School Health Education

Health education instruction is required by North Carolina G.S. 115C-81.25 and by the State Board of Education to be part of the instructional program of every school, kindergarten through ninth grade. Even when not formally required, health education is an essential component of any school health program. Health education requirements are addressed in the North Carolina Healthful Living Essential Standards. All school professionals, especially clinical health services professionals, serve as a resource and can model responsible health-promoting behaviors as the desired outcome. Resources are available through the NC Healthy Schools webpage menu.

The North Carolina Board of Nursing regulations define education related to health as included in the scope of practice for the Registered Nurse under G.S. 90-171.20(7)g. Consistent with this, health education services provided by school nurses generally fall into two categories: individual instruction regarding a specific health need, or group instruction provided as a clinical resource or 'guest' speaker. Legislative standards for school nurses established by Session Law 2011-145 Section 10.22 in 2011 direct that school nurses do not assist in any instructional or administrative duties associated with a school's curriculum, while being simultaneously expected to provide health education to students, staff, and parents. These requirements and teacher credential standards of the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction prevent the school nurse from assignment as a classroom teacher or from assuming responsibility for curriculum.

In recent years, evidence has accumulated demonstrating that health education instruction reduces risk-taking behaviors and develops health literacy when carried out according to certain principles. An effective (i.e., capable of changing health-related behaviors) school health education program is built on characteristics such as those listed on the CDC's page Characteristics of an Effective Health Education Curriculum.

All providers of clinical school health services, such as school nursing and school counseling/psychological services, should be viewed as partners in the school health education instructional program. As personal health issues may come to the forefront as a result of direct health education instruction, it is imperative that clinical support services are prepared to provide support to students and their families. Clinical support services are a resource to reinforce instruction as well as to provide opportunities for students to become more engaged in their own school community. Comprehensive Health Education in Schools and School Health Services (SHS) Teams—Supporting Students are NASN position statements that support health education through the use of school nurses and other clinical disciplines.