

School Nurse

Making

A

DIFFERENCE in the **lives** of **students** with **special needs**

Gina, a sixth grader, takes prescription medicine to treat attention deficit disorder. Her school will not allow any student to keep medicines in bookbags or lockers, and teachers cannot safeguard or administer medications. Who can give Gina her medicine at school?

Tran, a middle school student, has just been diagnosed with juvenile diabetes. He is 12. Tran's family recently moved to the United States from Asia, and his parents speak very little English. Who can help Tran and his family understand the seriousness of diabetes?

Skip, a high school freshman, uses a wheelchair. Until a car accident caused serious leg injuries, Skip was an outstanding baseball player on the school team. One way he's dealing with depression is by smoking cigarettes, a newly acquired habit. Skip's mother confided to a school counselor that she feels angry and overwhelmed. She wants to help her son but doesn't know what to do. Who can help Skip and his family?

A school nurse can help Gina, Tran, and Skip with their problems. The nurse will ask Gina's parents to submit the medicine to the school in the original container, clearly labeled with Gina's name, dosage, and time schedule. This information will also be added to Gina's medical card or file that is maintained by the school nurse.



CAREERS

in Special Education and Related Services

The nurse can ease Tran's anxieties by arranging to counsel him about the importance of treating his diabetes. Using printed material and a videotape about the disease, the nurse can show him the kinds of food and exercise that he needs and can instruct both Tran and his teachers to recognize an insulin reaction. For additional support, the nurse might introduce Tran to a registered dietician or to a member from the local chapter of the American Diabetes Association. Through school connections or community resources, the nurse can arrange for an interpreter for Tran's parents, so that they can support their son's treatment.

From the school nurse's perspective, Skip's difficulties are the most complex of the three students, because he has both physical and emotional problems. Since Skip's mother has requested help from the school, the nurse can proceed to gather information from Skip's physicians, teachers, and parents. Her search for information may include: Does the school or community have recreation programs for athletes with disabilities? Are there any health or community programs that would teach Skip about health and fitness for a person in a wheelchair? Are there mentoring programs that can help Skip meet other athletes with disabilities? The school nurse along with other school staff can find out and advise Skip and his family.

Nature of Work

The responsibilities of school nurses working with students with disabilities have grown enormously since 1975 when Congress passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act and, its subsequent amendments as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Forty years ago, for example, a school nurse usually had very little contact with students with disabilities and their families. Today, however, because of congressional acts, children with various disabilities from birth through age 21 can attend any school program and use the services a school nurse can provide to help him or her to have a quality educational school program.

School nurses promote good health in schools so that students may have successful school careers by:

- Performing vision, hearing, dental, and spinal scoliosis health screening tests.
- Providing emergency first aid.
- Monitoring student compliance with state immunization laws.
- Assessing the health needs of students and coordinating appropriate curriculum or activities for them.
- Counseling students about chronic illnesses, the effects of nutrition, disease prevention, and positive lifestyles.
- Interpreting medical data and contributing to the health component of individualized education programs (IEPs) for students with disabilities.
- Participating with the school administration in investigating cases of suspected child abuse and neglect.
- Training teachers and staff members to perform standard procedures that might be needed for students with disabilities—gastrostomy tube feeding, tracheostomy care, responding to a child having a seizure, using oxygen in the classroom or on the bus.

School nurses also serve as liaisons to the community, a function that can be both creative and challenging. An elementary school nurse in Delaware opened her office one day to the public for free blood pressure screenings. A Virginia nurse who supervises clinic room aides in six schools that serve a total of 4,000 students contributed suggestions to the county health department on standardizing medical diagnostic procedures in schools. A school nurse in Pennsylvania helped develop her school's "Nurse's Office" home page for the World Wide Web. It includes information about medication; physicals for athletes; school-related injuries; and where to find help for drug, alcohol, and mental health problems.

Although some school nurses work primarily with students, all school nurses confer regularly with parents,

teachers, administrators, and health professionals in the community. If a communicable disease has affected the student body, for example, the school nurse can provide vital information to the administration and suggest appropriate action. School nurses also provide a critical role in the case management of a student with health problems. A student who needs health care in the school setting should have an individualized health care plan (IHCP), allowing the school nurse to plan, describe, document and evaluate the nursing care delivered to children in schools. IHCPs are becoming more commonly used in schools as there are more students who are chronically ill and medically fragile attending school.

Education Required

To become a Registered Nurse (R.N.) in any state, a student must graduate from an accredited nursing school and pass a national licensing examination. Nurses can be licensed in more than one state, and licenses must be renewed every one to two years depending on the state.

Qualifications for school nurses vary by state. Some states require registered nurses with an active state license to serve on site in schools; other states place registered nurses in supervisory positions to oversee health aides in schools. School nurses can be employed by county health departments, state health departments, or school systems.

Students can earn an associate degree, a diploma, or a bachelor of science degree in nursing. Some nurses' training programs specialize even further. Millikin University in Illinois, for example, teaches courses specifically for nurses who plan to work in school settings. R.N.s holding bachelor's or master's degrees have the broadest advancement opportunities. Once a degree is received, it is recommended that you continue taking professional education courses to maintain and upgrade knowledge in the rapidly changing and expanding field of school nursing.

Personal Qualities

School nurses are caring and sympathetic, and are concerned with the physical, mental, and emotional needs of their students. They have excellent listening skills and can instruct both children and adults about a variety of health issues and treatments. School nurses follow a code of ethics and deal with sensitive and/or confidential information in an appropriate manner. They are mature and trustworthy individuals, and they should be able to keep meticulous written records.



Denice Reese, RN CPNP
School Nurse
Parsons, West Virginia

Denice Reese is a full-time school nurse for one preschool, two elementary middle schools, and one high school in Tucker County, West Virginia. An Ohio native, she received three degrees from Case Western Reserve University: bachelor's degrees in biology and nursing and a master's degree in pediatric nursing. Denice is certified as a pediatric nurse practitioner.

Before her current position, Denice was employed in a large university hospital in pediatric emergency services. She entered the pediatric nursing profession because she likes working with children. After her hospital work, Denice became a school nurse. She thought being a school nurse could be a very creative job "because you can teach children so much about living a good life when you are dealing with their health." Because there is no hospital in the county, it is particularly important for students to stay healthy.

Denice is responsible for the medical needs of the 1,400 students who attend the county schools, as well as the programs she coordinates for students and staff. Her work with the Healthy Schools Project was cited when Denice was presented the National School Nurse of the Year award in 1996 by the National Association of School Nurses in Washington, D.C.

Daily Schedule: "I do first aid whenever I'm available for that, but it is not a big part of my job," explained Denice. "The myth about school nurses is that you only check for head lice and hand out Band-aids. That's far from the truth." In addition to providing direct care for students and staff, she supervises other care givers, plans for the medical needs of students while they are in school, trains teachers and staff, as well as organizes programs and projects. For example, because Denice cannot be at all four schools at the same time to administer medications to individual students,

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she arranges for others to do that task. Denice is also involved in follow-up care for students with medical problems, which may require arranging for medical appointments or communication with various professionals.

Supervising the Healthy Schools Project has been a major part of Denice's job. Initiated by her county in West Virginia, the program addresses eight components of a healthy school, including health services, health education, counseling, community relations, staff wellness, child nutrition, health education, and physical education. The project has addressed issues in all of the above areas. Preparing healthier school lunches, improving the health and physical education curricula, and increasing staff wellness have resulted in tangible results.

Students who are receiving special education services know Denice through her involvement in individual help and in planning for their needs while they are at school. She sometimes attends doctor's appointments with children and serves as an advocate for them. She refers students to other health professionals when necessary and helps parents determine how to pay for medicines and care when their children are not eligible for Medicaid services. Denice also intervenes on behalf of preschoolers who are developmentally delayed and need special services.

Challenges: "There's an overwhelming amount of work that needs to be accomplished in this job. I don't see the paperwork as a problem even though it takes a lot of time because I see the value in being able to track information, but I would like to spend more time with kids. The challenge is keeping your priorities straight when there are conflicting demands."

Satisfaction: "I like the teamwork associated with this job. When it works, it works very well. Because we're a small school system in a rural county, we don't have enough resources to do anything twice. People here have incentive to do the job right the first time. We're also trying to teach skills for lifetime health. In our Healthy Schools Project, for example, we've worked hard to teach older kids not just about anatomy and physiology, but to teach them skills to make sound decisions about sex, drugs, alcohol, tobacco, and other risky activities. In talking to students, I hear indications that some of them have made better decisions as a result of the teaching we're doing. It is a process. We must continue our work."

Job Outlook and Advancement

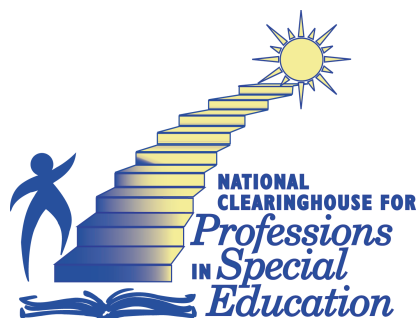
Almost two million registered nurses were employed in the United States throughout the last decade with about two-thirds of them working in hospitals. The others worked in clinics, home health agencies, nursing homes, schools, and government agencies.

Employment opportunities for registered nurses are expected to grow faster than other types of employment through the year 2005. Nursing jobs in hospitals are expected to grow more slowly than in other health care sectors because of the increase of outpatient care. In the future, the largest number of nursing jobs will be available in home health care.

School nursing positions are growing steadily in demand, especially to work with the growing number of students with special needs. If you wish to work in a school setting, you should consult the state nursing association and/or the school/county in which you seek employment. Some states employ registered nurses in schools as supervisors over licensed practical nurses or nurse technicians. Many states are also requiring school nurse certification as a requirement for employment. Certification requirements in most states include a current Registered Nurse license, bachelor's degree in nursing, a successful score on the national examination, and a 200 hours of supervised practicum or 1,500 hours of school nursing practice.

With graduate education and appropriate certification, registered nurses can advance to clinical nurse specialist, nurse practitioner, certified nurse-midwife, or nurse anesthetist. Job advancement in schools is limited; however, some supervisory positions are available in larger systems.

The school nurse certificate is awarded by the National Board for Certification of School Nurses, Inc. For further information on certification or to receive a list of accredited school nurse graduate programs, contact the National Association of School Nurses, or the National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education.



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How to Prepare for a Career

Aspiring school nurses need strong academic backgrounds in science, biology, chemistry, psychology, mathematics, and communications. During high school, volunteer to work in hospitals with children, with your school nurse, or as a teacher assistant in a special education class to learn more about special needs students. Consider summer employment as a receptionist in a clinic or as a camp counselor who can assist the camp nurse working with various disabilities and needs of campers. Contact the county school nurse supervisor in your town and ask about volunteer opportunities in immunization projects, community health programs, or public health screenings.

RESOURCES

National Association of School Nurses, Inc.

P.O. Box 1300
Scarborough, ME 04070-1300
207-883-2117
nasn@nasn.org
www.nasn.org

American Nurses' Association

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Washington, DC 20024-2571
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