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Staff Wellness Promotion: The Role of the School Nurse

By Dona Roberts, BSN, RN, Indiana

Question: Why support staff wellness promotion?

Answers:

- Increased fitness and nutrition potentially can reflect overall well-being of the teacher.
- Staff members who are physically fit generally make good nutritional choices and healthy decisions and are likely to experience fewer illnesses and absences.
- A teacher who is well nourished and fit will have a higher level of energy to sustain teaching activities throughout the day.
- Teachers have the capacity to role model for students, parents, and families the importance of making good personal choices for a healthy lifestyle.
- All of the above!

Question: What is the role of the school nurse in staff wellness promotion?

Answers:

- Coordinator.
- Advocate.
- Change agent.
- Educator.
- All of the above!

Question: What supports the role of the nurse in staff wellness promotion?

Answers:

- School nursing scope and standards of practice.
- The nursing process.
- A coordinated school health program.
- All of the above!

Rationale

The primary role of the school nurse is to support student learning. Consequently, the school nurse is responsible for providing a broad range of services. In an effort to capture the extensive role of the registered professional school nurse, NASN has described the leadership role of the school nurse in a coordinated school health program and the role of the school nurse in promoting the health and well-being of the staff through a staff wellness program.

The school nurse works to influence positive change and ongoing maintenance in the health status of the staff. Such a change, ultimately, has the potential to improve the effectiveness of the school team as they work with students.

The *Scope and Standards of School Nursing Practice* identifies areas of practice that embrace the school nurse as coordinator of a school wellness program. Health education, health counseling, health services, program administration, and community assessment to identify services, programs, and people as potential partners are key elements of a wellness program. Coordinating a wellness program is within the scope of practice for school nurses.

The nursing process for nurses is an automatic response and approach not only to nursing care, but also to program development. Within staff wellness promotion, the process has the potential to move an identified population (school staff) toward wellness using programs designed to meet the needs of both the school community and the community of the school. The nursing process is nursing!

A coordinated school health program includes eight components: health education; physical education; health services; nutrition services; counseling, psychological, and social services; healthy environment; health promotion for staff; and parent/community involvement. Within the eight components of a coordinated school health program, Marx and Wooley (1998), in *Health is Academic*, discuss essential functions of health services. Health education that provides appropriate health information that promotes informed healthcare decisions, promotes health, prevents disease, and enhances school performance, and staff wellness that provides health education and counseling, and promotes healthy activities and a healthy environment for school staff are just two of these core functions.

The school nurse serves as an advocate for staff wellness programs that address the physical, social, and emotional domains. As a health advocate, the nurse is able to articulate to decision makers the "payoff" for the district. The "What's In It For Me" for the district is the focus on the promotion of

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healthful living styles and the prevention of illness and disability. For school districts, a healthier staff may translate to lower insurance costs and fewer teacher absences. Model programs have the potential to effectively guide people to make good health choices, to establish good health behaviors, to be a support system to others participating in the wellness program, to have a system to track or evaluate the progress of the participants, and to have fun in the process.

A comprehensive staff wellness promotion program should offer both physical health and emotional/mental health activities. Activities related to physical health could include fitness, good nutritional choices including portion sizes, and hydration. Activities that focus on good mental health might include stress reduction activities, reading books and magazines outside a person's discipline, and participating in recreational activities such as painting, photography, or gardening.

Organizationally, participants can be involved in the wellness program as individuals and/or teams. A locally developed staff wellness program should be shaped by the group needs and resources... creativity sets the limits of a great program! This should be fun! Community partnerships can also be sought to offer on-site weight monitoring and maintenance, discounts for fitness club memberships and other incentives, and health screenings or other programs geared toward a healthy lifestyle

"Healthy students are better learners" is a quote frequently put forth to support health education and programs for all students, with the outcome focused on student learning and achievement. There is science that connects health, physical activity, and nutrition to learning. *No Child Left Behind* calls for "highly qualified teachers," and certainly every student deserves such a teacher. Think about all the positive outcomes if the call was for a "highly qualified, healthy staff"... and maybe, just maybe, the same could be said for teachers/staff as for students: "Healthy teachers are better teachers!" That brings this discussion full circle: "The primary role of the school nurse is to support student learning."

Watch for This Resource

Protecting Our Assets: A School Employee Wellness Guide, developed by the Directors of Health Promotion and

Education with support from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, is designed to help schools, districts, and states develop comprehensive school employee wellness programs. This resource provides guidance for obtaining program support, developing a school employee wellness team, using existing data to optimize a new or existing program, and implementing policies and practices to support employee wellness. This resource will be available in early 2006; see <http://www.dhpe.org>.

Reference

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Additional Resources

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