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My name is Linda Gibbons and I am a certified school nurse and director of the health education and school nurse certification programs at National-Louis University. I am representing the Illinois Association of School Nurses and health educators. The children of Illinois spend almost 7 hours a day and 188 days a year for 12-13 years in our schools. With all of that time, our graduates should know how to make healthy lifestyle decisions and have learned habits that prevent disease and lead to better health. Research tells us that habits are formed early in life so it is important to teach nutrition and care for their bodies in the early grades so that they can avoid growing up with conditions that will pre-dispose them to chronic disease. Increasing the amount and quality of health education in our public schools is a cost effective way of starting a whole generation of students on a healthier life path.

Who will do this health teaching? Consistency is key. Our students need to hear the same message of health from their teachers, lunch supervisors, principals, and the school nurse. Currently in Illinois, all schools are required to have a wellness policy in place. However, there is no enforcement for implementation of the policy. When school nurses are integral leaders and members of the wellness team, they lead a coordinated effort towards wellness and health promotion across all areas of the school community. Requiring documentation of wellness activities, lessons in the classroom, and extracurricular activities for the schools and community will assist our students in making wise choices that lead to higher levels of wellness and create lifelong habits that prevent chronic diseases.

Illinois is already proactive in requiring Type 73 certification for school nurses that includes developing skills and expertise in education to add to the health and wellness expertise that the school nurse brings to the school setting. Thus, Certified school nurses have a background in health and education and are logical people to develop and teach in the health curriculum and whenever students come to the health office. Health teachers are scarce in the lower grades, but the certified school nurse is available to provide a health education curriculum and support classroom teachers in health education initiatives.

The fastest rising public health problem in our nation is obesity; in the last two decades the percentage of overweight children has almost doubled and the percentage of overweight adolescents has almost tripled. Thirty-two percent of children and adolescents are overweight or obese; and children from diverse ethnicities and poverty are unduly affected by this epidemic. Childhood overweight accelerates the development of chronic diseases such as hypertension, type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, sleep apnea, gallbladder disease, asthma, cancer, and others. Most children spend a large portion of their day at school, and schools are a key setting in which to implement strategies to address this issue. The school nurse has the capacity to reach a large number of youth from diverse groups; and obesity must be addressed through the combined effort of the entire healthcare and larger community including schools.

What do school nurses do? Their responsibilities that have the greatest impact on chronic disease prevention and health promotion are:

- Respond to students' physical and emotional concerns
- Connect students with substance abuse treatment and mental, behavioral, and reproductive health services
- Refer students' families to care providers and insurance programs
- Screen for conditions that impair learning, such as poor vision and decreased hearing

- Educate children about healthy lifestyles
- Ensure immunization compliance

These are in addition to caring for injuries and illness and managing the care of students with chronic health conditions.

School nurses are already in place in many schools in Illinois and are making a difference in teaching students to make healthy choices. With minimal additional spending, appropriate clerical services could allow the certified school nurses more time to teach and promote wellness.

A lack of school nurses due to underfunding in many localities may have long-term health and economic consequences. According to the CDC, chronic conditions consumed 75 cents of every health care dollar spent in the United States in 2005. When school nurses identify and manage these conditions, they stave off future health problems and help reduce overall health care spending. The CDC has also found correlations between lower grades and youth health risk behaviors such as smoking, acts of violence, and unsafe sex. This data strongly suggests that school health services that promote healthy behaviors also contribute to educational success. School nurses are well positioned to play a pivotal role in improving students' health by ensuring continuity of care, but greater coordination between the education and health care sectors will be needed to fully realize this potential. Every child in Illinois deserves a school nurse so that he/she can become a healthier, well-educated adult who will contribute positively to our society.

Thank you for your time and attention.

References:

National Association of School Nurses (NASN). (2010). Resolution: Overweight and obese children and adolescents>. Silver Spring, MD: Author. Retrieved November, 2010 from <http://www.nasn.org/Portals/0/statements/resolutionobesity.pdf>

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. (2010, August) Unlocking the potential of school nursing: keeping children healthy and ready to learn.. *Charting nursing's future*. Retrieved from <http://www.rwjf.org/files/research/cnf14.pdf>



*National Association of School Nurses*

**Resolution**

***Overweight and Obese Children and Adolescents***

- Whereas, The fastest rising public health problem in our nation is obesity; and
- Whereas, In the last two decades the percentage of overweight children has almost doubled and the percentage of overweight adolescents has almost tripled; and
- Whereas, Thirty-two percent of children and adolescents are overweight or obese; and
- Whereas, Children from diverse ethnicities are unduly effected by this epidemic; and
- Whereas, Childhood overweight accelerates the development of chronic diseases such as hypertension, type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, sleep apnea, gall bladder disease, asthma, cancer, and others; and
- Whereas, Most children spend a large portion of their day at school, and schools are a key setting in which to implement strategies to address this issue; and
- Whereas, The school nurse has the capacity to reach a large number of youth from diverse groups; and
- Whereas, Obesity must be addressed through the combined effort of the entire healthcare and larger community; therefore be it
- Resolved,* That the National Association of School Nurses supports the First Lady's Initiative to reverse the tide of child and adolescent overweight and obesity; and
- Resolved,* That school nurses have the expertise to meet the needs of overweight and obese children and to promote and advocate for healthy lifestyles for all students; and
- Resolved,* That school nurses and NASN collaborate with students, parents, school community, community at large and health care community to provide education and resources to address this public health issue and promote a culture of health in schools; and
- Resolved,* That the National Association of School Nurses can provide the education and skills for school nurses in the prevention and intervention of overweight and obesity in children and adolescents.