

School Nurses Help Create Healthy and Thriving Learning Environments for ALL students

There is a common misconception that the role of school nurses only includes the occasional first aid duties and caring for kids with a cold or the flu. Yet, the truth is that the responsibilities of school nurses are critical to monitoring and maintaining healthy and thriving schools. School Nurses are foundational to making public education available to every student, regardless of any and all pre-existing health conditions and circumstances.

As head nurse, Debi Bradfield put it, “ Every day I am constantly bombarded everywhere at school - in the hallways, in the lunchroom, in the classroom, on the playground- with the responsibility of assessing what I see to make sure students are okay.” She shared that as a school nurse, she uses ALL of her nursing skills all the time. “There is an idea that school nurses operate very differently than a nurse in a hospital or doctor’s office, but the truth is everything I learned as a hospital nurse, I use at the school. This includes, making assessments and nursing diagnoses, administering preventive health care, first aid, taking care of administrative duties, and responsibilities to families and students.”

The main goal of school nurses as Debi Bradfield put it is to “ help keep students in school”. Counter to what people may think, which is that school nurses are there to send students home when sick, their job is actually to do everything they can to treat, prevent, and monitor to make sure that students can continue to learn without the barriers that poor health can create.

A credentialed school nurse is, by law, a registered nurse with at least a bachelor's degree in nursing and usually a Public Health Nurse certification, plus the necessary School Health Services Credential. The health credential takes at least another two years of education beyond the bachelor's, plus hands-on work.

Plumas Unified has two school nurses - Debi Bradfield, in Quincy and Emilee Pruitt, in Portola. PUSD also has Licensed Vocational Nurses (LVNs) at most school sites. LVNs are very important to providing licensed nurse health services in schools. Our LVNS work part-time at the schools and attend to all things first aid plus medication administration, including insulin calculations, asthma care, comfort, encouragement, and calling parents.

They also work directly with students with special health care needs. For instance, one LVN, Christina, cares for a student with special needs during each day. She rides the bus with the student and monitors the student and their medical equipment. She is crucial to helping the student learn at school. Our other LVNs are Tina at QHS, Emily at QES, Emilee and Mel at IVES.

PUSD has school health services provided in Chester by Registered Nurse Sylvia. Although she is not yet credentialed, she is working towards becoming a credentialed school nurse. Nursing services are provided in Greenville by Nurse Emilee and Nurse Mel. Since these nurses do not have a credential, the credentialed school nurse who oversees them and provides guidance and mandated health services is retired School Nurse Nancy Hemsley, RN, CPNP. Nancy travels to the communities of Greenville and Chester once a week to oversee the nurses and get the state-mandated screenings and reports completed.

The two certified school nurses in our district are responsible for orchestrating all health programs in the schools. They oversee programs that are legally mandated by education code and must be administered only by a credentialed school nurse. Some examples include: Immunizations, special education health reports, school screenings, case managing chronic and medically complex conditions like seizures, diabetes, and Down Syndrome. School Nurses also work with other agencies like Plumas County Public Health, social services, local medical providers, Plumas County Behavioral Health, and the Sheriff's office.

All Health Services in PUSD are overseen by the Department of Pupil Services. The Director of Pupil Services, Laura Blesse, works closely with the nurses and helps make sure all students' health needs are addressed.

The role of school nursing includes preventing disease and the spread of infection, catching and helping prevent complications of health conditions and monitoring pre-existing conditions. As Debi Bradfield and Emilee Pruitt explained, everything from diabetes, to epilepsy, to scoliosis, to vision, hearing, and dental issues, to anemia has been discovered by school nurses and health screenings at the schools.

Mandated health screenings of vision and hearing happen in Kindergarten or First grade, 2nd grade, 5th grade, and 10th or 11th grade. By 1st grade, every student is required to have had a head to toe physical examination by a medical provider. It also includes a dental exam, which needs to be done by a dentist or a registered dental hygienist. If kids come through Kindergarten Round-up they can receive this exam at no out-of-pocket expense. And have fun doing it!

Credentialed school nurses are also responsible for teacher and staff trainings that may deal with medication administration, seizures, diabetes, concussion management, infection control and specialized health care procedures. School nurses are also vital to the success of school field trips and allowing students with health conditions to continue to be involved with school activities on and off campus.

School nurses track each student's immunization record and work with parents to make sure that their students have all their necessary immunizations from Kindergarten to graduation.

Additionally, an important role of the school nurses is to develop medical care plans for students with unique health issues. This requires important collaboration with health professionals and parents. School nurses work with the students' doctors and parents to create a health plan that addresses their medical diagnosis and ensures that the students will be safe and as healthy as possible during school and on school field trips. These health plans include important information on restrictions or authorizations for various physical activities and potential medical measures and action plans for complications during the school day.

As evident from the variety of roles and responsibilities that school nurses are entrusted with, school nurses are vital to the overall success of a school. Effective and efficient learning requires good physical and mental health. A nursing presence at schools improves student health and as the National Association of School Nurses says, "Healthy kids learn better".

Plumas Unified is thankful to all our school nurses, licensed vocational nurses, and registered nurses for providing quality health care at our school sites and ensuring that public education is available and accessible to every child who wishes to attend our schools.