



School-Based Obesity Prevention: The Role of the School Nurse

Lucas C. Moore, EdD¹, Carole V. Harris, PhD¹, Andrew S. Bradlyn, PhD¹, Melanie Purkey, MS², Don Chapman, MS², Keri Kennedy, MPH³, Kristy Blower, MA³, Laurie Abildso, MS¹ and Jessica Coffman, MA¹

¹Health Research Center, West Virginia University; ²West Virginia Office of Healthy Schools; ³West Virginia Office of Healthy Lifestyles.

Background

- Schools can be optimal settings for obesity prevention efforts¹
- Within this setting, the school nurse plays an important role, by serving as a health educator, an information resource for students and parents, and as a liaison between families and other health care providers².
- School nurses have knowledge and expertise in the areas of nutrition, weight management, and exercise, all of which can be applied in school-based obesity prevention programs and interventions for students who are overweight and obese³.

Objective

- The objective of the present study was to identify and describe the role of the school nurse in school-based obesity prevention efforts.

Method

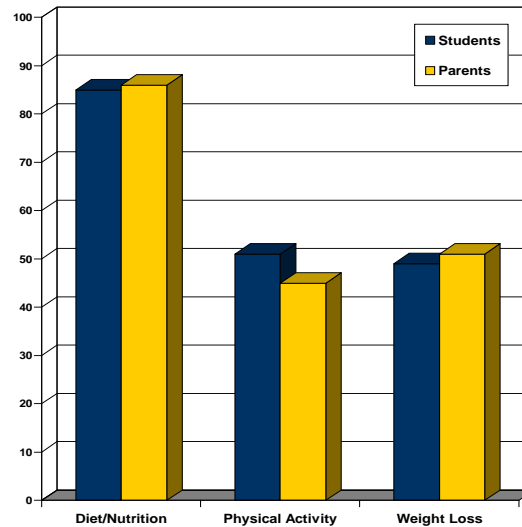
- The present study surveyed school nurses in conjunction with a state-wide evaluation of West Virginia's childhood obesity legislation – The WV Healthy Lifestyles Act, which was passed in April of 2005⁴.
- All school nurses in West Virginia (N = 240) were surveyed and responses were received from 214. The demographic characteristics of these school nurses can be found in Table 1.

Gender	
Female	100%
Education	
Associate's degree	4%
Bachelor's degree	67%
Master's degree	26%
Post-graduate degree	3%
Years of Experience	
< 1 year	6%
1-5 years	40%
6-10 years	18%
> 10 years	36%
School Level	
Elementary	83%
Middle	8%
High	9%

Results

- Eighty-five percent of school nurses reported receiving questions from students about diet and nutrition, and nearly half had received questions on physical activity and weight loss methods.
- The majority of school nurses (86%) reported receiving questions from parents about their child's diet and nutrition behaviors, and 45% had received questions about ways to increase their child's physical activity.
- Roughly half (49%) of school nurses had received questions from students about how to lose weight or reduce their BMI, while slightly more than half (51%) reported receiving questions from parents about child weight loss methods.

Figure 1. Percent of nurses who received questions from students and parents regarding diet/nutrition, physical activity, and weight loss.



- During the 2007-2008 school year, 97% of school nurses reported receiving physician orders for specialized student diets, and 47% reported making referrals for students with weight loss problems.
- Of the school nurses surveyed, 47% reported serving on school wellness committees and 36% reported serving on county wellness committees.
- School nurses support many health related activities within the school. For instance, 73% of nurses reported assisting with health screenings, 21% assisted with fitness testing, and 24% assisted with student BMI measurement.
- Presented in Table 2 are a sample of quotes from school nurses which indicate additional areas where they have provided support.

Results

Table 2: Additional Areas of Support Provided By School Nurses

"I have attempted to assist in increasing activity time in academic areas outside of PE class."

"I am more involved in any dietary decisions made in our building. I have also been involved in addressing parents in regard to the choices made for parties and events in our building."

"Frequent requests to review appropriate snacks served at school parties."

"Most of the students I see are for conditions relating to lack of fitness and poor nutrition. These are also the students who perform poorly in school."

Conclusions

- School nurses play an important role in a school's obesity prevention efforts by educating students and parents about nutrition, physical activity, and other weight related issues.
- In addition to serving as an information source for students and parents, school nurses often serve as a liaison between the school and health care providers in the surrounding communities.
- School nurses also play an important role in shaping the health policies within their schools and communities through service on wellness committees.
- In West Virginia, school nurses are typically assigned to provide health services to multiple schools, which limits the time they have available for many of these activities.

References

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