



POSITION STATEMENT

Using Assistive Personnel in School Health Services Programs

HISTORY:

The health-related needs of students are intensifying in our nation's schools. Student safety is the primary concern in determining whether or how assistants should be used to help professional school nurses to deliver increasingly needed health services to students. Persons serving as school nurses in first class districts in the state of Washington must hold an ESA (Educational Staff Associate) certificate (WAC 180-86-011).

DESCRIPTION OF ISSUE:

Assistive personnel serve as school nurse extenders by supporting the nurse in the health office, performing clerical functions, and carrying out certain delegated nursing activities on behalf of students. The Nurse Practice Act for Washington State (RCW 18.79, WAC 246-840) determines the scope of nursing practice and what nursing activities can be delegated or given to assistive personnel. Certain people employed by the school district may have partial or total responsibility for assisting licensed, registered professional school nurses. These support staff include: unlicensed assistive personnel (UAP), such as school staff and health/nursing assistants or aides (HA); licensed practical nurses (LPN); and registered nurses (RN) who do not meet the state's requirements for qualification as an ESA school nurse. Each type of support staff has unique qualities and limitations as described below:

1. Unlicensed school staff whose job is to deliver, support, or manage education are the least qualified to assist the school nurse in providing physical health care to students. They lack health-specific training, and their job responsibilities may not allow them to devote the care and attention needed to safely deliver health services. They require supervision by the school nurse; and in addition, they need on-the-job training in such areas as school records management and confidentiality.
2. HAs, at minimum, should have a high school diploma, current certification in CPR and first aid, and on-the-job-training in such subjects as confidentiality and infection control. School nurses are responsible for directing, delegating to, and supervising these UAPs.
3. LPNs usually complete a 12-month course of study beyond high school and pass state licensure, which allows them to practice on a technical level of nursing. LPNs can contribute to each step of the nursing process, but cannot independently assess the health status of any student or the student's environment, make a nursing diagnosis, develop the plan of care, or determine when delegation of care to a UAP is appropriate. They work in a team relationship with the registered professional school nurse.

The nurse practice act requires that a RN must supervise technical nurses.

4. RNs who do not meet the education and experience qualifications stipulated by WAC 180-79A-223 to work as ESA school nurses are nonetheless licensed to practice nursing independently. The ESA school nurse should remain responsible for evaluating the outcomes of nursing services for all students, making suitable assignments to the RN, and providing supervision appropriate to the situation.

Key factors for effective and competent use of assistive personnel are role definition, adequacy of training, and appropriate delegation and supervision. School nurses, in collaboration with school and district administration, should develop clear, limited, written practice descriptions and then ensure adequate training and competency to perform identified tasks. Assistive personnel may not be required to make clinical assessments or nursing judgments or to implement nursing tasks requiring licensure. There should be written protocols for handling specific student health issues, with directions for particular signs and symptoms that must be reported to the professional school nurse. When the school nurse delegates responsibilities, the nurse must be available to provide direction, supervision, and immediate intervention in a situation as needed. State law, regulations, standards, and rules set by the Nursing Care Quality Assurance Board determine whether off-site supervision of assistive personnel by school nurses is an option. If permitted, the school nurse determines when off-site supervision is safe and how frequently on-site supervision is indicated.

It is important that the following issues are considered when using assistive personnel in schools:

- The state nurse practice act, including but not limited to scope of practice and to licensure, delegation, and supervisory responsibilities of RNs in relationship to LPNs and to certified or registered nursing assistants
- School nurse certification requirements under state education statutes and regulation
- Scope and standards of school nursing practice
- School district job descriptions that are legally appropriate to the level of preparation, expectations, and experience of the assistive personnel
- State staffing guidelines that consider various safe staffing mixes in relation to the health needs of the student population

RATIONALE:

The use of assistive personnel can extend the delivery of health services, but when used to replace professional health care providers, it leads to reduced quality of care to students. For staffing or budgetary reasons, assistive personnel may be a necessary adjunct to many school health services programs; and if properly trained and supervised, they can enhance services to students and increase the cost-effectiveness of the program. Staffing decisions must be based on the assistive services needed, scope of practice, competencies, legal considerations, and the amount of time required for on- and off-site supervision. Improved staffing of health services programs seems to result in healthier children who attend school and are more available for learning. While the use of assistive personnel may be an acceptable alternative to enhance this staffing,

their improper use can not only compromise students' quality of care, but also create liability for the district and/or nurse.

CONCLUSION:

It is the position of the SNOW that the use of assistive personnel may be appropriate to supplement professional school nursing services in certain situations, but they should never supplant school nurses nor be permitted to practice nursing without a license. Professional school nurses should take the lead in helping school districts appropriately determine whether and how to use assistive health personnel. The school nurse is the only one who is trained and capable of assessing the health needs of the student population and the only one who can legally delegate nursing activities to unlicensed persons. Appropriate nurse to assistant ratios and on-site supervision are essential for ensuring safe delivery of nursing services to students.

References/Resources:

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