

## **ADVOCACY 101: How to ACT and How to be HEARD!**

Certified school nurses often work in isolation and are not well-versed in how to navigate the legislative process. For most certified school nurses, advocacy becomes personal—dealing with a school or district administrator or board member who wants to make changes to the school nurse’s role or responsibilities in the district. It is time, however, that certified school nurses move beyond local issues to the bigger arena—certified school nursing in New Jersey is under attack. If we as a profession are not proactive and united, our voices will be diluted by calls for cost-saving measures—not student-saving measures. In some areas of the state, for-profit healthcare agencies already provide certified school nurses, substitute school nurses, and 1:1 nurses for students with special needs. For twenty years, private schools in New Jersey have been funded to employ registered nurses, not CSNs, to provide specific nursing services. While **we** understand that the student population may be significantly different in a private school versus a public school, particularly with the demands of special education, this practice has influenced legislators and others to see the possibilities of reducing or eliminating certification requirements for school nurses and of course, saving tax dollars. If that were to happen, New Jersey would no longer be viewed as the “gold standard” for school health services.

While NJSSNA currently boasts about 1200 members, there are many certified school nurses who are not members of NJSSNA, NASN, and the county affiliates. Our numbers must be strong and united--recruiting new members is critical to our success as a profession. NJSSNA also depends on its affiliation with NJEA for lobbying and advisement. Now is the time to boost our membership and show everyone that we are strong and that we speak with one voice!

What can you do? Thomas Jefferson once said: ***Do you want to know who you are? Don't ask. Act! Action will delineate and define you.*** Advocacy is what you say and do every single day. Each of us has the capacity to tell a story about how certified school nurses made a difference in the life of a child. Make sure it is always about kids, about health and learning, and about what is best for children, their families, and the community. IT IS NOT PERSONAL!

Here are a few tips to help you craft that important letter or email or make that phone call about an issue that impacts your practice and the health and safety of New Jersey’s children.

1. **Know the difference between law and code.** Law (statute) is promulgated by the New Jersey Legislature (Assembly and Senate) and signed by the Governor. Code (rule or regulation) is generated by the NJDOE and approved by the State Board of Education. Generally, the State Board of Education is not involved in writing the actual code/rules—the code is developed by NJDOE personnel and may be in response to new law or may be entirely separate from law. For example, NJAC 6A:16 is developed by the NJDOE and approved by the State Board. Some of the rules specifically reference statute and some

do not. Guidance, guidelines, frameworks, and other similar documents may have their origins in code or law but are usually best practices or advice and not viewed as law or code.

2. **Be informed!** Go to <http://www.njleg.state.nj.us/> to find out what is happening in the New Jersey Legislature. Here you can find out how to contact sponsors, the status of bills, and which bills have passed and are now law. It takes a little practice to navigate this site but you can do it! If you are unsure, click on public information assistance (on the left) or even the Kid's Page to learn how a bill becomes law. You can also subscribe to receive the agenda for the monthly State Board of Education meetings at: <http://www.state.nj.us/education/sboe/meetings/agenda.shtml>.
3. **Know your legislators.** Get to know the legislative representatives from both your home and school legislative districts. Look at the kind of bills the legislators have sponsored and note their interests and employers. See if they chair any important committees. To find out more about your legislators, go to: <http://www.njleg.state.nj.us/districts/municipalities.asp> OR <http://www.njleg.state.nj.us/members/roster.asp>.
4. **Make your opinion count!** Form letters may be ignored, but they do help people who are unsure about writing formal letters. Take the key elements from a form letter and personalize your correspondence. Start out by thanking the legislator for his/her interest in school and student health. Comment on those parts of the bill you like—this may be hard but try to find something that is “admirable.” (For example, the intent of the bill is admirable, to help save the lives of children but.....). Don't just say you oppose a bill—tell the sponsors why you oppose it and suggest new language that will make the bill more acceptable. Make everything about kids and not about you and your job! **PS: Don't use your school district letterhead. Do use your personal email address, home address, and phone number. Your comments are as a private citizen and not as a representative of your school district or employer.**
5. **Get feedback!** Have someone NOT connected to school nursing read and comment on your letter or email BEFORE you send it to a legislator. Does this person understand your concerns and your positions? Remember, the legislator may not see your email or letter—it may be an intern or staffer that serves as gatekeeper. If your “personal reader” does not understand the point of your correspondence, chances are the staffers won't either.
6. **Follow-Up.** Make a call, send another email thanking the legislator and asking if he/she has considered your comments or schedule an appointment if you live in that district. Don't expect a response more than a “thank you” if you are not a resident of the legislator's district. That's ok—anyone can comment on any bill posted in the legislature.

7. **Be prepared to tell your story.** Always be ready with stories about how you as a CERTIFIED school nurse helped a child. Examples are powerful. Make the connection to your education in this NURSING SPECIALTY and how you are uniquely positioned to connect health and education. Use data. Your stories help put a “face” on the issue and keep the focus on kids and what you do every day to help them learn.

**REMEMBER.....**

- ***It takes one minute to leave a message.***
- ***It takes 3-5 minutes to copy an article and share with someone.***
- ***It takes 5-10 minutes to send an email or fax or post on the Web.***

The time you take to educate your legislators and other interested stakeholders may be your best investment! This is your future and the future of New Jersey’s students. Act now and be heard!

**NJSSNA--United WE are School Nurses: Leading, Teaching, Caring!**