

Exploring the Role of

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Exploring the Role of the School Nurse in Promoting Student Achievement is an initiative designed by the New York Statewide School Health Services Center to increase communication and understanding between school administrators and school nurses about the relationship between academic success and healthy behaviors on the part of students. The initiative further explores ways to move forward to address more effectively the academic needs of students through positive role modeling by the school nurse in promoting healthy behaviors and strengthening academic achievement.

As a result of this initiative, both school administrators and school nurses will be better able to promote the message that healthy children become school achievers, and that positive integration of the school nurse into the educational environment promotes active learning for all students. There is increasing knowledge that integrating quality health care through competent professional school nurses into the academic framework for schools supports an environment that produces academic results.

This initiative emerged in two phases: (1) Phase 1, which included an extensive review of professional literature, the development of a conceptual framework, and the conducting of focus groups involving school principals and school nurses across the state; and (2) Phase 2, which will include the development of a targeted image campaign based on the understanding and lessons learned in Phase 1 regarding the role of school nurses in supporting academic success.

the School Nurse in Promoting Student Achievement

An extensive literature review confirmed the emergence of research supporting the linkage between healthy students and healthy schools, and academic success. The research pointed to the evolving nature of schools, with an emphasis on higher standards and an increasing academic focus for students. Factors such as new technologies, globalization of the economy, increasing diversity in the population, and changing family and social structures were discussed as influences on today's schools. Barriers to learning that interfere with academic achievement were documented and defined. The evolving role of health as a factor in academic success, especially for children and youth in less affluent urban districts, was discussed. The research concludes with the understanding that schools cannot achieve their primary mission of education if students and staff are not healthy and fit mentally, physically, and socially.

The literature further indicates that the school nurse is in a specialized position within the school district setting, and that the primary role of the school nurse is to support learning. Studies from a number of states, including California, Florida, and Mississippi, confirm the role of health in achieving academic success. Further stories of "healthy heroes," including school principals and school nurses who have actively sought to increase student achievement through health promotion, round out the literature search.

The conceptual framework developed as a result of the literature search also focused on the roles of the school nurse and issues facing



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school nurses today. The context for both the literature review and the conceptual framework was the growing awareness that our nation is experiencing a critical nursing shortage and, at the same time, all stakeholders must work together to ensure that (New York State) schools will be educationally stimulating environments that support and promote the academic, social and health development of students.

Based on the literature review and the development of the conceptual framework, 70 individuals (23 school principals and 47 school nurses) came together in eight focus groups across New York to explore the role of the school nurse in promoting academic achievement. Both school nurses and principals represented the full range of wealth and poverty in districts, as well as a range of urban, suburban, and rural districts, and schools from pre-K through grade 12.

“The primary role of the school nurse is to support student learning.”

- National Association of School Nurses

Each group participated in a pre-survey, detailed results of which are reported on our website (see Resources). Pre-survey results indicated that principals and school nurses strongly agreed that many factors influence student learning and achievement, and that an engaging curriculum and instructional models based on the learning standards, as well as responsive leadership, can support learning. Both groups also agreed that schools need to attend to barriers to learning, and that learning and achievement are affected by not only what occurs in the classroom but also the health of students and the school environment.

There was also concurrence between the groups that the school nurse can play an important role in helping students achieve academic success. However, neither group believes that the role of the school nurse in promoting student achievement is clearly understood by teachers, or that uniform standards exist for the role of the school nurse in educational settings. Both factors stimulated considerable discussion within the focus groups, which concluded there was a need for further exploration and understanding of these important issues.

Principals and school nurses generally agreed that school nurses should have opportunities for professional development, similar to other school professionals, and that school nurses should have access to up-to-date technology. All school nurses and all principals agreed that school nurses need to be effective collaborators in today's school environment. However, about one-third of both groups disagreed with the statement that educators and school nurses are able to communicate about student achievement. Effective communication surely is a stepping-stone to successful collaboration.

In both the pre-survey and the focus groups, participants used the framework of the National Association of School Nurses outlining the comprehensive roles of a school nurse, including care provider, advocate, change agent, manager, and educator. The description and delineation of the roles played by nurses in schools set the stage for participants to engage in discussion about the types of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and other attributes needed by today's school nurses. While the care provider role emerged as the predominant one identified by both school nurses and principals as most important in promoting student achievement, there was greater awareness of, and importance attached to, the advocate and educator roles by the school nurses as very important in influencing a student's ability to learn. Those roles, in the opinion of the school nurses, affected whether a student came to school, stayed in school, and attended classes.

Participants were given the opportunity to discuss the impact of school nurses on students, the influence that the role has on student achievement, and the impending shortage of qualified school nurses. Ensuring the health and safety of students in the school, providing a safe haven for students, and supporting and encouraging students as they learn emerged as important factors by nurses. Principals cited trust in the school nurse, knowledge about medical needs, and the skills of the school nurse related to the health and safety of students as most important. Both used the words “safe haven” as a description of the role, from elementary through high school.

Both principals and school nurses explored the factors that influence the recruitment and retention of school nurses, given the growing national nursing shortage. Salaries for school nurses, the lack of recognition, and their “solo” role within the school setting were factors cited by school nurses as recruitment barriers. Principals concurred that low pay is a key factor as well. The school calendar and family-friendly

EMPHASIZING THE PROFESSIONAL SATISFACTION AND PERSONAL REWARDS FOR BEING A SCHOOL NURSE

After participants had an opportunity to share their ideas and thoughts about the knowledge, skills and personal qualities that are desirable for individuals aspiring to be school nurses, conversations were initiated to ascertain what participants believed were the factors that attracted individuals to school nurse positions.

School nurses said that some of the most favorable factors attracting people to work in schools are the hours and the ability of the school nurse to match family obligations with professional employment. They said that working with children was a definite benefit of being a school nurse, and working in an educational setting was generally more positive than

working in a hospital setting. The school nurses also cited job availability; the ever-changing nature of their role; independent functioning; and the opportunity to perform the role of educator as positive factors in their professional positions.

Principals also cited the favorable hours, the ability to match family obligations with work, and working with children as definite rewards for school nurses. They agreed with the school nurses that the severity of medical conditions in schools is less than in hospitals, and that the school environment enables nurses to see that they can make a difference in children's lives. The principals also said that school nurse positions provide an element of security and stability for individuals in those positions.

hours were cited as factors that positively influenced recruitment. Schools have had varying degrees of success in recruiting school nurses; however, there was universal agreement that attracting quality substitute nurses to work in school buildings is very difficult. In both cases, the level and degree of training and work experience of candidates are often not entirely sufficient for the responsibilities of the position.

Six clearly identified issues that impinge upon the role of the school nurse in promoting student achievement emerged: the role of the school nurse itself; limited opportunities for professional development; lack of uniform school health standards; the need for enhanced

communication; the increased necessity for appropriate technology; and the call for collaboration with many partners, given the complexity of today's student health care needs, from serious medical conditions through depression, drugs, alcohol and other emotional and social issues. In the view of both school nurses and principals, the lack of understanding, a misunderstanding, or a lack of information about the role of the school nurse and its relationship to student success was the major professional issue facing school nurses. The second most prominent issue identified by both groups was the limited availability of professional development opportunities.

EVOLVING ROLES OF THE SCHOOL NURSE

The school nurse is a specialized position within the school district setting. Unlike the role of the nurse in a hospital emergency room setting typically depicted in movies or on television, the school nurse acts not only in the role of health care provider of intervention services, but also in the role of an experienced professional knowledgeable about prevention of illness and injury. The Position Statement of the National Association of School Nurses, Inc. states that professional school nurses act as care providers, advocates, change agents, managers and educators.

- As *care providers*, school nurses promote the optimal health of children; they provide health assessments and screenings; administer medication; provide first aid and crisis intervention for acute illnesses and emergencies; and perform other important school health care functions to allow students to remain in school and in class.
- As *advocates*, school nurses promote safe school environments where children can learn and be safe; they work with students, parents, teachers, school administrators, school board members, medical professionals, and other community members to promote healthy schools and healthy students.
- As *change agents*, school nurses educate students, parents and teachers about current and emerging health issues; they bring knowledge and information about the latest medical research and findings that can be used to promote positive health behaviors among students and faculty.
- As *managers*, school nurses provide leadership in coordinating school and community health activities; they assist in the formation of health policies, goals and objectives for the school district; and they plan and implement school health management protocols for students with special health needs.
- As *educators*, school nurses provide health education, both directly and indirectly; they counsel students concerning chronic health conditions, mental health issues, problems such as pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and substance abuse; and they act as resource persons in promoting health careers among students.

Today's specialized school nurses are often part of an interdisciplinary school team working to ensure that all students

benefit from quality education, and health prevention and intervention services that reduce barriers to learning. Across the nation, schools are implementing the Centers for Disease Control's framework for coordinated school health programs with professional school nurses playing key roles in all eight components of the model. In New York State, the NY Healthy Schools model, designed to promote student achievement, reflects the eight components of coordinated school health:

- Learning and adopting healthy behaviors
- Achieving life-long physical fitness
- Encouraging healthful nutrition
- Enhancing school health services
- Creating positive learning environments
- Supporting social and emotional well-being
- Promoting faculty and staff wellness
- Connecting school, parents and community

Greater demand to provide intricate medical procedures for children with complex medical needs; more "hands-on" management of students with chronic conditions, such as asthma or diabetes; increased concerns about health and school safety; and a general expectation that schools are becoming places where quality health care is provided, are all factors in changing the image and role of today's school nurses in promoting educational achievement.

The National Association of School Nurses endorses the coordinated school health model and has a strong commitment to promoting and ensuring that the role of the school nurse is closely aligned with academic performance with a focus on three components: educational outcomes, student behaviors measured by improved school attendance and lowered drop-out rates, and student attitudes affecting self-esteem and self-control.

The Association stresses that the provision of nursing services enhances the conditions necessary for learning to take place. Students must be: in school (manage chronic health conditions, shorten illness-related absences, lessen the number of students sent home needlessly); in class (provide interventions to return students to class, promote inclusion related to health needs); safe (inspect the school's physical environment, teach and use universal precautions, support a nonviolent, drug-free environment); and ready to learn (provide vision and hearing screening/monitoring, identify health-related barriers and refer for care, support nutritional, comfort and other needs).

Exploring the Role of the School Nurse in Promoting Student Achievement

While 94% of the school nurses disagreed with the statement that school nurses are fairly compensated for the role they perform in the school setting and only 6% agreed with the statement, 30% of the principals agreed with the statement while 70% disagreed that school nurses are fairly compensated as shown on Charts 17 and 18.

Chart 17-School nurses are fairly compensated for the role they perform in the school setting. (nurses)

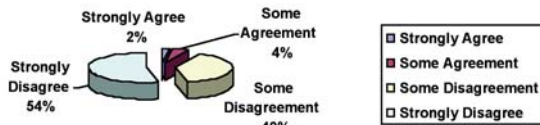
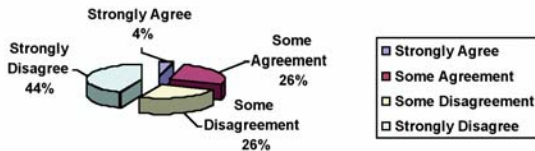


Chart 18-School nurses are fairly compensated for the role they perform in the school setting. (principals)



While both school nurses and principals believe that the school nurse can play an important role in helping students achieve academic success, there was little agreement that the role of the school nurse in promoting student achievement is understood by educators. Charts 5 and 6 demonstrate that only 20% of the school nurses and 26% of the principals agree that educators clearly understand the role of the school nurse in promoting student achievement.

Chart 5-The role of the school nurse in promoting student achievement is clearly understood by educators. (nurses)

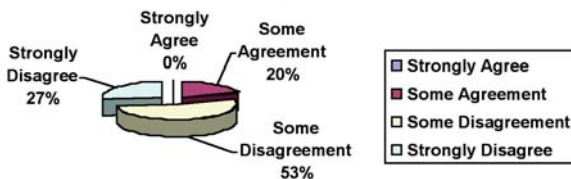
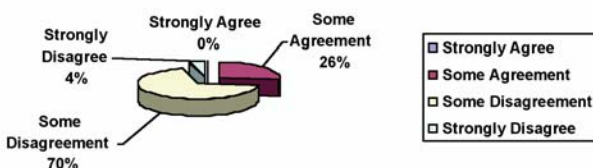


Chart 6-The role of the school nurse in promoting student achievement is clearly understood by educators. (principals)



Principals and school nurses offered recommendations. One was the provision of a “tool kit” of information and resources for both school nurses and principals that would support the role of the school nurse in positively influencing student success, along with other suggestions including mentoring and increasing opportunities for dialogue.

The focus groups concluded with a feedback form where participants were encouraged to indicate what new ideas they gained, questions they encountered, actions they were going to take, and information they would like to receive. Those results are documented within the report. However, initial results indicate a significant interest in further exploration and dialogue. It is evident from the results that the focus groups stimulated awareness and communication, and that a tool kit to provide further information is a critical next step.

The final section of the report provides a summary and conclusions of the Phase 1 work, and sets the stage for development of the targeted image campaign designed to increase the awareness of the crucial role of the school nurse in promoting student achievement. Learning more about how the school nurse affects students in different educational settings, building support for recognizing the professional role of the school nurse in supporting learning, and gaining new perspectives on how school nurses can be further integrated into educational planning and decision making in schools highlight the findings of Phase 1 that will form the basis for promoting the message that healthy learners achieve academic success.

Social Marketing materials and the entire project were developed with the assistance of Sullivan Educational Associates. Products were disseminated (statewide) to both school administrators and school nurses. Those products consisted of a set of six posters outlining the different roles of the School Nurse: Care Provider, Advocate, Manager, Educator, and Change Agent. In addition, brochures were developed to help in educating staff, parents, and School Board members about the role of the school health professional; other materials included fact sheets, postcards, bookmarks, and a PowerPoint presentation, which is available along with the final report on our website; <http://www.schoolhealthservices.org> click on “Making the Difference.” For more information, call Mary Capparelli at 585-349-7630/7631/7632. 🐾

RESOURCES

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