
School Nurses: A Solution to Safely Open Schools and Help Students Learn

Summary

School nurses are helping us safely reopen U.S. schools. These pandemic-related responsibilities are above and beyond the core contributions of school nurses; they traditionally address student health and mental health issues to support learning. Yet more than a quarter of our nation's schools don't have a school nurse. Most funding for school nurses is from education dollars, and since states' and schools' budgets are stretched during this pandemic, money to hire school nurses is scarce. **NASN asks that \$1.36B be allocated to help schools and districts hire nurses. Congress should also ensure that school nursing services are appropriately reimbursed by health insurance so that nurses can be retained long-term.**

\$1.36B is needed to fund a school nurse in every U.S. school. A [recent analysis](#) concluded that reopening safely will cost an additional \$400,000 per school district to hire more nurses, even if just part-time. There are 13,598 school districts in the United States and since 24.7 percent currently have no school nurse, \$1.36B would provide funding for every school to have at least a part-time school nurse.

Adequate reimbursement for services will ensure long-term retention of school nurses. In addition to the education dollars that support school nurses, [states can get insurance reimbursement to partially fund school nursing services](#). Most state Medicaid programs allow schools to bill for specific nursing services and then direct the reimbursed funds back into nursing positions. However, [only about half of schools do so](#). The rules and process for this reimbursement are dated and should be updated to ensure that states and schools get adequate reimbursement to retain school nurses.

The Opportunity: School Nurses Can Help Fight Coronavirus and Meet Student Health and Mental Health Needs

School nurses can help safely reopen schools and prevent COVID spread. During the 1918 pandemic, our nation learned that [school nurses were critical](#). The same is true now: school nurses are helping us [safely reopen schools](#) and prevent the spread of Coronavirus. In some places, school nurses are already implementing the COVID [prevention, detection, and isolation measures](#) that are needed to reopen schools. In [Texas](#) and elsewhere, school nurses have been instrumental in crafting school pandemic action plans and evaluating whether students should be pulled out of school because of Coronavirus-like symptoms. In other places like [Massachusetts](#), school nurses are helping local health departments with contact tracing.

School nurses help students learn. School nursing is linked to [improved academic outcomes](#). A [2015 study in Kentucky](#) documented higher graduation rates, lower absentee rates and higher ACT scores in public high schools that had a school nurse, compared with schools that didn't.

School nurses help keep healthy students in school. School nurses reduce the number of students who leave school because of illness or injury, thus [improving attendance](#) since students are not sent home unnecessarily. This is critical, since [chronic absenteeism](#) has a profoundly negative effect on student achievement, particularly for students of color, and is closely correlated with ongoing and/or unmet health care needs.

School nurses save time for teachers and other school staff. Not only do school nurses help students stay at school, they have also been shown to [save time](#) – 20 minutes/day for teachers, 1 hour/day for principals and 45 minutes/day for clerical staff. Teachers feel so strongly about the critical role of nurses that in some places they have demanded school nursing support as part of their [labor negotiations](#) and [strikes](#).

School nurses improve access to health care, particularly for children living in poverty. Today's students face more medically complex conditions and chronic health illnesses – including asthma, diabetes, food allergies, obesity, and mental health and behavioral issues. The [knowledge, assessment skills and judgment of a school nurse are needed](#) to manage these conditions. [About 37 percent of all school-age children and 79 percent of school-age children living in poverty are covered by Medicaid or CHIP](#), and nurses help these students and others access care.

School nurses help prevent, detect and get treatment for student mental health issues. [One in six k-12 age children has a treatable mental health disorder](#) such as depression, anxiety or attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder. Yet nearly half of children with these disorders did not receive counseling from a mental health professional. Student mental health issues are so important to teachers that some have gone on [strike](#) or demanded more counselors as part of their [labor negotiations](#), including demanding [more school nurses](#) who are often the ones who identify behavioral health concerns and get students into treatment.

School nurses can help get children immunized, which is especially challenging during COVID. Due to COVID, many [children are not up-to-date on immunizations](#) and cannot meet immunization requirements to attend school. School nurses routinely give immunizations and can [help now to make sure all children are caught up on their immunizations](#). [Schools that employ nurses have higher immunization rates](#), which also results in stronger herd immunity, meaning that fewer vaccine-preventable infections spread to those that are not immunized. School districts are implementing [back-to-school strategies that include immunizations](#) along with other COVID-related health priorities, like social distancing, mask wearing and increased hygiene measures.

School nurses are cost-effective. A [cost-benefit analysis of Massachusetts’ school nursing program](#) showed that for every dollar invested in the program, society would gain \$2.20. This [study](#) only accounted for the cost of parent’s time off work, teachers’ time and the cost of treatment. School nurses also provide cost-effective preventive services like wellness and disease prevention and early intervention services, including vision, hearing, and dental screenings. For example, [every dollar spent on immunization saves between \\$16 and \\$44](#), (Ozawa et al., 2016).

The Challenge: Funding to Hire School Nurses Now and Retain them Post-COVID

Not all schools have school nurses. Many school districts are [failing to meet the American Academy of Pediatrics’ recommendation](#) that there be at least [one registered nurse in every school](#). [A quarter of U.S. schools don’t have a school nurse](#) at all. And in one-third of the country, 36% of schools lack a school nurse.

Percentage of Schools with School Nurse Coverage



Funding to hire school nurses and retain them long-term is lacking. Three-quarters of school nurses are funded solely through [education dollars](#). When education dollars are stretched thin, such as during this pandemic, [school and district leaders often don’t have funding to hire or retain school nurses](#).



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Existing Legislative Initiatives

The NURSE Act (Nurses for Under Resourced Schools Everywhere) S. 1362 and H.R. 2606 has been introduced by Senator Jon Tester (D-MT) and Representative Dina Titus (D-NV) and has been in this iteration for the last three Congressional cycles. Prior to this, the legislation was written in as a ratio bill that would mandate a ratio of students to school nurse. The NURSE Act was re-written with help from Senator Jon Tester's office (D-MT) to focus on equity issues by emphasizing the need for school nurses in Title I schools. The NURSE Act would give grants to Title I schools, from the Department of Education, where there is not already a school nurse. This is a demonstration grant which mandates reporting that looks at the effectiveness of increasing school nursing as well as the effect school nurses have on the academic achievement and attendance of children.