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Role of School Nurses in the Health and Education of Children

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The media headlines highlighting stories about schools over the past 5 years have been overwhelmingly focused on the increasing levels of young people's mental and behavioral distress, the threat of [firearm violence](#), and the [management of student health during the pandemic](#). Epidemiological data documents [declines in the behavioral, mental, and physical health](#) of US children, their [educational outcomes](#), and [inequities](#) among racial and ethnic minoritized youth during this same period. Although there has been a range of resources proposed to help mitigate these challenges, one key resource may hold a critically important role in ensuring the safety, health, and educational outcomes of children in the US—the school nurse. We provide justification for investing in school nurses, identify challenges in supporting school health programs, and provide recommendations for investing in school nursing as a key strategy for improving children's health, equity, and well-being.

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Historically Critical Roles of School Nurses

School nursing has undergone a remarkable transformation since its inception in the early 20th century.¹ Originally focused on combating contagious diseases, current school nursing practice requires a specialty focus to address the multifaceted health needs of students within educational settings. School nursing in the US began in 1902 when Lillian Wald, founder of the [Henry Street Settlement](#) appointed Nurse Lina Rogers to address contagious diseases and promote hygiene among students on New York City's Lower East Side (an area with limited resources at that time). The results of the work of Rogers demonstrated the profound effect of health interventions on education—in 1 year, the number of absent students dropped from 10 000 to just over 1000, a remarkable success that catalyzed school nursing expansion across New York City and throughout the US.¹ Today, more than 120 years later, the presence of a school nurse continues to demonstrate profound improvement in student absenteeism and other outcomes.²

The scope of practice for school nurses is illustrated by the National Association of School Nurses [School Nursing Practice Framework](#),³ an evidence-based framework defining school nursing practice, leadership, research, and collaboration. The framework represents the comprehensive work of school nurses, emphasizing evidence-based best practices supporting student health, safety, and academic readiness. The evolution of school nursing reflects a growing understanding of the relationship between the health of students, especially those who are systematically disadvantaged and would otherwise have limited access to health care, and their educational progress and overall well-being.

Justification for School Nurses

School nurses are responsible for a plethora of health care needs of children, families, and the broader community. Despite often working alone, they (1) provide essential management and supervision of care for students with a chronic condition or disease (eg, diabetes, seizure response, gastrostomy tube feeding); (2) teach health education; (3) screen for and manage depression, anxiety, vision, and hearing disorders; (4) oversee accessibility plans for students with accommodations (eg, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder); and (5) refer students to external

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health professionals. Some school nurses have health aides to help manage the needs of students. During the COVID-19 pandemic, while politicians and school leaders argued about how best to implement strategies to prevent the transmission of the virus in school settings, school nurses responded to the growing health needs of students.⁴ School nurses also offer vital mental health support and serve as a bridge between schools, families, and community health resources. Research shows that [school-based health centers](#) and [school nursing services are cost-effective](#), with significant returns on investment, especially in the areas of chronic conditions, immunizations, and mental health and in addressing income-based disparities in outcomes among children.

The influence of school nurses on student health outcomes is well-documented,² and effective school health programs have demonstrated improved academic outcomes by addressing safety, physical, and mental health needs. School nurses are at the forefront of identifying health issues such as asthma or diabetes, and mental health issues that may hinder a student's ability to learn. For many students, particularly those from underserved and historically marginalized populations, geographically rural communities, and [low-income families](#), school nurses may be their only access to a health care professional. This reality underscores the vital role school nurses play in addressing [health equity](#).

Current Challenges and Emerging Issues

Despite their essential contributions, school nurses face numerous challenges that impede their effectiveness. One of the most pressing issues is [inadequate funding](#) for school health services.⁵ Many schools operate with limited budgets that do not allow for sufficient staffing or resources necessary for comprehensive health care delivery, and many districts do not have the capacity to bill for reimbursement of nursing services. This chronic underfunding leads to inequities in health services for students who rely on school nurses as their primary health care clinicians.

The increasing demand for mental health support for students can be exacerbated by [social media use](#) and academic pressures. [School nurses can collaborate](#) with mental health professionals to meet the mental and emotional health needs of [students](#). The threat of gun violence in schools has introduced a new dimension to the responsibilities of school nurses. They must now be prepared for emergencies created by violent acts, requiring additional training in crisis management and trauma response.⁶ [As an extension of local public health systems](#), school nurses must also navigate ongoing public health concerns, managing potential disease outbreaks, implementing safety protocols, and supporting students and staff in adapting to new health guidelines.⁷

How to Support School Nurses and Leverage Their Effects

Children need safe and healthy places to learn, grow, and thrive. To create and maintain that environment for students, communities and schools need to support and expand health access to school nurses by

1. **Investing in at least 1 school nurse in every school.** Ensuring adequate staffing for school health services is critical for the health and well-being of children. The National Association of School Nurses⁸ recommends a registered professional nurse all day, every day in every school to improve the health and educational outcomes of students. This requires federal, state, and local jurisdictions to allocate appropriate funding as an investment for the future.
2. **Supporting school nurses as advocates of data-driven approaches to promote health equity.** School nurses not only generate data, but use that data to advocate for improvements in federal, state, and local programs and policies that promote optimal child development. Data-driven approaches leveraged by school nurses to address the social drivers of health can give voice to historically marginalized communities.
3. **Integrating school nurses as leaders in the broader ecosystem.** School nurses are well positioned to partner with health, social services, government, and other sectors to promote

access to evidence-based health care services in schools and other community settings. School nurses should be provided opportunities to sit on decision-making boards (eg, school boards) to inform evidence-based investments, programs, and policies.

4. **Investing in specialized training and certification for school nurses.** Given the multidimensional roles of school nurses, it is important to equip them with the unique skills needed to address both historical (eg, disease outbreaks) and contemporary (eg, mental health and gun violence) health challenges in school environments.

Conclusions

By investing in and recognizing the contributions school nurses make to student well-being, schools can create healthier learning environments where all children can succeed academically and develop into healthy adults who contribute positively to society. [Investing in school nursing](#) is not only about fostering a healthier future for children, but also strengthening communities for generations to come.

ARTICLE INFORMATION

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