

# SCHOOL NURSES & YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH



WISCONSIN OFFICE OF CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH

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## WHY THIS MATTERS

School nurses do more than just provide bandages and ice packs. They are critical team members who care for both students and staff. School nurses help manage students' chronic health conditions, render first aid, administer life-saving medications like epinephrine and naloxone, monitor communicable diseases, and provide immunizations, plus conduct vision and hearing screenings. Now more than ever, school nurses are also managing student mental health.

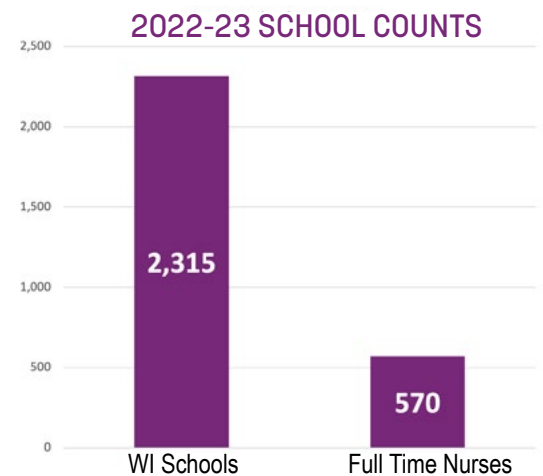
## WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

The role of school nurse is one of the broadest nursing roles and requires expertise in both direct care to individuals and community wide population health<sup>1</sup> Despite nurses being the most trusted profession in the country<sup>2</sup>, half reported feeling bullied, threatened, or harassed during the pandemic.<sup>3</sup>

A cost-benefit analysis of school nursing found that school nursing prevents medical costs as well as parent and teacher productivity losses. The resulting net benefits were clear: for every dollar invested in school nursing, communities reap more than twice that amount in benefits.<sup>4</sup>

## WHAT'S HAPPENING IN WISCONSIN?<sup>5</sup>

Wisconsin only requires school districts to provide "emergency nursing services." Of the 75% of districts that report they employ a school nurse, the contracts can range from a few hours per year to the majority of the year. In many cases, the school nurse splits time between schools, serving an entire district and traveling to several buildings. Some nurses even cover multiple school districts, particularly in rural parts of the state. Wisconsin's school nurse to student ratio is one nurse for every 1,443 students (1:1443). Recent reports indicate there are 570 full-time school nurses serving our 2,315 public schools.



## HOW SCHOOL NURSES CAN HELP

The school nurse is often a student's first point of contact when they need help. Knowing physical and mental health are intertwined, school nurses are at the front lines of picking up on what could be underlying indicators of a mental health issue. Stomachaches and headaches can be a sign of anxiety because, for many kids, stress manifests as a physical symptom first.

Nursing promotes wellness and does not separate mental health from physical health. All registered nurses receive training in mental health, but in many schools, nurses

lack the support and recognition within the school to address mental health.<sup>6</sup>

Knowing the school nurse is commonly the first person a student goes to with a problem, and that they are a trusted adult in the school, specifically training school nurses in suicide prevention and mental health promotion can serve the whole school community. For example, training school nurses in Youth Mental Health First Aid could help them to identify, screen, and refer at-risk students for help. They can also serve as a trusted partner when communicating with families.

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## HOW SCHOOL NURSES HELP

Additionally, school nurses are uniquely positioned to collect and manage student health data, which provides insight on student attendance, builds a fuller picture of students' health needs, informs referrals, and helps identify the best community-based resources. Including a medical perspective on school-wide teams is just one of the critical functions of a school nurse. The CDC highlights four key areas in which school nurses work to support school-based mental health.<sup>7</sup>



Providing direct care and medication management.



Conducting screenings to identify student needs.



Supporting emergency preparedness and crisis response.



Managing referrals and care coordination with other school and community providers.

## WHAT WE CAN DO

### ➤ PARENTS/CAREGIVERS:

- Get to know your child's school nurse and establish a trusted line of communication.
- Share your child's medical and mental health status with the school nurse.
- Ask your child's school to have the school nurse speak at school events to foster connections.
- Advocate for a full-time school nurse in the district.

### ➤ SCHOOLS:

- Include school nurses on the mental health team, school safety team, attendance committee, and in 504/IEP meetings.
- Actively promote the integration of mental health care into school nursing practice by providing training, resources, and recognition.
- Designate school nurses to help administer school-wide wellness screenings.
- Collaborate with school nurses in decisions on school health, especially during crises.
- Invest in training programs that ensure nurses have skills to act as emergency responders in an active shooter event.
- Invite school nurses to speak in classrooms, at back-to-school nights, and at family engagement events to educate families about student mental health risks and in-school supports.

### ➤ PROVIDERS:

- Partner with and share data with school nurses, who are the health experts within their schools.
- Involve school nurses in care coordination and case management.

### ➤ POLICYMAKERS:

- Invest in consistent and sustained funding to support school nurses in every school district, with a focus on staffing rural areas in particular. Funding should include an investment in training in suicide prevention and mental health literacy programs.
- Expand access to Medicaid school-based services to build a sustainable funding stream.
- Invite school nurses to speak on school mental health funding issues.
- Support the [One School, One Nurse Act](#).

### ➤ COMMUNITIES:

- Include school nurses in public health and school board decision-making.
- Invite school nurses to local board of health meetings and share school health data.
- Advocate for a full-time school nurse in every school.
- Share community programs and after-school offerings with school nurses who can connect students to resources.

#### REFERENCES:

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- <sup>3</sup> CDC, Mental Health of School Nurses in the United States during the COVID-19 Pandemic. 2022. [https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/shs/school\\_nurses\\_mh\\_study.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/shs/school_nurses_mh_study.htm).
- <sup>4</sup> Wang et al. Cost-Benefit Study of School Nursing Services. 2014. doi:10.1001/jamapediatrics.2013.5441.
- <sup>5</sup> Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. 2017-2023 Trend Data on School Nurses.
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- <sup>7</sup> National Association of School Nurses. Elevating the Role of School Nurses in School Based Mental and Behavioral Health. 2023. <https://npin.cdc.gov/publication/elevating-role-school-nurses-school-based-mental-and-behavioral-health>