

# The School Nurse Role in Behavioral Health

Behavioral health assessment and intervention falls within the scope of the professional registered nurse. Yet school nurse contributions to student mental and behavioral health (MBH) and wellness are often unrecognized. School nurses provide early identification of stressors and recognize symptoms that may be indicative of MBH concerns. School nurses provide essential health teaching, care coordination, and on-going support.



## Identification of Student Behavioral Health Concerns

School nurses are frequently the first to identify and address behavioral health concerns and connect students and families with systems of support.

School nurses see students in the health room who:

“By enhancing the students’ abilities to cope with the long-term impacts of chronic medical conditions as well as academic stress and other contributing factors that affect their mental health, school nurses are in a unique position to positively affect the long-term health of students.”

- 1 Do not understand their symptoms are related to mental or behavioral health
- 2 Have panic attacks which exhibit as physical symptoms
- 3 Who self-harm
- 4 Experience health disparities and social influencers of health

**“School nurses spend an estimated 33% of their time addressing student mental health issues.”**

School nurses are trusted by children and families and often sought out with concerns such as depression, anxiety, and self-harm. The school nurse can provide a non-threatening environment which helps decrease stigma and overcome reluctance of children and families to discuss their concerns. Some students come into the health room with vague symptoms which occur frequently and may be somatic. These symptoms with no discernible organic cause may be related to stress or adverse events. School nurses help identify students experiencing somatic symptoms and support the process of ruling out physical causes so the underlying concerns can be addressed.

# School Nurse Interventions for Behavioral Health

School nurses provide MBH interventions at every level of a tiered system of support. The scope of practice for the professional registered nurse includes the following nursing interventions:

- screening and assessment
  - suicide prevention
  - teaching calming techniques
  - active listening
  - medication management
  - health teaching
  - care coordination
  - resources
  - referrals



## School Nurses are Important Members of the Behavioral Health Team

School nurses play an essential role in the integration of mental health programming in the schools and must be included in district or school BH/MTSS teams. The effectiveness of the school BH team is enhanced by multi-disciplinary collaboration regarding student concerns to better meet the needs of the students. School nurses have a unique perspective on the intersection of physical and behavioral health that enriches the team’s understanding of each student and their academic performance. “Collaborative practice is imperative for the benefit of all students, especially for those with mental/behavioral health issues.”<sup>4</sup>

***“School nurses are essential members of the school community. Their ability to collaborate with other school team members promotes a system’s approach to the identification and management of students’ mental health thereby promoting students’ academic success”<sup>4</sup>.***

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