

Public Health Nurses in Schools

Children are important to our future, and schools are central in supporting their individual health and in helping us build healthy communities. Schools talk about health, they teach it and they model it, through their daily instruction and extracurricular activities, while school nurses elevate the health of school communities and promote student attendance and academic achievement.¹

Yet, without a national strategy on public health nursing in schools, Canada is missing one of the best opportunities to strengthen community health.

Schools are the second most influential environments in a child's life (after the home)² and are therefore of key importance for improving the health of Canada's young people.³ The health concepts children learn in school, whether in the classroom or from a registered nurse, can shape all aspects of their well-being from the food choices they make to learning about pregnancy risks. Clearly, public health nurses can significantly influence the health and education of generations of Canadians.

But Canada has yet to develop a national strategy for public health nursing in schools, and the programs that do exist across the country are too often hampered by a lack of funding and weak legislative and policy support. The provinces and territories offer little consistency and even less scope for achieving effective national action on population health in schools. Simply put, it's a situation that calls for Caring Ahead, a new approach to health care from CNA.

Caring Ahead takes the basics of planning ahead — anticipating events, considering actions and options, and taking steps to be organized and prepared — and applies them to health care. Planning ahead increases our chances of coping and thriving in business and in life. Caring Ahead will give that same chance to the health of Canadian school children.

Research shows that having public health nurses in schools improves attendance and educational results. There is also ample evidence that having primary care clinics in schools improves educational outcomes, reduces absenteeism⁴ and decreases teenage pregnancy rates.⁵ Comprehensive school health programs help students develop the skills they need to be physically and emotionally healthy for life. That's important, both because healthy students are better learners and better-educated individuals are healthier.⁶

Other studies show that public health nurses working with schools can help identify health patterns related to physical activity⁷ and injury prevention.⁸ Britain's new public health strategy expects nurses to improve children's readiness for school, decrease their absences, lower teen smoking rates and reduce excess weight among the young.⁹ In Australia, school nurse practitioners specialize in adolescent health, while those in New Zealand screen all grade nine students for a range of issues, including home life, drug use, eating habits, sexuality and depression.

How can we use Caring Ahead to help Canada's students?

1. Develop a comprehensive health strategy in our schools and clearly define the public health nurse's role within it.
2. Lobby for the strategy to become policy across Canada and ensure that it is backed by proper funding and cooperation between ministries of health and education.
3. Prepare registered nurses for a broad and comprehensive leadership role in population health, including community engagement, intersectoral management, program evaluation, applied research and policy development.

¹ Vessey, J. A., & McGowan, K. A. (2006) A successful public health experiment: School nursing. *Pediatric Nursing*, 32, 255-256.

² American Academy of Pediatrics, 2008. Role of the school nurse in providing school health services [Policy statement]. *Pediatrics*, 121, 1052-1056.

³ Ontario Ministry of Health Promotion. (2010). *School health: Guidance document*. Ottawa: Standards, Programs and Community Development Branch. Retrieved from <http://www.mhp.gov.on.ca/en/healthy-communities/public-health/guidance-docs/SchoolHealth.pdf>

⁴ (Vessey & McGowan)

⁵ Strunk, J. A. (2008). The effect of school-based health clinics on teenage pregnancy and parenting outcomes: An integrated literature review. *Journal of School Nursing*, 24, 13-20.

⁶ Joint Consortium for School Health. (n.d.). *Comprehensive school health* [Framework]. Retrieved from <http://www.jcsh-cces.ca/upload/JCSH%20CSH%20Framework%20FINAL%20Nov%2008.pdf>

⁷ Faigenbaum, A. D., Gipson-Jones, T. L., & Myer, G. D. (2012). Exercise deficit disorder in youth: An emergent health concern for school nurses. *Journal of School Nursing*, 28, 252-255.

⁸ Hudson, S. D., Olsen, H. M., & Thompson, D. (2008). An investigation of school playground safety practices as reported by school nurses. *Journal of School Nursing*, 24, 138-144.

⁹ Department of Health, Public Health England. (2014). *Maximising the school nursing team contribution to the public health of school-aged children*. London: Author. Retrieved from https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/303769/Service_specifications.pdf