

Summary: North Carolina's School Nurse Shortage

The North Carolina General Assembly commissioned its Program Evaluation Division in 2016 to examine the school nurse shortage across the state. The Division's report, prepared in 2017, provides a roadmap for state legislators seeking to end North Carolina's school nurse shortage. This paper represents a summary of key findings from that report.

NC Child strongly urges the State Legislature to end the school nurse shortage by appropriating adequate funds. The price tag for achieving appropriate student to nurse ratios is between \$45 million to \$79 million annually. School nurses are critically important now because:

- School nurses can help prevent school violence: School nurses and social workers are trained professionals who can identify and help troubled students before they harm themselves or others.
- School nurses keep teachers focused on education: The state's school nurse shortage forces teachers to provide health care to students during educational time.
- School nurses save money: With chronic conditions such as asthma and diabetes on the rise, the preventive care administered by qualified school nurses can ensure that students use inhalers and insulin correctly, and help prevent costly emergency room visits. In rural counties where health care providers can be harder for children to access, school nurses are even more important - many are the main source of preventive health care for kids.

The North Carolina Program Evaluation Division's report on School Nurses includes five primary findings and four recommendations. A summary of key findings is included below:

School nurse duties have increased in scope and complexity due to federal and state legislation, an increase in student health issues, and other cultural and contextual factors (p 5).

While the job responsibilities of school nurses have steadily increased in recent years, state funding for school nurses has declined over the last decade. From vaccinations to life-saving Epi pens to managing medication for chronic conditions

such as asthma and diabetes, school nurses fulfill a long and complex list of tasks required under state and federal law. Unfortunately many of those duties are being delegated to teachers and other non-nurses. Fewer than 40% of local education agencies (LEA's) meet the recommended minimum school nurse to student ratio of 1:750. Some school districts have nurses serving as many as six schools at a time, and fewer than 27% of North Carolina middle and high schools have a full-time nurse.

North Carolina neither met the State Board of Education's recommended nurse-to-student ratio by its target date of 2014, nor is it meeting the National Association of School Nurses' current recommendation of one nurse per school (p 10).

One of the challenges to achieving the 1:750 ratio is that School Nurse positions are underpaid, making them difficult to fill. The General Assembly has not adjusted the dollar amount per position (\$50,000) since the School Nurse Funding Initiative began in 2004. LEA's are forced to cover the gap between the state allocation and the actual cost to hire a nurse.

The State's education budget subsidizes health care costs when school personnel other than nurses perform health care services (p 22).

The state's school nurse shortage forces teachers to provide health care to students during educational time. According to a study commissioned by the General Assembly, **teachers and school administrators perform 60% of all medical tasks in school.** These personnel used 592,751 hours administering medications and addressing health concerns of students during the 2015-2016 school year.

The Program Evaluation Division used just one example of a nursing service frequently provided to students by teachers or other non-nurses: administering medication. During the 2015-16 school year, the state spent approximately \$15 million of education funds simply on providing students with their medications.

In summary, the 2018 session of the North Carolina General Assembly presents an important opportunity to mark the beginning of the end of the state's school nurse shortage. The Program Evaluation Division's report provides a roadmap to legislators for making that happen.