators. They must advocate for policies that protect the safety of students and promote the health of the community. They must build partnerships with community-based organizations to assist students and families in need of financial, health, and personal resources.

In recent years, the profession of school nursing has become increasingly more complex and dynamic. The higher acuity of student needs, greater nurse-to-student ratios, and difficult economic times have presented school nurses with a host of challenges in meeting the needs of students. By assuming leadership roles and building a body of research to support the relationship between quality school nursing care and positive student outcomes, school nurses can make an even greater difference in the lives of their students and their communities.
References **good, but be sure to use DOI numbers for all references**


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