

THE INFLUENCE OF POLICY ON SCHOOL NURSING PRACTICE

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A Senior Honors Project Presented to the

Honors College

East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for

Graduation with Honors

by

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December 2, 2024

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Abstract

Introduction/Significance: School nurses are in an optimal position to influence the health of a large population of school-age children. Literature suggests that school nursing practice varies greatly, and school nurse interventions are often focused on various priorities of school health. Policy implementation in schools that include school nurse intervention may facilitate an increase in specific school nurse practice. This case study examined the school nurse practice and school policy dyad of one school nurse in a rural area of North Carolina.

Methods: Case study design was used to examine the practice of a unique case of a school nurse in a rural area of North Carolina and associated school policy. Secondary data generated from a de-identified school nurse interview was the primary source of evidence. Two additional sources of evidence were used, the school health website for the school district and the school's policy related to school nutrition. The data were analyzed to identify similarities between the school nurse's practice and related school policy. **Results:** One overarching theme was identified, 1) Inclusion of the school nurse in policy facilitated school nurse practice, and one subtheme was identified 1) Communication, school nurse awareness of existing policy and communication is vital. Findings indicated that the school nurse's practice in this case was directly influenced by the presence of a related school policy and the school nurse's awareness of the policy. Both the school health website and the school policy reviewed integrated the role of the school nurse.

Discussion: While the findings of this case study are not generalizable to all school nurses, findings support the impact on practice with the inclusion of the school nurse in policy and the school nurse's awareness of school policy.

Background and Significance

There is currently a global shortage of school nurses which poses a risk of poor student outcomes (Maughan, 2024). Certain barriers that lead to nurse shortage including lack of system support and resources, understaffing, and role misunderstanding, have been linked to the nursing shortage (Maughan, 2024). Literature suggests that school nursing practice varies greatly, and school nurse interventions are often focused on various priorities of school health. Additionally, school nurses may be susceptible to moral distress as a result of these barriers to providing care when they are unable to practice to the fullest extent of their potential (Powell et al., 2017). The presence of policy and inclusion of school nurses in the implementation may facilitate an increase in specific school nurse practice. School nurses have a unique outlook and can provide medical-related insight that could easily be overlooked by other staff within schools. Therefore, identifying the perceptions of school nurses on the impact of policy on practice is an important consideration for student health.

School nurses have limited time and resources that impact direct care for students. For example, school nurses provide much of the critical teaching involving health promotion such as obesity, which is a precursor for many fatal chronic diseases (Schroeder et al., 2017). The problem with implementing obesity teaching programs is due to a misunderstanding of the school nurse's role. While some school nurses continue traditional teaching, many emerging health needs such as “mental health, chronic conditions, and violence” go unnoticed (Maughan, 2024, 5). When these overarching themes in today's society are not being prioritized in the school system, the school nurse may not be working to their full scope of practice which can easily lead to moral distress. Moral distress occurs when one knows the correct action he should take but institutional laws inhibit him from making that decision (Powell et al., 2017). Moral

distress affects school nurse's care and may influence the number of school nurses available in the school system (Powell et al., 2017). A lack of time, pressure from the administration, and a heavy workload are identified as the culprits for moral distress among school nurses (Powell et al., 2017). Increasing school nurses in schools and supporting the role of the school nurse may improve nurse work satisfaction and decrease moral distress, thus increasing school nurse recruitment and retention.

Secondly, there is a "lack of integration of health into the education sector" (Maughan, 2024, 6). School nurses work to bridge the gap between health and education, but this is made challenging due to a lack of knowledge for implementation and "poorly identified governance" regarding specific policies for that school (Maughan, 2024, 6). School nurses must be aware of and understand policies related to resources to be effective and implemented by the school nurse. Identifying a school nurse whose practice mirrors policy may be a first step in identifying areas that require change. The purpose of this study was to explore the influence policy may have on school nurse practice.

Methodology

A case study design (Yin, 2018) was used to facilitate an understanding of the influence of policy on school nursing practice. The data for this study included a secondary data analysis of one semi-structured interview with an experienced school nurse identified as a unique case. The school nurse was identified as having specific practice directly associated with a local school district policy. The transcribed interview was the primary source of evidence. Two additional sources of evidence were used, the school health website of the school district and the document of the school district's policy related to school nutrition.

The study was approved exempt by the University Institutional Review Board. The transcribed interview for analysis was de-identified prior to secondary analysis in this project. The following questions were asked during the transcribed interview.

Question 1: As a school nurse, what is a daily challenge that you face?

Question 2: What policies exist in your school that directly involve the school nurse?

Question 3: Can you identify a certain policy that creates a barrier for you to provide the best care?

Question 4: Do you experience moral distress within your job?

Analysis

The data were analyzed to identify similarities between the school nurse's practice and related school district policy. Data analysis involved first and second-cycle coding by both the student researcher and the research mentor (Saldaña, 2016). This process was done independently and then both researchers discussed it together until a consensus was reached.

Findings

Findings from this case study analysis identified one overarching and one sub-theme related to the impact of policy on school nurse practice in this unique case. The overarching theme identified was, 1) Inclusion of the school nurse in policy-facilitated school nurse practice in specific areas and the subtheme of communication. School Nurse awareness of existing policy and communication is vital. Findings indicated that the school nurse's practice, in this case, was directly influenced by the presence of a related school policy and the school nurse's awareness of the policy.

Overarching theme: Inclusion of the School Nurse in Policy Facilitated school nurse practice in specific areas. This school nurse spoke about her role in the realm of policy

enforcement as she quickly was able to recall a specific policy that impacted her daily practice around school nutrition. The school nurse was aware of how food allergies are addressed within the school and notified the staff to make sure they were aware if a student had an allergy. The nurse explained that within her school, “It starts with the parent giving me that information and the teacher, and then I try to make sure everybody knows as far as we get that information, we usually get an emergency action plan from the doctor, the healthcare provider, and it says what they're allergic to, if they need Benadryl, EpiPen, we get a separate medication form for those.” The parent would begin the process by notifying the teacher that their child has a certain allergy. The nurse is then notified and seeks to ensure everyone having regular contact with the child is aware of the allergy. She also referred to a policy with a dietary form titled *Medical Statement for Students with Unique Mealtime Needs for School Meals*. This dietary form included areas for both the parent and health care provider to fill out and return to the school. The school nurse is involved in this process and facilitates communication of the form with the cafeteria manager. The form is given to the cafeteria manager to be put on file locally within the school and with the district school nutrition office. Implementation of this form provides an alert when the child checks out with their lunch tray if their plate includes an item with their allergy. Analysis of the school district website found, that if the school does not receive the medical statement from a recognized medical authority, the child receives a regular lunch tray. Both the school health website and the documented school policy were found to integrate the role of the school nurse.

Subtheme: Communication, school nurse awareness, and communication of existing policy is vital. Policy enforcement by the school nurse exists because the nurse in this case was well aware of the policy and documentation to promote student health in the area of school

nutrition and food allergies. The school nurse was able to recall the dietary form utilized and communicate her role in policy implementation. Both the school health website and the documented school policy integrated the role of the school nurse which may increase communication with school nurses.

Discussion

The National Association of School Nurses (NASN) provides resources on its website for policy development and example forms for school nurses to use for several health topics. The ‘Allergies and Anaphylaxis’ tab gives access to sample policies and sample practice forms. The sample *Family Food Allergy Health History Form* is similar to the medical sample that the interviewed school nurse utilized at her school. The sample form from the website only allows straightforward yes-or-no responses, while the medical statement has many places to write explanations and open-ended responses. These two forms cannot perfectly compare because the sample is strictly to evaluate child allergies while the medical statement includes a more comprehensive dietary plan. The medical statement includes consistency requirements as well as allergies and food intolerances.

Although policy enforcement is a large part of the nurse’s role, policy development is another important component and can yield tremendous changes that transform the health of individuals. When asked about barriers that exist in the community she serves, the nurse in this unique case identified dental carries as being a primary issue that many students face. Literature suggests that school nurses may lead policy development. One example of school nurse-led policy development was found that began with one nurse’s observations of sugary snacks that children were being sent to school. The school nurse observed that the children were coming to school with sugary snacks and sharing them with classmates. The school nurse collaborated with

the classroom teacher and school administrators to implement policies that would discourage this behavior (Schoon et al., 2019). This example includes how school nurses can be involved in both policy development and enforcement. School nurses are often the only health care professionals who are engaged in daily interactions within the school setting, therefore school nurses are in an optimal position to assess needs and facilitate policy development to improve care and student outcomes in the school environment.

Inclusion of the school nurse in school policies and ensuring ample communication for awareness of policies is critical in successfully impacting school nurse practice in a given area. As seen in this unique case, the school nurse's ability to recall the nutrition policy in her school, students benefited because this policy provided a detailed process to address a child's allergy, and system checks to avoid serving the child food containing their allergy.

Nurses have a responsibility to advocate for their patients by participating in public policy development and enforcement. Engaging in policy development can seem daunting, but joining organizations that are related to one's specialty of nursing is an easy and practical way to begin. Local stakeholders often learn about issues existing in their communities through these organizations and by partnering with them. Organizations also offer opportunities to share experiences and ideas that can facilitate governmental leaders to be aware of issues their community faces. Journals and literature also help educate the general public on issues existing that can aid in supporting these issues through voting or funding. The NASN focuses on developing school nurses in areas of leadership and advocacy to influence and support policies impacting students (NASN, 2024).

While the findings of this case study are not generalizable to all school nurses, findings support the inclusion of the school nurse in policy and the school nurse's awareness of school

policy, in this case, directly influencing the school nurse's practice. Further research on the best ways to prepare school nurses to participate in policy development, implementation, evaluation, and change is needed. Policy may be a powerful tool to influence school nurse practice and student outcomes. Professional organizations such as NASN advocate for and provide resources to assist school nurses' participation in policy work at the school level.

The school committee is responsible for drafting policies, while the Superintendent's role is implementing them in the school (Rabinowitz, 2024, Chapter 25). In the 1960s, one Superintendent tried to implement policy changes without the approval of the schoolteachers. The teachers refused to participate in these changes and with much frustration, the Superintendent left his position (Rabinowitz, 2024, Chapter 25). The School Committee and Superintendent probably could have found more favor with the teachers, if they had included them in the planning process of creating their policy. School teachers and nurses are alike in this field because they do not have a formal role in drafting school policies. The school nurses' role in creating these policies is to provide proper routine documentation. Data trends can lead policymakers to see areas within the school that may need to be altered and the efficiency of existing policies (Ryberg et al., 2003). Ryberg et al. (2003) argue that school nurses have the responsibility to lead research within their field because it "justifies nurses' interventions" and "the contributions of nurses to school health policy become more visible". Justifying interventions includes the utilization of school resources by the school nurse. This can lead to the retention and increase of more school nurses.

While data collection may be a crucial area of policy design, the school nurse faces barriers. These include time, workload, and understanding the rationale and process of data collection. The NASN launched a data initiative, the National School Health Data Set: Every

Student Counts! in 2018. The NASN assists school nurses with this process by teaching them the “WHY, WHAT, and HOW” of data collection (Stanislo, 2023). Participation in Every Student Counts is important because it creates a standardized data set which is necessary for developing evidence-based policies that relate to actual community needs. This is the why behind participating. The role of school nurses is greatly impacted by their participation in and association with school policy. Development and implementation of school policy should involve the school nurse where there is an intersection with school health.

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