



School Health Services Policy Development Guidance

American Academy of Pediatrics

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Background

The primary concern of all educators is to ensure that every student achieves academic success. In order to attain this success, students must be healthy and ready to learn. As the National Association of State Boards of Education asserts, “Schools must help students by ensuring they have not only the academic supports needed to excel academically, but also the social, emotional, health, and mental health supports needed to learn to their fullest potential” (2014, p. 5). Given the complex needs of many children attending school today, it is imperative that districts implement policies that address not only the educational needs of students, but their health and safety needs as well.

In the context of schools, policy is defined as a general principle, guide for decision-making, or rule adopted by the board of education. Policy is typically a broad outline of what should be done and is legally binding. It is distinct from protocol, which is a procedural statement typically developed by health services leadership that includes specific instructions or a sequence of steps for assessing and managing a particular clinical issue (Schwab & Gelfman, 2005).

School health services policies define the structure of a health services program and guide staff in providing optimal care while avoiding problems. They offer direction and guidance for health services provided within the school district. Policies set expectations for students, parents, staff and administrators. They also help to provide consistency and continuity across the district and reflect laws and regulations.

The school nurse leader is the healthcare expert within the education system and, as such, has the opportunity to guide health policy development, implementation, and evaluation (National Association of School Nurses, 2011). This document provides guidance to assist the school nurse leader in developing district health services policies.

The Role of the School Nurse Leader in Health Services Policy Development

Educators understand the critical link between health and education, but must focus on academic outcomes. The school nurse leader (who may be called the nurse supervisor, health services coordinator, etc.) plays a vital role in the district by fostering the health and safety of students so that they are prepared to learn. The school nurse leader offers an invaluable perspective on school health and can use professional nursing knowledge to guide health-related school policy. In districts without a nurse leader, one or more building nurses can take responsibility for health policy.

One of the key roles of a school nurse leader is to ensure that school policy reflects best practices related to student health and safety (Wickline Ryberg et al, 2003). The school nurse leader can provide the school board and administrators with relevant, evidence-based recommendations. It is important for the school nurse leader to stay current on best practice recommendations by reviewing position statements and policies from national associations as well as relevant research published in peer-reviewed journals (Galemore, 2012; Herrman, 2009).

The school nurse leader also plays an important role in ensuring that district policies are in alignment with state and federal laws and regulations. For example, the school nurse leader should ensure that policies related to delegation to unlicensed school staff are consistent with the state's nurse practice act, school code, and recommendations from the state board of nursing (Spriggle, 2009).

Finally, the school nurse leader collects data on student health that can be very useful in informing school district policy. Other school staff may not be aware of the trends or issues that school nurses observe; therefore, it is important for the school nurse leader to share this information with district leadership. For example, the school nurse leader might note an increase in the number of students with life-threatening allergy. The nurse leader can present this information to school leadership and provide recommendations as to whether a new policy might be appropriate.

State school nurse associations and the state school nurse consultant are key sources of professional support, guidance, and resources for developing district health services policies, particularly for districts that do not have a school nurse leader. School nurses can also work with their state association to support evidence-based policies at the state level, which can, in turn, help to inform and strengthen district-level health services policies.

The Policy Process

Each district has a unique process for developing, reviewing, approving, and implementing district policy. In many districts, the nurse leader is responsible for developing health and safety policies. However, in districts that have a policy writer, the nurse leader's role is typically to provide content for the policy writer to use in drafting policy. In other districts, the medical director or school physician takes the lead in developing policy in collaboration with the nurse leader. If there is no nurse leader, building-level nurses may work with district leadership to develop policies.

In almost all school districts, policy must be approved by the school board before going into effect. Some school districts may require multiple readings of a policy at subsequent board meetings before a vote can be taken. Other districts may only require a proposed policy to be discussed at one board meeting, but may require a specified number of days to pass before a proposed policy can be voted upon.

It is important for nurse leaders to understand the process in their district in order to exercise effective and appropriate leadership in the development and review of health services policies. Rules and regulations regarding school board proceedings can often be found on a school district's website. Alternately, a representative from the superintendent's office should be able to provide the necessary information. It is also helpful to speak with those involved in the policy process in order to gain a better understanding of the rules and required steps as well as the culture around policy in the district. For example, some school boards prefer to limit what is set in policy, while others view policy as an important legal protection. Prior to engaging in the policy process, it is critical to review federal, state, and district rules around lobbying that might regulate how district employees may interact with the school board.

Components of School Health Services Policy

A school district policy is a broad statement that provides overarching guidelines and usually does not include a great level of detail. In general, the specific instructions on how to carry out the policy are found in protocol/procedures, though some school districts include protocol/procedures within policy.

The format and components of health services policies vary from district to district. When drafting policy, it is helpful to consult existing policies and follow a similar style and structure. The following are key components that are often included in a school district policy:

1. **Background or purpose statement**
This section includes information about the issue addressed by the policy, provides justification for the policy, and/or expresses the policy's overall intent.
2. **Definitions**
This section defines key terminology used in the policy.
3. **Legal requirements or references**
This section provides a summary or list of federal and state laws/regulations that impact the policy.
4. **Body**
This section contains the content of the policy and summarizes what the district will do, provide, and/or be responsible for.
5. **Responsibilities and qualifications**
This section lists the key roles and responsibilities of various positions (e.g. teachers, administrators, nurses, students, parents). Any specific licensing or training that is required in order to carry out certain duties set forth in the policy would be listed here.
6. **Cross references or related policies**
This section lists related policies, if applicable (e.g., a policy on asthma management may reference the district's medication policy).
7. **Authorizing information**
The policy document typically contains a policy number and the effective or adopted date.

How to Develop a Health Services Policy

While specific procedures will vary from district to district, the steps below provide general guidance on how to go about developing a health services policy.

1. **Identify the issue** and be able to articulate why it is a problem. Is there data to support the importance of this issue? Is there a new recommendation for best practice, or a legal mandate that needs to be addressed?

2. **Determine whether a policy is necessary and appropriate.** Does the issue affect the entire district? Does it need to be addressed at the policy level, or would a protocol or procedure be more appropriate? Does the district have the necessary resources to implement the policy? Is there evidence, best-practice, or law to guide the development of the policy?
3. **Determine your role in the policy process** and identify the specific steps and requirements for passing policy in your district.
4. **Gather resources** to inform the policy, including examples from other school districts; guidance from local, state, and national organizations; research articles; relevant laws and regulations; related policies and protocols; and relevant information from employee contracts, job descriptions, and employee guidelines.
5. **Collect input** from stakeholders, including other nurses, the school physician, district leadership, staff, parents, students, public health, community healthcare providers, and any others who will be affected by the policy or have expertise to share.
6. According to district procedures, **draft the policy or provide expert recommendations and submit for approval.** As stated previously, when drafting policy, follow the general style and format used in the district.
7. **Provide explanation of what the policy does and why it is needed.** The school board should receive an explanation, in layman’s terms, that includes the scope and consequences of the issue, the evidence supporting the policy, and the connection to educational outcomes. Depending on the district’s policy process, the nurse leader may provide this in-person, in writing, or through a “policy champion” such as the district’s medical advisor, legal counsel, or superintendent.

Once a policy is passed, the nurse leader’s role is not over. To be effective, a policy must be implemented and regularly evaluated. In many ways, the steps in the policy process mirror those of the nursing process (assessment, diagnosis, outcomes identification, planning, implementation, evaluation). Nurse leaders can apply the same skills used in their daily work to the policy development process.

Conclusion

Strong, evidence-based policy provides structure for the delivery of high-quality health services in schools. School nurse leaders can advance student health in their district by engaging in the policy process. In addition to directly improving health services, taking a leadership role in policy provides the opportunity to bring attention to the important role of school nurses in keeping children healthy and ready to learn and can help the nurse leader build collaborative relationships with district leaders.

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