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Schools in Illinois need more certified school nurses

by **ERIN SHEA**

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A school nurse does more than give out the occasional Ibuprofen or help a child with a stomachache; they manage the well-being of students and can even help kids perform better in school. However, not all children have access to a school nurse, especially in Illinois.

Illinois ranks 44th out of 50 states and the District of Columbia, in the number of children per school nurse, according to the National Association of School Nurses. Illinois has approximately 2,179 children per school nurse, compared to Vermont, the top ranked state, where there are 396 children per school nurse.

"A school nurse can help keep kids in schools," said Cameron Traut, former president of the Illinois Association of School Nurses and school nurse at Libertyville High School. "Nurses can help enhance student performance in attendance and achievement." Traut said that some schools can be awarded financially for high attendance rates.

Experts said that healthy children are more likely to attend and be engaged in the classroom, and tend to perform better in school and on standardized tests.

"If you don't have a healthy child there is no need to try to educate them," said Sue Voss, president of the Illinois Association of School Nurses.

With the states that have a higher number of children per school nurse, access to a nurse is limited. Some larger schools may only have a nurse visit one day a week.

In those situations, "things won't be taken care of as quickly and chronic conditions aren't as well managed," said Linda Davis-Alldritt, president of the National Association of School Nurses. Nurses today are relied on to manage such chronic illnesses as diabetes, which were not as prevalent in the past.

The problem is not a lack of nurses in the state, rather schools aren't hiring them because of a lack of funding. Traut said that schools are looking to cut costs wherever they can, and the nurse per student ratio is getting worse. When a school nurse retires, schools are hiring registered nurses, who don't have school nurse certification and are paid on an hourly wage, or they are not hiring a replacement at all.

Currently the Student-to-School Nurse Ratio Improvement Act of 2011-2012 is working its way through Congress. This act would give grants through the Department of Education to local educational agencies in hire certified school nurses. Sen. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) reintroduced the Senate version of the bill on Jan. 31.

Traut said she wants both legislators and the Illinois School Board to appreciate what nurses do to enhance learning.

"I would like to see their support and [have them] understand the important role we bring to the table," she said.

Children per school nurse ratio by state:



View [School Nurses by State](#) in a larger map

Data retrieved from the National Association of School Nurses.

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