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NASN School Nurse 2006; 21; 8

DOI: 10.1177/104747570602100404

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Marketing the Role of School Health Services

By Anne H. Sheetz, RN, MPH, RNC, Massachusetts

Q: How Can a School Nurse Market the Role of School Health Services?

A: Because school nurses practice in an educational setting, rather than a traditional health care setting, their role (and its importance) often is challenging to interpret. School nurses need to be proactive in developing a marketing plan, using opportunities that regularly present themselves in their daily practice. Merriam-Webster's *Collegiate Dictionary* defines marketing as "the process or technique of promoting, selling and distributing a product or service." For school nurses, this entails interpreting the critical nature of their role in enhancing educational achievement. Their marketing efforts should be geared toward a range of audiences with specific informational needs: administrators, families, teachers, community health care providers, local and state decision-makers, and elected officials, to name a few.

When describing the role, it is important to focus on societal changes that have resulted in the need for more health care services in schools: (a) advances in medical research permitting a longer lifespan for children with such special health care needs as cancer and cystic fibrosis; (b) growth in medical technology, which enables children assisted with medical technology to be more mobile and able to attend school; (c) increases in the numbers of working parents, who depend on the school nurse for initial health assessments, rather than losing time from work; and (d) a restructuring of the health care delivery system, resulting in school nurses assuming greater responsibilities in such areas as asthma and diabetes management. In addition, with the increase in before and after school programs, responsibility for many health treatments or medications formerly administered in the home has shifted to the school. School nurses are the clinical health providers on-site in the school, where they have become the health safety net for children.

To establish her or his role as the clinical health expert in the school, as well as to facilitate communication with families, educational colleagues, and providers, the school nurse should utilize certain tools: business cards and of-

ficial school stationery with her or his name and credentials, as well as telephone, e-mail, and fax numbers, when appropriate. School brochures for parents should include a description of the health care program. Many schools provide a separate brochure describing the health services available to students, such as health screenings (vision, hearing, body mass index), illness and injury assessment, medication administration, first aid, and emergency care. These brochures also should include information on parent/guardian responsibilities such as completing emergency cards annually with parent/guardian contact information. They should describe requirements for medication administration (parent/guardian consent, provider's medication order, and separate pharmacy-labeled containers for medications). The brochures also may contain community resources available to families.

Sharing data on the school health service program is a powerful method to interpret the role of the school nurse. School health activity data are useful to describe such indicators as the numbers and types of encounters, major health issues, medications administered, and students referred to primary care providers or emergency care. The reports are useful and should be presented to targeted audiences, such as principals (on a monthly basis). Annual summary reports should be shared with superintendents, school committee representatives, and other community decision-makers. Reports should highlight types of encounters (e.g., illness or injury, emergency referrals) and average time per visit, as well as major and time-consuming issues, such as administering catheterizations and implementing a school-wide policy for the care of children with life-threatening allergies. As data are analyzed further, the school nurse should begin to identify indicators that may affect educational achievement. The return-to-class rate, vision screening failures and completed follow-ups, and attendance improvement for children whose asthma is being managed by the school nurse, lend strong support to the need for school nursing services.

School nurses need to include local primary providers in their marketing plans. Providers should know the names of the school nurses serving their clients, as well as contact

information. They need information on school entry requirements for physical examinations and immunizations, as well as communications regarding infectious disease outbreaks affecting the community's children. With parent/guardian consent to share information, many opportunities exist to improve the care management of children with such chronic health conditions as asthma and attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder.

The school nurse's role also focuses on health education and health promotion. There are many written, technological, and media opportunities to demonstrate and to interpret this aspect of the role to students, their families, and the community at-large. Some school nurses write health promotion columns in the school newsletter for parents/guardians. Others regularly contribute a column on health issues to local newspapers, again establishing themselves as health experts in child care. Topics may include strategies to prevent the spread of influenza, to provide sun safety, and to avoid traumatic head injuries. Although this may seem to be a time-consuming effort, health information from local and state health departments and such national agencies as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, may be summarized easily in a concise article for the general public. School health websites designed specifically for families and updated on a monthly basis also offer valuable methods to share health promotion information. A more recent opportunity has been the REVERSE 911® system being implemented in many school districts. Important health messages, including information on infectious disease outbreaks and control measures, may be transmitted easily to parents/guardians and local providers. In addition, local or state television channels are increasingly interested in topics relating to child health. Establishing working relationships with the news media can produce a win-win situation

when critical health information needs to be shared with the community.

Other forums for promoting the role of the school nurse include attendance at meetings and participation in local coalitions. Parent-teacher organizations are interested in such topics as asthma, overweight, and a host of other health issues affecting children. School nurses also should request time at school professional days to present information to teachers: infection control, Automated External Defibrillator or cardiopulmonary resuscitation training, and appropriate indicators for referring children to the school nurse. Another critical marketing opportunity is the school nurse's participation on committees such as emergency planning efforts and mental health crisis teams. Because the school nurse is increasingly recognized as having valuable frontline experience with a wide variety of physical and social morbidities affecting youth, her or his presence is often requested by local community coalitions focusing on such issues as suicide prevention, teen pregnancy prevention, and tobacco control. This involvement provides valuable opportunities for constructive input—and also establishes the school nurse as an expert in addressing the many issues confronting children, adolescents, and their families.

Although creating a marketing plan may require extra effort, it also may provide positive outcomes. The school nurse interfaces with a wide variety of audiences: school administrators, school committees, educational colleagues, students, parents/guardians, and the community at large. Each may benefit from increased knowledge about health, the issues confronting students, the services offered, and the interventions that may produce positive results for educational achievement. School nurses themselves are increasingly benefiting from the expanding support associated with a better understanding of the role.

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