

Mythbuster: Demystifying School Nursing

By Deborah Zeller, MSN, RN, NCSN, National Certified School Nurse & Immediate Past President of the Virginia Association of School Nurses

School nursing is a specialty that has been evolving since nurses began working in schools in the 1800's. At the time, their main job was to identify illnesses, quarantine those with communicable diseases, and reduce truancy.

School nursing has advanced since its early days and now has a much broader definition as “the specialized practice of professional school nursing that advances the well-being, academic success, and lifelong achievement and health of students. To that end, school nurses facilitate normal development and positive student response to interventions; promote health and safety including a healthy environment; intervene with actual and potential health problems; provide case management services; and actively collaborate with others to build student and family capacity for adaptation, self-management, self-advocacy, and learning” (NASN, 2011).

Regardless of the accomplishments of individual school nurses and strides made within the profession, school nursing continues to be plagued by myths.

Myth: We really don't need school nurses. Kids should stay home from school if they are sick.

Reality: It is estimated that more than three quarter of school aged children (45 million) missed at least one school day in the past 12 months due to illness or injury. About 5% of school-aged children missed 11 or more days of school due to illness or injury in this same time period (NCHS, 2011). Research shows that absenteeism contributes to lower graduation rates. The school nurse makes supports student attendance and academic success by providing health care through assessment, intervention and follow-up for all children within the school setting.

A student's health status is directly related to the ability to learn. Healthy children are successful learners; children with unmet health needs have a difficult time engaging in the educational process. Today, more than 25% of children and adolescents have chronic health conditions that may impact the student's ability to be in school and ready to learn. Students come to school with increasingly complex medical problems, technically intricate medical equipment, and complicated treatments. The school nurse addresses the physical, mental, emotional, and social health needs of students and supports their achievement in the learning process. The school nurse provides for the safety and care of students and integrates health solutions into the educational environment. The school nurse is a vital member of the academic team who leads change to advance health, thus keep students safe at school and healthy, and ready to learn.

Myth: School nursing is easy – anyone can do it.

Reality: School nursing is a challenging, fast-paced and demanding job. On any given day, between 5 to 10% of the school's population may visit the health office for school nursing care. School nurses perform their duties with very limited medical resources that are available to nurses in traditional health care settings. Generally, school nurses function as the sole health care professional in their building and must function with little consultative support from peers.

In Virginia, licensed RNs and LPNs may provide health care in schools. Their roles vary in terms of scope of practice and years of educational preparation. The professional school RN s plans, implements, monitors, and coordinates care delivered by members of the school health team, and is supported by LPNs and unlicensed assistive personnel. School nurses are skilled health care providers who work independently as well as collaboratively within the education and health care teams. School nurses apply a broad knowledge of public health, pediatrics, behavioral health, occupational health, school law, and policy into practice. This specialty requires strong skills in critical thinking, problem solving, creativity, adaptability, resourcefulness, leadership, and case management. School nurses translate specialized knowledge into health promotion and intervention strategies in both the

student health office and the classroom. They also provide health counseling and emotional support to their clients. School nurses ensure that children are safe, healthy, and in school learning.

Myth: A school nurse is not a real nurse like those working in hospitals.

Reality: According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 20% of nurses are employed outside of hospitals and medical care facilities. School nurses have completed a rigorous credentialing process to become licensed and nationally certified. School nurses practice in public, private, alternative, early childhood, vocational, tribal and charter schools. Their primary responsibility is to provide multi-faceted nursing care that supports the physical, mental, emotional, and social health of students. School nurses serve as trusted health care experts within their communities and are a valued resource for students as well as parents, teachers, administrators and community leaders. Serving as a school nurse provides the opportunity to serve the individual student as well as the broader community as a care coordinator, health care advocate, and consultant. School nurses practice real nursing in a unique non-medical setting.

Myth: There is a shortage of school nurses to adequately fill school nurse positions.

Reality: The problem for schools is the shortage of adequately funded positions for school nurses. Funding for school nurse positions is a local educational agency decision. Virginia's instructional standards require staffing ratios for teachers, resource teachers, counselors, librarians, clerical personnel, and administrators. However, there is no required nurse staffing to student ratio. Depending on the school's model of service delivery and funding pattern, a school nurse may be assigned to one school, travel between assigned schools, or serve as a nurse supervisor to health assistants who are assigned to school buildings. The nurse may be on duty full or part time. Virginia's average school RN to student ratio is 1:900. The National Association of School Nurses recommends a ratio of 1 full time RN to 750 well students. A school nurse in every school building all day, every day, allows teachers to teach and enables students to be healthy, safe, and in school, ready to learn. Every child deserves a school nurse.

Do You Want to Be a School Nurse?

School nursing has the benefits of regular school hours, weekends off, and vacation over the summer. If you think that school nursing may be for you, learn more about it by talking to a school nurse. Contact the Virginia Association of School Nurses at www.VASN.US for more information. It is an exciting and rewarding career path that is filled with meaningful impact and life-enriching experiences.

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