Talking Points: Advocacy for School Nurse Ratios and Requirements

Subject

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the academic success of America’s youth is strongly linked with their health. For many uninsured or underinsured low income families, school nurses are the frontline health care provider.

The Tennessee Department of Health identified the following goals of school nurses:

- Reduce students’ health-related absenteeism
- Eliminate or minimize health problems that impair learning.
- Reduce or prevent health problems through education.
- Educate the community as to the health concerns of school-aged children.
- Help students to achieve the highest degree of independent functioning.
- Assist with referrals and screenings.

Background

Federal laws (IDEA and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act) guarantee access to education for all children. In our schools, we see increasing numbers of students with chronic health needs which require a school nurse’s expertise to manage during the school day. A lack of access to a school nurse can lead to disruption of the child’s school day and learning, more expensive trips to emergency rooms, and delays in the care of chronic illness (including asthma, diabetes, cystic fibrosis, sickle cell anemia, and cerebral palsy just to name a few) and preventable illnesses such as communicable diseases (influenza, hepatitis A, chickenpox/shingles, and MRSA).

Situation in Tennessee

Tennessee does not meet the national recommendations for student to school nurse ratio. Currently there is one school nurse for every 3,000 students in Tennessee. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Healthy People 2020 recommend a school nurse-to-student ratio of 1:750 (USDHHS). This recommendation is supported by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). For children who require daily assistance with their medical needs the AAP recommends a ratio of 1:225.

Only 45 percent of all Tennessee public schools have a full-time school nurse on site. However, school nurses are uniquely positioned and capable of improving the following outcomes for school age children in Tennessee:

- Teen pregnancy rate is 30.5 per 1000, the 12th highest rate nationally
- 34.1 percent of children are overweight or obese
- More than half of high school students (57 percent) are not meeting recommended physical activity requirements
- 10 percent of teens (ages 12-17 years) report using tobacco in the past month

Recommendation

The Tennessee Nurses Association recommends:
- Enactment of a minimum mandatory school nurse to well-student ratio of 1:750 in all public schools in the state of Tennessee
- Requiring each school nurse in the state hold a minimum of a Bachelor's degree in Nursing from an accredited college or university
- RN licensure and certification per the National Association of School Nurses (2016)

References:


Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH), 2013 and 2014.

