

PUBLIC HEALTH AND SCHOOL NURSING: COLLABORATING TO PROMOTE HEALTH

Public health agencies provide the 10 essential services of public health within the three core functions of assessment, policy development, and assurance in order to protect and promote health and well-being for all people in the community.¹ School nurses are public health's eyes and ears for the nation's children and families. Their position within schools and their understanding of the social environment that surrounds the school offers a point of access for care that can extend the reach of public health. School nurses are responsible for both individual student care and for promoting the health and well-being of the broader school community. Their role includes conducting health surveillance and public health reporting, preventing and managing infectious and chronic diseases, promoting healthy behaviors, helping students and families access healthcare resources, and addressing the social determinants of health and health disparities. Collaboration between school nursing and public health is critical to best utilize health dollars and achieve success in attaining population health goals.

The healthcare system is undergoing a remarkable transformation with increased focus on community-based coordinated care and use of technology to improve communication to achieve better population health outcomes with fewer healthcare dollars. Transformations within the education system are focused on the link between the health of the student, family, and academic success. Collaboration between school nursing and public health can help meet the emerging challenges within the healthcare and education sectors in several ways. As overseers of population health, state level public health stakeholders can advocate for school health services and provide school nurse consultant services. At the local level, providers in public health and school settings can strategically collaborate to increase their communities' capacity to address the root causes of illness by implementing broad social, cultural, and economic reforms that address social determinants of health to improve overall population health. This collaboration can benefit the entire healthcare system

by leading to seamless care, reducing duplicative services, and lowering healthcare costs.

The following examples provide reality-based scenarios that describe different ways school nurses and public health are currently working together to promote the health, well-being, and academic success of the school community.

Disease Surveillance

Disease surveillance is a central public health strategy for monitoring communicable disease transmission within a population. School nurses help expand public health nurses' efforts by conducting disease surveillance in the school community and using their trusted position within the school community to efficiently communicate timely health information with the broader community.

During the spring of 2015, a tuberculosis outbreak in Kansas required increased collaboration between school and public health nurses. It began when the county health department was notified of an active tuberculosis case involving a high school student. Public health and school nurses in the area worked together to expand disease surveillance in the school, pool personnel to conduct tuberculosis testing, and field questions from the public. Using messaging from the health department, school nurses could easily communicate with families because of established relationships and communication channels.

Disease Prevention

In addition to reducing morbidity and mortality, school nurses help maximize public health resources by working with families to identify at-risk students and prevent the spread of communicable disease.

A school nurse in California works closely with the county public health department to administer immunizations and conduct tuberculosis skin tests, vision and hearing testing, and physical exams for incoming students. She hosts meetings during school registration time to teach parents and guardians and then organizes immunization clinics. As a result of these efforts, her schools have very high vaccine uptake for both required and recommended vaccines.

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Social Determinants of Health

School nurses assess the social and environmental determinants that influence student health and address these as part of their plan of care. When school nurses partner with public health agencies, cities and states can more efficiently use resources to address student and family social determinants of health.

The Bureau of Indian Education grant school in New Mexico serves students from the state's 19 American Indian pueblos and from more than 20 other tribal nations throughout the United States. These students often experience significant health disparities; access to health insurance and equitable care is a vital issue for this population. During school registration, the school nurse arranges for representatives from the nearby Indian Health Service (IHS) hospital to present information about Medicaid to families and help with student enrollment. While the school health center serves as the students' medical home and does not charge for any provided health services, students registered at the IHS hospital are able to utilize Medicaid coverage for additional health services such as X-rays, laboratory tests, physical therapy, prenatal care, and contraceptive implants.

Health Policy

School nurses promote a healthy school and community environment by developing and implementing new and already existing policies and best practices. Connecting policy development with public health promotes strategy coordination and measurable system outcomes.

In New Mexico, school health advocate public health nurses work directly with school nurses and school districts on their wellness policies and school health advisory councils and help develop best practices and policies for managing chronic health conditions such as asthma and allergies. The school health advocates also coordinate the School Kids Influenza Immunization Project in their regions of the state and help school nurses administer influenza vaccine to students.

Health Promotion and Wellness

School nurses provide health education to students, school staff, and families on a number of topics that promote health and wellness. Public health agencies can partner with school nurses to coordinate health promotion educational initiatives to ensure that these efforts and resources are not duplicated.

In one Utah county, school nurses who are employed by the local health department provide health education on multiple health promotion topics in the classroom (e.g., dental hygiene, physical activity, stress and relaxation, and nutrition). The nurses use health department resources such as puppet shows about nutrition and exercise to depict healthy behaviors that empower students to teach healthy habits to their families. They also coordinate with other health department efforts so as not to duplicate services in the schools.

Collaboration Between Public Health and School Nursing

State level public health agencies can advocate for school health services and provide school nurse consultant services; and at the local level, nurses in public health and school settings can strategically collaborate to increase their communities' capacity to address population health. Collaboration between public health and school nursing will further both school and public health's mission to assess populations, develop policies, and assure that populations (e.g., school communities) reach their optimal health.

¹CDC. "National Public Health Performance Standards." Available at <http://www.cdc.gov/nphpsp/index.html>. Accessed 4-4-2015.