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What Is the Role of the State School Nurse Consultant?

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Thirty-eight states have appointed a state school nurse consultant (SSNC), who directs the school-nursing program at the state level. The SSNC's role is critical to provide consultation, coordination, technical and clinical assistance, quality assurance, and staff development for school nurses. In some states the SSNC is employed by the state department of health, whereas in others, he or she is on the staff of the state department of education. In either case, collaboration among the state agencies is essential to ensuring that health and education specialists work together to benefit student health and educational achievement.

The SSNC represents school nursing at the state level on issues pertaining to the health of children and adolescents. She or he serves on many task forces, coalitions, and committees that address issues such as injury prevention, mental health, skin cancer prevention, and life-threatening allergies. Although states may vary, the SSNC's responsibilities include developing and updating standards, policies, procedures, and protocols that then can be disseminated statewide. Examples may include care of the child with diabetes in schools, emergency planning, and tobacco-free schools. In addition, the SSNC participates in developing and promulgating regulations governing school health, such as immunization and medication administration requirements or guidelines. Through all these activities, the SSNC collaborates with a wide range of state and professional organizations. Examples include, but are not limited to, the state school nurses' organization, state nurses' association, board of registration in nursing, the Asthma and Allergy Foundation, the medical society, local chapters of the American Academy of Pediatrics, parent-teacher organizations, American Cancer Society, American Diabetes Association, and health maintenance organizations.

In many states, the SSNC collaborates with local universities to identify educational needs of school nurses in order to develop continuing education or degree programs to meet those needs. Because the school nurse is both a

clinician and a program manager, these programs must address a wide range of issues and skills. As the role expands, and as medical technology increasingly enters the schools, creating effective programs for a statewide audience becomes more challenging. The SSNC, in her or his statewide role, needs to keep abreast of changing trends, so that the programs will be relevant to the care of students in the school setting. Likewise, she or he needs to create partnerships with universities to develop and to implement research in the rapidly expanding specialty of school health.

The SSNC is responsible for developing data systems at a state level and for supporting data systems at a local level. Expanding technology is enabling school nurses to begin to track health indicators for large numbers of children. For example, some states are working with school nurses on asthma and diabetes surveillance. Other states have major initiatives in preventing overweight and monitoring body mass index. Because school nurses are in the unique position of serving large populations of children, their role in data collection is critical. Data on health services activities also can provide useful information to local school administrators and other decision-makers as programs are developed and budgets prepared.

On a daily basis, the SSNC provides consultation and technical assistance to school nurses, school administrators, teachers, and/or parents. School nurses often practice in comparatively isolated settings, and they depend on the SSNC for technical assistance when challenging circumstances arise. The SSNC provides updated information, using a variety of methods: Web sites, newsletters, weekly e-mails, and regular meetings. He or she also links school nurses to other colleagues who may be developing policy and programs in the same topic area. Promoting networking is a critical element of the role.

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Consistent with management in any health care field, the SSNC has the responsibility for exploring reimbursement systems and monitoring quality of care. As technology expands, states will begin to establish benchmarks for school health service utilization, with the goal of supporting educational achievement. Schools will need to address the issue of client satisfaction. And, the implementation of continuous quality improvement programs is essential to ensure safe standards of practice. For example, completion of follow-up for vision and hearing referrals should be monitored on a regular basis.

The role of the SSNC is ever changing and continues to vary from state to state. It provides a bridge between professional school nurses caring for students at the local level and the development of policy and programs at the state level. These policies should both support school-nursing practice and benefit the health and education of the state's children and adolescents.

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