School Nurses Are Important to Alaska’s Children

School nurses have been caring for students in Alaska since territorial days. Today, Alaska’s 240 school nurses play an integral role in the academic success of Alaska’s children, forming an essential link between health, attendance, and graduation.

School Nurses serve in an environment of complex health care needs

- 48% Economically disadvantaged (Anchorage School District, ASD, 2013)
- 33% Obese or overweight (Healthy Alaskans 2020, grades K-8)
- 14% Special health care needs (National Survey of Children with Special Health Care Needs, 2009/10)
- 12% Asthma (ASD, 2013)
- 12% Depression/Mental health diagnosis (ASD, 2013)
- 4-6% Food allergies (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013; national data)

School nurses have a central role in providing health services to Alaska’s children

- Provide acute, chronic and emergency care for illness & injury
- Prevent, monitor and control spread of communicable disease and other health problems
- Screen for health problems that may interfere with educational achievement
- Facilitate access and referral to primary health care services
- Improve attendance, and therefore academic achievement and graduation rates, by providing assessment, care and case management services
- Promote optimum conditions for safe school facility and school environment
- Provide education and counseling for a variety of health and wellness topics
- Serve as a medical resource in the development of policies and procedures in the school

“A growing body of research indicates that school nurses – when present every day – advance the twin goals of improving health and educational outcomes.... When Milwaukee Public Schools placed additional RNs in schools...impressive gains were made in immunization rates, identification of asthma and life-threatening conditions, the number of vision screenings, and educational time restored to teachers and others who previously handled health issues. Before nurses were hired, other school staff reported spending an average of 13 hours a day per school on health concerns.”

-Charting Nursing's Future, Reports on Policies That Can Transform Patient Care, 2010

School nurses save lives

Without school nurses, the responsibility to make necessary assessments, administer medications and treatments, and appropriately monitor complex student health conditions rests on the shoulders of staff who are ill-prepared to respond. **Depression, asthma, and food allergies are potentially life-threatening conditions whose symptoms can be difficult to recognize without nursing knowledge and training.** A nurse is prepared to complete a suicide-risk-assessment for a student who has expressed “no one cares about me”, to evaluate airflow and airway obstruction for a student who reports “my chest feels tight”, and to discern early signs and symptoms of anaphylaxis from minor allergic reactions for a student who reports an “itchy mouth.” These are serious judgment calls, where in-depth knowledge and training matters. This is a school nurse’s area of expertise.
School nurses are crucial to children’s mental health

Every day school nurses give care for mental health needs: prevention services, early identification, early referral, surveillance, medication management (administering and monitoring for effectiveness and side-effects), and counseling for students with emotional, behavioral, mental health or developmental concerns. In a national survey, school nurses reported spending approximately one-third of their time providing mental health services. When students are experiencing a stressful situation they often turn to the school nurse, a trusted adult whom they know and who has given them care in the past. School nurses play an important role in identifying students with depression who may become suicidal and helping them obtain needed services in a timely fashion.

“A school nurse is the only consistent contact that millions of children have with a health care professional, yet half of the nation’s schools lack a full-time registered nurse. We need to make sure that all children have access to a nurse in their schools.”
- U.S. Senator Olympia Snowe, Maine

Diminishing Funding and Gaps in School Health Services Place Alaska’s Children at Greater Risk

First, it is estimated that at least twenty percent of Alaska school children do NOT have a school nurse to provide health services in their schools. At least another ten percent have less than the absolute minimum level of services as recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), the National Association of School Nurses (NASN) and Healthy People 2020. Only 18.2% of secondary schools in Alaska have a full-time registered nurse, compared to 43.9% nation-wide. (2012 CDC School Profiles Survey for Alaska)

Second, some school districts have reduced school nurse staffing in response to budget cuts by decreasing the number of school nurses and/or hiring non-licensed staff to replace the nurse. This is a serious concern that affects the health and safety of Alaska’s school children. AAP supports having a full time nurse in every school. This is echoed by the NASN, which further states that at minimum, a needs-based formula approach for determining full-time school nurse-to-students ratio should be used; for example, one nurse for 750 well students, and lower ratios for student populations with greater health needs. Current information suggests that in those districts that do provide school nurse services, there is wide variation in school nurse staffing, ranging from approximately 1 nurse to 300 students to 1 nurse to over 2000 students.

“We know that students have to be healthy to learn. School nurses play a vital role in making sure children are healthy and ready to learn.”
- Arne Duncan, Secretary, U.S. Department of Education

“Underfunding in many localities may have long-term consequences. According to the Centers for Disease Control, chronic conditions consumed 75 cents of every health care dollar spent in the United States in 2005. When school nurses identify and manage these conditions, they stave off future health problems and help reduce overall health care spending.”
-Charting Nursing’s Future, Reports on Policies That Can Transform Patient Care, 2010