

# Statement of the Pennsylvania Association of School Nurses and Practitioners

to

## Pennsylvania House Education Committee

### August 4, 2020

Thank you for listening to the voices that care for our children in the schools of Pennsylvania. We are PASNAP, the Pennsylvania Association of School Nurses and Practitioners, an Association representing 1200 Certified School Nurses and Nurse Practitioners throughout Pennsylvania. My name is Lori Kelley and I am the current President of PASNAP.

PASNAP leadership has been diligently following all of the updates issued by the CDC and the PA DOH as well as PDE and other recognized experts. We have concerns and questions that we would like to bring to you, for your consideration, as schools throughout the Commonwealth of PA prepare to open.

While some school districts may be planning to open remotely, others are planning on welcoming students into the classrooms for in-person instruction. This is the ideal! In-person instruction benefits the students in so many ways. Teachers are better able to make sure the student understands the instruction. Students who receive services such as speech or learning support benefit from not missing those services. Children are able to participate in Physical Education, Art, Music, etc., while interacting with other children and their teachers. School guidance counselors, school psychologists, and school nurses are able to help those students experiencing emotional difficulties, as well as to be present to assess those students who may

be subject to abusive situations at home. Families experiencing financial hardships are able to send their children to school knowing they are being fed breakfast and lunch.

We recognize the importance of having our children back in the classroom, the brick and mortar classroom! However, this recognition is coupled with the real concern that in doing so it may be at a cost of inadvertently compromising the health and safety of our children, their families, and the health of our teachers and staff. While we want to see children back in the classrooms, we dread the thought that those actions might result in one of our medically fragile students-becoming ill and hospitalized, or that a child might be asymptomatic but bring the virus home to their family/grandparent/caretaker.

In order to minimize the risks, we need to ensure that safety measures are consistently being followed, not only at school, but in the homes of the entire school community, before the students and district employees even leave their houses. Parents and guardians need to be aware of the symptoms of Covid-19, checking their child's temperature and making sure they are not sending a sick child on the school bus to school.- Transportation budgets will undoubtedly need an increase in funding in response to the need to safely social distance students on buses.

School districts will need to increase the money spent on custodial personnel and supplies, not to mention the costs incurred in providing PPE to the health room staff and any other protective equipment needed by teachers and ancillary staff, as well as students who arrive at school or the bus stop without the required face coverings. Districts serving minority and low socioeconomic students will need even more funding because of the virus' indiscriminate attack on black and Latino populations.

As the "frontline workers" in the educational setting, the Certified School Nurses (CSNs) are the advocates for the health and safety of their students as well as school staff. The PA School Code sets a minimum ratio of one CSN per 1500 students. By meeting this quota, districts still meet staffing requirements, even though this results in many schools across the state not having a nurse in their building on a daily basis. Some nurses are required to travel miles between multiple buildings on a rotating basis to cover their assigned caseloads, leaving schools without a licensed health care professional to provide care on the days the nurse is not there. Prior to school closures in the absence of a nurse, medical care, including medication administration, was often provided by the school administrator or their designee ( the secretary) in the absence of the school nurse. This is NOT best practice for our students at any time, but certainly not when we are in the midst of a national health crisis. The Covid-19 pandemic exemplifies the shortfalls of this outdated standard. Every school across the Commonwealth needs a licensed medical professional there all day, every day. This will ensure that skilled nursing assessments and medical care will promptly be performed when needed by persons with the body of knowledge unique to school health who are licensed and qualified to do so. Certified School Nurses in schools will improve children's presence in buildings, while mitigating the risk to classmates, teachers and staff.

The ongoing shortage of qualified substitute nurses for schools compounds this issue. It is common that a district's substitute nurse pool, if they are fortunate enough to have one, consists of retired school nurses, whose age alone, barring any underlying chronic health conditions, puts them in the high risk category to contract COVID-19. Other subs often are persons seeking their first full-time school nurse position. They are most often working another full-time job, filling in on their days off with limited extra hours to cover school health office vacancies and leave when the awaited employment opportunity becomes available. Lastly, substitutes may fall into a group of nurses that are taking a break from full-time employment. This frequently occurs while juggling other family needs including parenting young children, or caring for aging or ill family members. Schools are struggling to meet the recommended safety requirements to return to in person instruction. As a member of one of these categories, considering the known risks to themselves and family members, is it a possibility that many of those who previously did substitute will opt out of earning the \$70-\$120 a day salary paid for working in some districts of PA? The chance is yes. Funding needs to be allocated to school districts to increase the pay for substitute nurses. Financial incentive will help provide an attractive alternative to nurses that do not want or need a full-time job.

The school's nurse will be seeing everyone, children and adults alike, that present at school with symptoms of COVID-19. This alone elevates their risk. Couple this with the fact that they will be providing this care without many of the safety measures that are present in traditional medical settings to protect their professionals from contagions. Odds are that some school nurses will be exposed to the virus. Some will need to isolate or quarantine. Without necessary backup staffing on hand, schools may have their nurse suites unattended, being unable to provide care for students, thus potentially leading to more prolonged school closures. Unless the issue of reliable school nurse staffing and coverage is addressed, the likelihood of schools being without school nurses available to care for many of the students of PA in the fall will be a foreseen reality:

Every school building with students needs to have a school nurse, not only to care for the student with a fever and Covid-19 symptoms until a caregiver is able to come to pick them up, but also to deal with the students with diabetes, students with seizures, students with medications, and students displaying injuries or illnesses other than Covid-19. In other words, in an ideal Covid-19 world, every Health Room would have two nurses: one to take care of students with Covid-19 symptoms, and one to take care of everyone else, in order not to spread the virus!

The Pennsylvania school code mandates that students in designated grades have varied health screenings completed during the school year. CSNs assure that vision, hearing, and growth screenings, as well as postural screenings, are completed as required on all of their students. Additionally they schedule school-based physical and dental examinations for those students not submitting private exams. The completion of these mandates holds particular challenges and concerns to CSNs this school year. Many students may be learning online for a portion of their weekly school hours. This reduced in-school class time will limit screening opportunities for the school nurse. However, the logistics required to safely screen hundreds of children safely is of greatest concern to the CSN. Previous practices had many screenings done en masse, with entire classrooms streaming into the Nurse's Office to get weighed and

measured, or have their hearing or vision screened. This is no longer an option. Screenings will need to be done on a one to one basis, away from peers in a designated “ clean” area. Particular focus will be required in the cleaning of the screening equipment after each child to prevent cross-contamination. What were routine practices will now become labor-intensive tasks requiring many additional staff hours. Additionally, social distancing between the school nurse and the student will not be possible while completing many of these mandates. Mitigating this risk will require the use of additional PPE. These assessments may be further complicated with delays by the need for the nurse to drop what they are doing to doff contaminated PPE, then don new PPE and enter an isolation area to students presenting with potential symptoms of Covid-19. School based dental and physical examinations will present more challenges of their own.

We ask that special consideration be given to the difficulty that these mandates present this year. School reimbursement for nursing services is linked to the completion of these mandated screenings by the school nurse. For all the reasons as noted above PASNAP is requesting a waiver that would temporarily remove the connection between school district reimbursement and the percentage of screenings completed. School nurses would prioritize screening students with prior concerns or are those referred by their teachers as safety allowed. Given the unprecedented circumstances, the remaining screenings would be completed as time, safety and conditions allowed. This waiver would avoid penalizing school districts for conditions that are out of district and school nurse control.

While caring for the general student population in the Covid-19 world will present a challenge for CSNs, caring for medically fragile children is much more concerning, given that they are much less able to fight off the coronavirus and in all likelihood, their becoming ill may end with hospitalization. Not only does social distancing become even more important but also the necessity of every staff member and student adhering to mitigating strategies (facial coverings, hand hygiene). An increase in the number of CSNs and substitute nurses is even more important in taking care of students with chronic illnesses.

PASNAP advocates not only for our children in schools, but for the school nurses we represent.- We ask that you advocate for them as well. In summary we request increased funding for school districts, increased funding for more Certified School Nurses, and increased funding for substitute school nurses. We request a temporary waiver linking the percentage of completed mandated school screenings with reimbursement for school nurse services. The presence of a school nurse helps maintain and improve the physical, mental and emotional well-being of the school aged children in PA. We ask you to support school nursing to optimize the health, education and safety of the students in Pennsylvania as they prepare to return to school.

## References

PA DOH and PDE Public Health Guidance. (July 17, 2020)

<https://www.education.pa.gov/Schools/safeschools/emergencyplanning/COVID-19/SchoolReopeningGuidance/ReopeningPreKto12/PublicHealthGuidance/Pages/default.aspx>

CDC Updated Guidance for School Re-Opening. (July 23, 2020)

[Preparing K-12 School Administrators for a Safe Return to ...www.cdc.gov › community › schools-childcare › prepare-safe-return](https://www.cdc.gov/community/schools-childcare/prepare-safe-return)

NASN (National Association of School Nurses) Statement on Safer Return to Schools. (July 23, 2020)

Thank you,

Lori Kelley MSN, RN, CSN

President, PASNAP

pasnapnurses@gmail.com

Valerie Zanotti MEd, RN, CSN

Legislative Chair, PASNAP