

School Nursing in Missouri

School nurses face unique challenges as they provide care for healthy children and children with chronic illnesses in a non-medical environment. This document briefly summarizes the care that school nurses provide to students attending public schools and presents recommendations for supporting school nursing in Missouri.

“Health and education affect individuals, society, and the economy and, as such, must work together whenever possible. Schools are the perfect setting for this collaboration. Schools are one of the most efficient systems for reaching children and youth to provide health services and programs, as approximately 95 percent of all U.S. children and youth attend school. At the same time, integrating health services and programs more deeply into the day-to-day life of schools and students represents an untapped tool for raising academic achievement and improving learning.” – CDC Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child

Background

School nurses provide a variety of services and fulfill many roles; however, many misconceptions still exist regarding their occupation responsibilities. School nurses are unique from other healthcare workers in that they do not work in a traditional healthcare setting yet often treat chronic illnesses. They are also prepared to deal with acute illness, are responsible for first aid and medical emergencies, and provide preventative services—including immunization assessments and vision/hearing screenings. School nurses cover all of these areas of care with the goal of keeping children healthy and reduce school absenteeism. The services provided by school nurses are becoming more important than ever before as the number of students needing healthcare treatment during school hours continues to increase. For example, the number of public school students in Missouri who receive routine medications at school increased by 240% from 2005 to 2015.

School Nurses Often Treat Chronic Conditions and the Prevalence is Increasing

Missouri is one of only five states that have collected data on children’s health care needs over the last 10 years. These data are used to understand trends in children’s health conditions and for the State School Nurse Consultant to provide training and tools to school nurses. This information has shown increases in the prevalence of several chronic conditions in Missouri. Between 2005 and 2015, the number of public school students with:

- asthma increased by 41% (9,940 students as of 2015)
- life-threatening allergies increased by 238% (2,589 students as of 2015)
- seizure disorders increased by 36% (899 students as of 2015)
- type I diabetes increased by 30% (281 students as of 2015)
- type II diabetes increased by 45% (72 students as of 2015)

School nurses are often the first healthcare professional contact to refer students for developmental and mental health evaluations. For example, the most commonly reported mental or behavioral health condition in Missouri public schools was Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD; 7% as of 2015). Unfortunately, tools and training to help school nurses navigate children’s mental health disorders are not as readily available as tools for managing chronic physical conditions.

School Nurses are Often the First Point of Contact to Identify Social Determinants of Health

Social determinants of health, defined as socioeconomic factors that create additional barriers to being healthy and ready to learn, can hinder children’s educational experience. Children who face these barriers frequently present physical symptoms, such as headaches and stomachaches, for which they might see a school nurse. When interviewed, school nurses in Missouri cited unmet basic needs as the primary challenge they face when caring for children from disadvantaged families. School nurses often become involved in addressing a variety of social

determinants of health, including relieving hunger, helping families find a stable home, providing emotional support, and addressing transportation difficulties.

Missouri School-Age Children's Health Services Program (SHS) and Eventual Program Suspension

The SHS Program was established by House Bill 564 passed in 1994. This program provided funding to local public schools and public health agencies to offer health services for all school-age children in their local jurisdiction. Services included: access to primary and preventive health care, increased utilization of Medicaid, and improvements to health and safety for all children in schools. Before this bill, 268 public school districts in Missouri were without routine health services, but by 2010, 518 public school districts had a formal school health program. The number of children in the SHS program with:

- access to a regular source of medical care increased from 33% to 87%
- a dental exam within the past 12 months increased from 16% to 55%
- referral completion for hearing screening increased from 42% to 93%
- referral completion for vision screening increased from 39% to 84%

In 2010, funding for the SHS Program was suspended, resulting in 41 school districts being left with no health services and 82 school districts having a reduction in staffing. In 2015, 14% of all school districts in Missouri did not have a health services provider.

Recommendations

School nurses are often the first point of contact for children's healthcare needs. School nurses not only are responsible for daily health care needs that arise, but also manage treatment for chronic conditions, tend to children's mental and behavioral health, and do their best to help address children's social determinants of health. Based on qualitative interviews and accumulated data (2005-2015) from school nurses across Missouri, we recommend:

- Sharing with local school board members information on the need for school nurses in public schools.
- Reinstating regional meetings for school nurses to develop and maintain a supportive, collaborative network for training and professional development.
- Increasing and improving the collection of health data to inform the need for school nursing resources.
- Providing additional opportunities for education and professional development for school nurses.
- Recognizing school nurses as professionals in the education system; currently, most are considered support staff in public schools.
- Increasing the number of social workers and behavioral health specialist in schools to foster collaborations with school nurses that can lead to the creation of integrative health programs.
- Updating school equipment for hearing and vision screenings and designating appropriate space to improve effectiveness and time-efficiency.

For More Detailed Information:

Hines, L., Cole, M., & Martinez, M. M. (2016, January). School Nurses and School-based Healthcare: The Data and the Stories. The Family and Community Trust (FACT)—Missouri KIDS COUNT. Available at: <http://mokidscount.org/stories/school-nurses-and-school-based-healthcare-the-data-and-the-stories/>

Hines, L., Cole, M., Martinez, M. M., & Kauffman, M. (2016, February). School Nurses—How Social Determinants Impact Their Work. The Family and Community Trust (FACT)—Missouri KIDS COUNT. Available at: <http://mokidscount.org/stories/school-nurses-how-social-determinants-impact-their-work/>

Hines, L., Cole, M., Kauffman, M., & Martinez, M. M. (2016, March). School Nurses and the State School Nurse Consultant: A Continued Commitment to Children's Health. The Family and Community Trust (FACT)—Missouri KIDS COUNT. Available at: <http://mokidscount.org/stories/school-nurses-state-school-nurses-consultant-continued-commitment-childrens-health/>

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The Center for Family Policy & Research is housed in the Department of Human Development and Family Science at the University of Missouri. The center serves as a resource for the development of effective public policies relating to all children, families, and communities.

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