

RANKS OF SCHOOL NURSES DWINDLING DESPITE NEED

By Adam Rodewald of *The Northwestern*

In the sunny but spacious nurse's office, where health-related posters mask the concrete walls at Oshkosh West High School, Stefanie Rebholz doles out afternoon medications to a stream of students. Morgan Broker, a junior, swallows her daily pill without looking up from a book while Rebholz searches the medicine cabinet for the next student's prescription. Another teen gets his eyes examined. A fourth checks in with the nurse before going home sick. And this is a slow day.

"It's a hectic pace to keep sometimes," Rebholz said during a rare break over a Monday lunch hour. Many children nationwide have chronic health conditions that require daily monitoring or medication, such as asthma, diabetes and allergies. Over the last decade, however, Wisconsin school districts have seen their nurse-to-student ratios worsen, meaning more students for every nurse to handle. Meanwhile, the incidence of medical need has risen, said Robert Geigle, Oshkosh Area School District's (OASD) pupil services director. "Some students need medical attention as often as every hour."

The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction estimates the state's 464 school districts employ 355 full-time equivalent nurses. That's a ratio of one registered nurse for every 2,220 students. OASD employs the equivalent of one full-time nurse for every 2,500 students. The ideal ratio, according to the National Association of School Nurses, is one nurse for every 750 students.

The dilemma for districts tightens as their budgets shrink and the cost of providing health care climbs. Only 19 states and the District of Columbia have legislation mandating school nursing services. Wisconsin is not one of them. Consequently, nurses remain vulnerable to budget cuts.

Still, experts say the availability of nurses directly correlates to attendance. "Nurses are critical to reducing absenteeism and to keeping children with chronic conditions in school," said Amy Garcia, a registered nurse and executive director of the National Association of School Nurses.

The nurses association cites some health data for U.S. children from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Thirteen of every 100 had to take regular prescription medication for at least three months in 2002, and 12 of every 100 have a history of asthma. Also, five of every 100 have been diagnosed with a food allergy, according to the Mayo Clinic.

Within the borders of OASD, nurses are torn between several buildings. Six different schools share Rebholz, whose responsibilities range from basic first aid to talking with students who are struggling emotionally. "There are so many kids that have so many medical needs," she said. "I don't know how they'd do it without nurses. 🙄"

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