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How May School Entry Provide a Safety Net for Children's Health?

By Anne Sheetz, RN, MPH, CNAA, Massachusetts

School entry presents a unique opportunity to assess and improve the health status of large populations of 4- and 5-year-old children as they embark on their school careers. This checkpoint is particularly important when beginning the educational experience, when physical and mental health are crucial to learning ability. Generally, entry into school provides a health safety net for all children in the following areas: (a) completion of immunization schedules, (b) assessment of physical/behavioral health, and (c) linkages with a medical home, a dental home, and available health insurance. It also offers an opportunity to plan the health care of children with a variety of health issues (e.g., diabetes, asthma, seizure disorders, and life-threatening allergies). Equally important is the opportunity for the school nurse to identify herself or himself as the clinical professional who will be providing care to the child during his or her educational career. School nurses have a critical role in ensuring that this safety net is intact, that essential plans for health care are in place, and that linkages to the formal health care delivery system are established.

Implementing the safety net requires ongoing collaboration with school administrators, teachers, and special education personnel. School nurses may need to assume responsibility for interpreting for their educational counterparts the relationship of health to achievement—often a major challenge! Ideally, the nurse will be an integral participant in the kindergarten registration process, interviewing the parent or guardian of each child, taking a brief health history, and developing a plan as needed. This conveys to the parent or guardian that health is important in the educational process and that the school nurse is a major resource should questions or onsite health needs arise. It also conveys a message that each child—the whole child—is important.

Collaboration with community primary care providers (PCPs) is also essential. School nurses should play a key role in notifying them of entry into school health requirements. In some communities, school nurses advise PCPs of the kindergarten registration dates, requesting that there be open appointments should a child need immunizations, a physical examination, or other services. This greatly facilitates completion of these important health assessments and services at the beginning of the school year. It also promotes and models the PCP/school nurse coordination, which is very critical to the increasingly complex care of many children.

In many states, *entry-into-school immunization regulations* are the most recognized example of the safety net,

servicing as a crucial infection control strategy. Review of the immunization status at kindergarten registration to ensure that all required and/or recommended immunizations have been given is essential to herd immunity and the well-being of the total student population. Computerized immunization records and immunization registries (implemented in several states) greatly facilitate this process.

School entry also provides opportunities to assess physical health status, as well as developmental progress, the latter frequently within the role of the educational professional. States differ widely in health assessment requirements. For example, Massachusetts regulates entry-into-school physical examinations, pre-school vision screening, and evidence of lead testing. These requirements emphasize the need for assessment of physical, developmental, and social well-being of school-age children and offer opportunities for anticipatory guidance, identification of physical and emotional areas of concern, and behavioral risk assessment. Other states have added body mass index monitoring and dental screening to their requirements. In those states in which health assessments are not required, school districts themselves may implement this health-promoting practice.

Recently, in many schools, this safety net is extended to identify children who need a medical home, a dental provider, and/or health insurance, if available. Most schools require parents or guardians to complete annual emergency contact cards/information. These cards may be easily modified to include the name of the PCP, dental provider, and health insurance. Once identified as needing assistance, the school nurse may collaborate with families to link them with providers and other resources within the community.

Finally, children with special health care needs should have an individualized health care plan developed at or before school entry. This collaborative effort among the parents, providers, school nurses, and other school professionals and officials ensures that plans are in place for the child to receive required medications and/or treatments, assessment, and follow-up while at school. The goal for these children—and for all children—is to ensure a smooth, safe, and healthy transition into the kindergarten setting.

For more information, please contact your State School Nurse Consultant. Please visit the National Association of State School Nurse Consultants' Web site at www.nassnc.org for a listing of our members.