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*NASN School Nurse* 2007; 22; 8

DOI: 10.1177/104747570702200604

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# Why Is the School Nurse Leader Role Important?

By Anne Sheetz, RN, MPH, Massachusetts

*Although this article uses the Massachusetts School Nurse Leader (SNL) title, it is intended to be a description of the generic role that is applicable to any state.*

School nursing, like professional nursing in other settings, requires the leadership and clinical supervision of a professional nursing manager. In some school districts, such as those in Massachusetts, the manager is called a *school nurse leader* (SNL), whereas in others, the title may be *school nurse supervisor* or *school nurse coordinator*. Although the role may differ, the critical elements are the support of optimal student health care and the professional school nurses who provide it.

School nursing today encompasses the intersection of three major systems: education, health, and public health. This requires a leader who is the public voice for child health and its relationship to educational achievement (Ouellette, 2000; National Association of State Boards of Education, 2000), a collaborator with a host of community health care providers and agencies, and an implementer of public health initiatives (Sheetz, 2003).

## Components of the SNL Role

- 1. The SNL provides leadership for the total district-wide health service program.** She or he develops a needs assessment, plans and implements programs, and ensures that standards are consistent among all school buildings. In collaboration with other disciplines, the SNL and nursing staff also develop health care policies, recommend them to the approving body, and implement and evaluate them. She or he coordinates the health services aspects of the coordinated school health program, sometimes assuming leadership of the overarching program.
- 2. The SNL has a critical role in supporting school nurses in their increasingly challenging practice.** She or he is charged with supervising and clinically evaluating performance, consistent with the 2006 National Association of State School Nurse Consultants' position statement on Clinical Supervision of School Nurses: "For the safety of students and to assure quality practice, school nurses must only be clinically supervised by a school nurse who is licensed as a registered nurse and who meets any other state required credentials for this supervisory role." As the school nursing role expands and new clinical technology and regimens emerge, the SNL must support the ongoing professional development of the nursing staff (both their clinical and their management skills).
- 3. The SNL also implements data systems and encourages nurses' use of data to support their practice, to demonstrate positive outcomes, and to develop ongoing reports to principals, superintendents, and the school committee.**
- 4. The SNL is a community liaison, addressing health issues of children and adolescents.** Interpreting the importance of health to all decision makers within the school, community, and state levels, she or he presents data geared to the goals of each audience. As health care increasingly shifts to the schools (e.g., asthma and diabetes management), the SNL must work with staff to implement communication and coordination systems with primary care providers and community health organizations.
- 5. The SNL serves as the pivotal contact person for all major public health initiatives within the school, such as growth screening, asthma surveillance, and new vaccine information (Knorr, Condon, Dwyer, & Hoffman, 2004).** The public health role of the school nurse is expanding exponentially as new risks emerge. She or he participates in all local emergency and pandemic planning efforts as schools play an integral role in community response.
- 6. The SNL is a key advocate for the health of all school-age children.** Whereas school nurses understand the health needs of children in their individual buildings, the SNL has the advantage of a broader perspective. She or he is responsible for both interpreting the importance of health services to the educational process and maintaining the health safety net for all children (Devlin & Asay, 2005). The SNL participates in school decisions that may affect health, such as changing recess hours, and advocates at the community level for policies relating to child health, such as the need for more health and mental health services. Statewide

child-health advisory committees increasingly are requesting school nurse membership, and the SNL offers valuable consultation as policies, legislation, and programs are constructed.

### **Infrastructure Critical to the Role**

In order to perform the role of the SNL, important infrastructure must be in place:

#### ***Freedom From Direct Care Responsibilities:***

Because time is needed to fulfill the SNL role, in Massachusetts, the Department of Public Health recommends that the SNL be freed from direct clinical care. History has demonstrated that those school districts that freed their SNL from direct services demonstrated the highest success rate in (a) strengthening school nursing infrastructure, including policy and procedures; (b) implementing tobacco-control programs; (c) developing linkages with primary care providers; and (d) implementing data systems (Sheetz, 2003).

#### ***Member of the School District's Management Team:***

The SNL's role includes planning and supporting district-wide programs aimed at reducing barriers to learning, such as ensuring high standards of care for chronically ill children in order to improve both health and attendance (Allen, 2003) and collaborating with other disciplines to improve the school's nutritional environment. Therefore, the SNL should be a member of the school's administrative team and should have responsibility for the district-wide school health service program, staff, and budget.

#### ***Communication System:***

Systems must be in place to coordinate efforts and to provide updated information from the state level to the community level. In Massachusetts, the Department of Public Health (DPH) has an e-mail tree of SNLs and contacts in communities throughout the Commonwealth. The Director of School Health provides weekly e-mails, which include updates from all DPH programs, conference offerings, and resources from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. SNLs then forward this information to school nursing staff, nonpublic schools in their communities, and other nurse contacts, thus empowering the school nurses with updated information essential to their practice. In addition, this system is used whenever a new public health initiative is launched.

#### ***Professional Development:***

To be effective, SNLs must have a minimum of a Baccalaureate of Science in Nursing (preferably a master's

degree) and management and administrative expertise. Duties may include leading meetings, supervising staff, encouraging professional development, budgeting, making oral presentations, writing, collaborating with media, advocating for child health, and *contributing (with their staff)* to the growing body of evidence-based school nursing practice.

### **The Future**

Although many states have begun to quantify school nursing activities, few have initiated a plan to identify the complex and varied aspects of the SNL role (Descoteaux, 2001). Recognizing their unique contributions and leadership, the Massachusetts ESHS Evaluation Committee, consisting of expert SNLs, has begun to develop and pilot an instrument to identify, on a monthly basis, the many activities of the role. The committee's goal is to interpret SNLs' importance to the educational system, the community's health care delivery system, and the state's public health infrastructure.

*For more information, please contact your State School Nurse Consultant. Please visit the National Association of State School Nurse Consultants' Website at <http://www.nassnc.org> for a listing of our members.*

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