

Managing Chronic Health Conditions in Schools: The Role of the School Nurse

Approximately 25% of children ages 2-8 years old in the United States are affected by chronic health conditions.¹ These can include asthma, diabetes, seizure disorders, food allergies, and poor oral health. Managing chronic health conditions in schools can be complex. This fact sheet focuses on the role of the school nurse in helping students manage their condition to help reach their full academic potential.

Health services in schools are a key component of the [Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child Model](#).² The healthcare needs of students with a chronic health condition may be complex and continuous. The school nurse is often the only healthcare provider in a school for both emergencies and daily management of chronic health conditions. The National Association of School Nurses (NASN) and the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommend that school districts provide a full-time school nurse in every school building. A full-time school nurse and dependable funding are essential to achieve high quality health services and to meet student health needs.

School nurses often have three main roles in managing chronic health conditions

1 Providing direct care, such as giving children medications.

- Many students with a chronic health condition are able to attend school and succeed due to services offered by school nurses.
- School nurses may be the first to identify chronic health conditions in students when they enter school.

2 Providing case management.

- The school nurse is a key member of the educational team and is usually responsible for assessing, planning, implementing, and monitoring individual health plans (IHP) and emergency care plans for students with chronic health conditions.



DID YOU KNOW

- A recent study estimated that for every dollar invested in a school nursing program, society gains \$2.20.⁴
- School nurses often lead the development and evaluation of school health policies and provide healthcare services for students who qualify under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 to meet requirements of federal laws.
- School nurses assist students in learning to manage their chronic health conditions, increasing time in the classroom and decreasing absenteeism. This saves costs to the school district and increases students' academic success.
- Smaller nurse-to-student ratios are associated with lower absenteeism rates and higher graduation rates.⁵

3 *Advocating for students and their families³ to help them get the resources and support they need.*

- School nurses assist many students that are not served by the healthcare system and may work to link these students and their families to health care or finding a medical home.
- School nurses can help families and students access health insurance through Medicaid, Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP), and/or eligible insurance.

School nurses can help improve academic achievement and decrease absenteeism

Daily school attendance is strongly associated with higher standardized test scores and graduation rates, and lower dropout rates. Students with chronic health conditions may struggle with chronic absenteeism (missing about 10% or a month’s worth of school in a school year⁶) or have other needs that can affect academic achievement.

Access to school nurses and health services can help reduce chronic absenteeism among students with chronic health conditions through care coordination and health education activities including⁶:

- Advocating for a school-wide approach to addressing chronic absenteeism among students with a chronic health condition.
- Assessing students’ health status, identifying barriers to educational progress, and developing a healthcare plan to help avoid school absences.
- Coordinating with students and their families to access needed medical or mental health providers and other individual needs.
- Conducting parent/caregiver and student classes on health topics; and addressing chronic tardiness, early dismissals, class absence, and chronic absenteeism.
- Partnering with school staff to help students feel safe at school.
- Encouraging use of consistent and innovative health reporting systems to collect data for quality improvement.

School nurses work to advocate and provide coordinated case management for students

School nurses are positioned to lead the school system in serving as a liaison between school staff, family, school physicians, community healthcare providers, and community organizations. Local organizations might include healthcare systems, hospitals, health departments and universities.

In some places, local hospitals and clinics may be able to provide secure, electronic medical records access to school nurses (with parent authorization). Having access to diagnoses and current medications, treatment plans, and care instructions after an injury, illness, surgery or hospitalization can ensure consistency in health services.



MEDICAL HOME DEFINITION

The National Center for Medical Home Implementation defines a medical home as an approach to providing comprehensive primary care that facilitates partnerships between patients, clinicians, medical staff, and families.

For more information, go to: <https://medicalhomeinfo.aap.org>



IMPORTANT REMINDER

The long-term effects of chronic absenteeism can lead to a population that is less educated, underemployed, less financially stable and less healthy, because a lifetime of good health correlates with receiving more education.⁷

School nurses give special consideration to developmental stages and homeless students

Developmental stages

The needs of students with chronic health conditions vary from elementary to high school. Identifying a chronic health condition at the onset can be particularly helpful for elementary school students if a pattern is identified before absences become chronic.

School nurses can:

- Assess each student's developmental stage and work with them where they are – whether helping administer medications for younger students, or counteracting myths or misinformation from peers and the internet for older students – school nurses help empower them along the way and as their needs change.
- Help with the transition to young adulthood with the goal of having students be independent by graduation, if appropriate.

Homeless students

For students experiencing homelessness, school nurses can play a vital role in addressing health needs and improving opportunities to succeed in school.⁸

School nurses can:

- Connect homeless students and their families to community resources, such as stable housing.
- Advocate for the importance of regular care of chronic health conditions.

For additional guidance on supporting homeless students, visit the U.S. Department of Education website at <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/index.html>

¹ Van Cleave, J., Gortmaker, S. L., & Perrin, J. M. (2010). Dynamics of obesity and chronic health conditions among children and youth. *Journal of American Medical Association*, 303, 623–630. doi:10.1001/jama.2010.104

² Components of the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC): <http://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/wsc/index.htm>

³ Role of the School Nurse in Providing School Health Services, National Association of School Nurses [NASN] & American Nurses Association [ANA], 2011.

⁴ Wang, L. Y., Vernon-Smiley, M., Gapinski, M. A., Desisto, M., Maughan, E., & Sheetz, A. (2014). Cost-benefit study of school nursing services. *Journal of American Medical Association: Pediatrics*, 168, 642–648.

⁵ Michael SL, Merlo CL, Basch CE, Wentzel KR, Wechsler H. Critical connections: health and academics. *J Sch Health*. 2015; 85: 740-758. August 3, 2015

⁶ National Association of School Nurses (NASN) *School Nurses' Role in Combating Chronic Absenteeism*, 2015

⁷ Brief on Chronic Absenteeism and School Health Prepared by the National Collaborative on Education and Health March 2015: <http://www.attendanceworks.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/Chronic-Absenteeism-and-School-Health-Brief-1.pdf>

⁸ Baisch, M. J., Lundeen, S.P., & Murphy, M. K. (2011). Evidence-based research on the value of school nurse in an urban school system. *Journal of School Health*, 81(2), 74-80.

