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How Do You Raise Awareness of the School Nurse's Role?

By Sally Schoessler, RN, SNT, MEd, New York

School nursing is a complex nursing specialty, in which on any given day, the school nurse must have expertise in pediatric nursing, emergency care, occupational health, and pharmacology. In addition, the school nurse must be proficient in epidemiology, orthopedic care, health education, patient counseling, psychiatric nursing, and, often, even obstetric nursing. The fact that the profession encompasses so many competencies is a large part of what keeps school nursing an exciting and rewarding profession, one that focuses on the continuum of care from acute care to chronic care to wellness promotion.

NASN defines our professional focus in the following manner:

School nursing is a specialized practice of professional nursing that advances the well being, academic success, and life-long achievement of students. To that end, school nurses facilitate positive student responses to normal development; promote health and safety; intervene with actual and potential health problems; provide case management services; and actively collaborate with others to build student and family capacity for adaptation, self management, self advocacy, and learning.

This definition was adopted at the NASN Board of Directors meeting in Providence, Rhode Island, in June 1999.

In an effort to raise awareness and further define the role of the school nurse, the New York Statewide School Health Services Center, under the direction of Mary Capparelli, RN, CSNP, outlined, designed, and implemented a social marketing initiative titled "Making the Difference: School Nurses Impact Student Achievement." As a result of this initiative, both school administrators and school nurses have been 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 across 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.

There were three distinct phases to the program:

- **Phase 1:** An extensive literature review was completed and a conceptual framework was developed. Focus groups were conducted with principals and school nurses across the state of New York to discuss the role and impact of the school nurse.

- **Phase 2:** A targeted image campaign, including school nursing resources, a school health handbook, posters, brochures, and Powerpoint presentations were developed from the information learned in Phase 1 of the program.
- **Phase 3:** Once developed, the Power Tools Toolkit was disseminated. It consisted of a binder that contained school nursing resources, including a CD addressing vital issues in caring for today's youth, posters sharing health issues interfering with learning in today's schools, a handbook highlighting common strategies regarding school health services, brochures useful to parents with a focus on health issues of today's youth, and fact sheets focused on critical health issues (obesity, asthma, and diabetes) facing youth.

One key element of the program was to discern the five primary roles of the school nurse. They have been identified as follows:

Care Provider

School nurses:

- Promote healthy students,
- Increase school attendance,
- Create safe havens,
- Assess health needs, and
- Screen for barriers to learning.

Educator

School nurses:

- Promote academic performance,
- Support at-risk students,
- Increase health knowledge and skills,
- Encourage school/classroom participation, and
- Strengthen student learning readiness.

Advocate

School nurses:

- Promote healthy schools,
- Participate on teams and committees,
- Strengthen youth development,
- Improve school morale, and
- Foster staff and school wellness.

Change Agent

School nurses:

- Enhance learning environments,
- Encourage parental involvement,
- Identify health-related barriers,

- Model healthy behaviors, and
- Implement research-based practice.

Manager

School nurses:

- Support shared leadership,
- Foster community partnerships,
- Administer health policies,
- Implement health protocols, and
- Promote healthy schools.

School nurses are valuable members of the school team and bring expertise to the school community that is unique, focused, and indispensable. As the often “unsung heroes” of student support services, the school nurse may need to provide education related to the value of school nursing and the impact on student achievement to the educators and families of his or her school. Strong identification of these roles can lead to an increased appreciation of the skills and knowledge base that the school nurse brings to discussions on student achievement and can affect our students on a daily basis.

School nurses in New York responded favorably to this social marketing initiative. A few excerpts from the feedback received are as follows:

- “In many ways, it has been wonderful to have something visible/tangible to show the many roles we play. It really brings to light the professional teamwork that takes place in the school setting. I believe it has made a positive impact in my elementary building, as I am a full team member in all aspects. It has given me the confidence to be proactive to make a difference also.”
- “I participated in one of the focus groups that were held and I thoroughly enjoyed hearing the thought provoking exchange that occurred. It was more focused and professional than I had anticipated. I left feeling energized and went back to my district and wrote a lengthy review, which I shared with my administration, outlining how well I felt that

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our district met the criterion that were being developed for school nursing and the areas where we could grow. I also shared my thoughts with our School Nurse/Teacher group at a monthly meeting. I used many of the materials that were sent. I used some in creating bulletin board displays, both about our role and about health issues, some I used as handouts in health classes.”

- “The toolkit was wonderful. I have used the materials in my budget presentations and in presentations to the Board of Education. With your materials and with data collected from annual reports, I have been able to successfully expand our health service initiatives while other departments suffered cuts. Our leadership now recognizes the connection between health and achievement and the role that nurses play in that equation.”

School nurses do affect student achievement and the well-being of students in our schools. The New York social marketing initiative helped to spotlight how the school nurse impacts students in different educational settings, building support for recognizing the professional role of the school nurse in supporting student learning. We gained new perspectives on how school nurses can be further integrated into educational planning and decision making in schools and how they assist us in promoting the message that healthy learners achieve academic success.

To discuss marketing the school nurse’s role in your state, please contact your State School Nurse Consultant. To locate contact information for your State School Nurse Consultant, please visit the National Association of State School Nurse Consultants’ Web site at www.nassnc.org and click on “About Us” to gain access to a listing of our members.

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