

School Nurse Workload: Staffing for Safe Care

Position Statement

NASN POSITION

It is the position of the National Association of School Nurses (NASN) that access to a registered professional nurse (hereinafter referred to as a school nurse) all day, every day can improve students' health, safety, and educational achievement. Student acuity and school community indicators should be assessed to determine appropriate staffing levels. Access to a school nurse may mean that more than one school nurse is necessary to meet the needs of the school population. School nurse workloads should be evaluated on at least an annual basis to meet the health and safety needs of school communities (Jameson et al., 2018).

BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

Since 1902, school nurses have contributed to individual and population health, in ever-expanding ways (Rogers, 1903/2014). Laws implemented in the 1970s established the rights for all students, even those with significant health needs, to attend public school, and led to recommendations for school nurse-to-student ratios. These laws included the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Section 504 (1973), and Public Law 94-142, the Education for all Handicapped Children Act (1975), reauthorized in 2004 as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA). Changes in these laws increased the role and responsibilities of the school nurse.

Appropriate staffing is necessary in order to provide safe care and ensure quality outcomes, and is accomplished through understanding and considering the complexities of the role of the nurse and the care that is provided (American Nurses Association [ANA], 2020). Using ratio of nurse to student alone is not evidence-based or appropriate. Other factors that should be considered include:

- Safety, medical acuity, and health needs of a student;
- Characteristics and considerations of student or population including individual social needs as well as the infrastructure that creates inequities in social determinants of health;
- Characteristics and considerations of the school nurse and other interprofessional team members; and
- Context and culture of the school or school district that influences nursing services delivered (Jameson et al., 2018).

Evaluation of staffing plans, overall costs, effectiveness, and resources expended also influences staffing decisions. Safe and appropriate staffing has an impact on population and community health outcomes, enriching the patient experience of care, reducing health care costs, and enhancing the work life of the healthcare provider (American Association of Critical-Care Nurses [AACN], 2016; Bodenheimer & Sinsky, 2014). Consistent with the research in acute care settings (Aiken et al., 2017; Brooks Carthon et al., 2019; Kelly & Todd, 2017; AACN, 2016), multiple studies suggest that appropriate school nurse staffing

has an impact on the health and academic outcomes of the students and the school community and contributes to reduced health care costs and a healthier population (Arimas-Macalino et al., 2019; Best et al., 2017; Daughtry & Engelke, 2017; Gormley, 2018; Hill & Hollis, 2012; Jacobsen et al., 2016; Nikpour & Hassmiller, 2017; Wang et al., 2014).

Little data exists on validated tools to determine school nurse staffing. Current best practice for staffing involves analyzing complex factors including number of students, social determinants, acuity levels, other responsibilities, barriers to care, current use of technology, and health care to adequately meet the health and safety needs of the children whose care is entrusted to schools (Jameson et al., 2018). Such a structure helps detail a 21st-century context for nurse staffing that recognizes the individual contribution and added value of each individual nurse as a provider of care (ANA, 2020). NASN recommends ongoing research to develop evidence-based health assessment and other tools that consider multiple factors for the development of staffing and workload models.

The school nurse provides the critical link to address gaps in healthcare by serving students and the school community as the health expert. School nurses can navigate and address socio-economic issues, physical health needs and health behavior factors; respond to student and community needs; and work as advocates and change agents.

NASN believes that school nursing services must be determined at levels sufficient to provide the range of health care necessary to meet the needs of school populations. NASN recommends continuing research developing evidence-based tools using a multifactorial health assessment approach for evaluating factors that influence student health and safety and developing staffing and workload models that support this evidence. All students need access to a school nurse every day. In addition to the number of students covered, staffing for school nursing coverage must include acuity, social needs of students, community/school infrastructure, and characteristics of nursing staff.

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“To optimize student health, safety and learning, it is the position of the National Association of School Nurses that a professional registered school nurse is present in every school all day, every day.”

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