

School Nurses in Idaho's Public Schools

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November 23, 2017

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The Honorable John McCrostie  
Idaho House of Representatives  
7820 W. Riverside Drive  
Garden City, ID 83714

Dear Representative McCrostie:

I am writing today to respectfully request you introduce a bill requiring all Idaho public schools to employ, at a minimum, a part-time Bachelor of Science in nursing (BSN)-educated school nurse. As a senior year nursing student and a mother of three children who attend public schools in Idaho (all with chronic health conditions and one with an autism spectrum disorder), I am deeply dismayed at the lack of standardization regarding the availability and quality of nursing care provided to Idaho's schoolchildren.

Currently, Idaho has no laws requiring public schools to employ school nurses (Samantha Congdon, personal communication, September 12, 2017). This often leaves professionals such as teachers, office staff, or principals responsible for student health decisions. Due to their lack of healthcare training, these individuals make healthcare decisions for which they are not qualified. In extreme cases, this has directly led to the avoidable death of students!

While some Idaho school districts do employ school nurses, their number and education vary widely. Having BSN-educated school nurses available to *all* students attending public schools in Idaho benefits schools, students, teachers, parents, and society in general. Idaho simply can't afford to entrust the daily healthcare of its future leaders to unqualified or unlicensed individuals. Doing so is irresponsible and self-sabotaging.

Thank you for your service to Idaho students and their parents as an educator and a member of Idaho's House of Representatives. I urge you to continue your strong support of Idaho's students and future by introducing a bill requiring all Idaho public schools to employ, at a minimum, a part-time BSN-educated school nurse.

Sincerely,

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### School Nurses in Idaho's Public Schools

Monday through Friday across the United States, children attend public schools to improve their knowledge and skills. But to effectively learn, children need more than a school building and qualified teachers; they also need support for their physical, mental, and emotional health. School nurses play a vital role in maintaining and improving the health of students. Unfortunately, there are no standardized requirements for public schools to employ school nurses. This oversight has caused short-term frustration and difficulty for students, parents, and school personnel. It has also resulted in poor health outcomes for students with chronic illnesses. Sadly, in extreme cases it has even cost the lives of young children (Camera, 2016; Eckart, 2016)! Idaho must protect the health of its children and its future. Therefore, a bill requiring all Idaho public schools to employ, at a minimum, a part-time Bachelor of Science in nursing (BSN)-educated school nurse is greatly needed.

### **School Nurses: The Current Landscape**

Unfortunately, when it comes to the daily availability of school nurses in public schools there are no standards at either the federal or state level to which schools are currently held.

### **United States: Federal Regulations**

There are no federal regulations regarding school nurses in public schools; therefore, coverage of schools by nursing staff varies from state to state (DeNisco, 2014). In fact, according to the National Association of School Nurses (NASN), only 45% of public schools in the United States had full-time nurses in 2007, 30% had only a part-time or split-time nurse (who works for more than one school at a time), and a staggering 25% of public schools had no school nurse at all (DeNisco, 2014; Lawyers.com, 2017)! Unfortunately, the situation does not appear to be

improving, as more districts nationwide are “eliminating school nurses or replacing them with unlicensed staffers” (DeNisco, 2014, p. 22).

### **Idaho State**

Samantha Congdon, past President of the School Nurse Organization of Idaho and a current School Nurse employed by the West Ada School District, explained that West Ada School District employs 43 nurses to care for the more than 39,000 students in the school district (personal communication, September 12, 2017). West Ada School District outperforms many other school districts in Idaho. Unfortunately, with a ratio of more than 906 students per nurse, West Ada's nurse to student ratio still falls short of the recommendations of NASN and the Centers for Disease Control who suggest a *minimum* of one nurse to every 750 students (Camera, 2016; Lawyers.com, 2017).

### **Why Should Idaho Require School Nurses?**

School nurses fill a unique and very health-specific role. Having BSN-educated school nurses available to all students attending public school has many benefits.

### **School Nurses: Responsibilities**

Contrary to popular public opinion, school nurses do more – much more – than hand out bandaids and ice packs (Samantha Congdon, personal communication, September 14, 2017). Some of the school nurse's many responsibilities include “administering first aid and care for sudden illnesses, annual vision and hearing screenings, dispensing medication, and developing care plans for students with severe and life-threatening conditions” (Eckart, 2016, Need on the rise section, para. 2). As the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (2010) points out, school nurses also help students access resources for substance-abuse treatment, mental health, and reproductive health services. And according to Ms. Congdon, school nurses also care for staff,

teachers, parents, and “anyone who walks through our doors” (personal communication, September 14, 2017). Clearly, school nurses have an important role to fill.

### **No School Nurse? Serious Consequences**

Not having a school nurse is not just a healthcare issue – it's a basic safety issue (Eckart, 2016)! Serious consequences have resulted from not having school nurses. Children whose chronic conditions are not well-managed can and do suffer fatalities. For instance, a sixth-grade girl in Philadelphia died due to poor management of an asthma attack at school (Camera, 2016). In Washington, a fifth-grade girl died after having an allergic reaction due to failure of school staff to follow the nurse's care plan in the nurse's absence (Eckart, 2016). Had an appropriately educated school nurse been present for either of these situations, the girls' lives may not have been lost. And while these cases may be extreme, small errors (such as medication errors) can and do happen more frequently when school nurses are not managing and administering medications (NASN, 2012). For a child with a chronic condition, a single missed dose of medication during the school day can result in weeks of illness or even hospitalization.

### **Benefits of School Nurses**

School nurses greatly benefit students, parents, teachers, other school staff, and society.

**Students.** Students' benefits from having a school nurse include better management of chronic conditions such as asthma and diabetes as well as more thorough assessment and care of acute concerns (NASN, 2012). Due to improved medical care for preterm infants, more students with chronic conditions related to prematurity are attending public schools. These students need skilled management of their health conditions during school hours (NASN, 2012). Healthy students are more willing and able to focus on schoolwork, and having access to a competent

school nurse increases the likelihood that students will have health concerns addressed and treated early (Missouri Kids Count, 2015).

**Parents.** Parents benefit from school nurses because their children are sent home ill from school less frequently (Wang et al., 2014). This is due both to better management of chronic conditions and better treatment of acute concerns. Because students are healthier and able to attend school more consistently, parents are required to take fewer days off work and to pay less in childcare fees (DeNisco, 2014; NASN, 2012; NASN, 2015; Wang et al., 2014).

**Teachers and other school staff.** Teachers and other school staff are required to tend to healthcare needs of students in the absence of a school nurse (Camera, 2016). Having a school nurse present to address students' healthcare needs affords school staff more time for their primary responsibilities and increases their job satisfaction (NASN, 2012; NASN, n.d.).

**Society.** NASN (2012) explains that repeated school absence predicts student achievement and even dropout rates. Society clearly benefits when students complete their education, and school nurses have been shown to reduce absenteeism which in turn leads to higher achievement and lower dropout rates (NASN, 2012). Additionally, many children who live in poverty have no access to healthcare except through the school nurse (Camera, 2016). Preventative care provided to these children by school nurses prevents disease, decreasing society's monetary burden of treating their illnesses.

### **Addressing Concerns**

#### **Cost**

Cost is always a factor when considering legislation, and requiring public schools in Idaho to employ BSN-educated nurses is no exception. While finding funds to employ school nurses may seem daunting, the long-term monetary benefits for schools, families, and society far

outweigh the initial struggle to find adequate funding. Creative funding options used in other states include taxes; public and private grants; partnerships with healthcare providers, insurers, and/or nursing schools; PTA/PTO budgets and fundraisers; health departments; board of education budgets; Medicaid billing; and other local and state organizations (DeNisco, 2014; NASN, 2017; Oregon Health Authority, n.d.; Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2010).

### **Licensure: Do We Really Need BSN Educated Nurses?**

While it may seem cost-effective to employ school nurses with less than a Bachelor's degree education, nurses with less education do not possess the same skills and critical thinking ability as BSN-educated nurses (NASN, 2016). According to NASN recommendations, schools should employ BSN-educated nurses full-time at a ratio not to exceed 750 students per one nurse (Camera, 2016; Lawyers.com, 2017; Missouri Kids Count, 2015; NASN, 2017). LPNs (Licensed Practical Nurses) or VNs (Vocational Nurses) can be used to supplement the BSN-educated school nurse, but should not be used as a replacement due to their lack of comprehensive training (Lawyers.com, 2017; NASN, 2016). Sufficient education and training can mean the difference between a student receiving appropriate, timely, life-saving care or inadequate assessment and treatment that may lead to death.

### **Conclusion**

Requiring BSN-educated nurses in public schools will benefit schools, students, parents, teachers, other school personnel, and society at large. The long-term health benefits and societal implications far outweigh the cost of employing high-quality school nurses. I urge you to continue your strong support of Idaho's students and future by introducing a bill requiring all Idaho public schools to employ, at a minimum, a part-time BSN-educated school nurse. Thank you for working to make Idaho a safe and healthy place to educate our country's future leaders.

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