Behavioral Health Support and Health Counseling

The area of *Counseling, Psychological and Social Services* is one of the 10 components of the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) model. The CDC defines this component as "prevention and intervention services to support the mental, behavioral, and social-emotional health of students and promote success in the learning process." Services may be provided in group settings on specific topics including violence and bullying prevention to a class, support for students who are experiencing family stress, or directed to an individual based on identified need, referral or request.

School nurses, along with other members of student support services, participate in school-based mental health services and collaborate with counselors, social workers, and psychologists in serving students and families. The National Association of School Nurses (NASN) has provided a position statement titled *The Behavioral Health and Wellness of Students* noting school nurses provide critical links to prevention, early identification, intervention, and referral for behavioral and mental health concerns in collaboration with the interdisciplinary education team (NASN, 2021).

School Mental Health Supports

In today's educational landscape, mental health is just as vital as academic success. While teachers, counselors, and psychologists play roles that are visible in supporting students' emotional well-being, school nurses are often the silent support of the mental health team. The unique position of school nurses places them at the crossroads of health, education and emotional care making them irreplaceable resources to address the needs of students. According to Shannon & Yonkaitis (2025), behavioral and mental health is essential to learning, and school nurses use their nursing judgement and skills to identify students with behavior health concerns.

While viewed as an important component of the role of the school nurse, each nurse is accountable to determine professional competence and learning needs in all areas of nursing practice. School nurses may meet identified learning needs through related training such as Youth Mental Health First Aid and Screening, Brief Intervention and Referral to Treatment (SBIRT), district provided professional development, or other venues that offer continuing education for licensed professionals.

School nurses are members of Student Instructional Support Personnel (SISP) teams in schools and have a role on those teams related to their areas of expertise. Many health conditions encompass both physical and emotional aspects. Students may present with physical complaints that are the result of anxiety and/or depression or are symptomatic of emotional distress. The school nurse should consider engaging the school social worker, counselor, or psychologist when identified issues exceed the nurse's scope of practice and experience. Some situations are also beyond the scope of the school setting and may warrant a referral to an outside community agency following local policy and protocol. School administrators should be notified any time a situation presents a potential safety risk or threat.

The school nurse role in mental health support is locally defined within the parameters of the

nursing scope of practice. Beyond the clinic, school nurses are advocates for mental health literacy, teaching student coping skills, stress management, and self-care. School Nurses promote safe, inclusive environments where mental health is discussed openly and without stigma. For families, they provide trusted guidance, connecting parents to community resources and helping them navigate complex systems of care (Shannon & Yonkaitis, 2025). Mental health support provided through school nurses may include:

- assessment and screening activities related to suicidal ideation, depression or anxiety with referral for those needing related services,
- participation in development of plans for student support and/or school re-entry,
- care coordination for students receiving interventions outside of the school setting, and
- individual and group student health counseling and education in topics related to well-being.
- motivational interviewing to promote behavioral changes.

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has provided guidance related to school re-entry of students who experienced suicide-related crisis/hospitalization in the following resource: "School Re-Entry Guidelines: Recommendations for Hospitals, Schools, and Families in Supporting Youth Following Psychiatric Hospitalization for Suicide-Related Crisis". "The purpose of these guidelines is to provide a structured framework to support schools, families, and hospitals navigate school reintegration."

The School Nurse's Well-Being

School nurses pour their energy, compassion, and expertise into caring for others but who cares for the caregiver. In every school building, the nurse is the steady presence students and staff run to in time of pain, fear, and crisis. They manage physical illness, emotional distress, mental health referrals, and sometimes the quiet heartbreaks that go unseen. Yet behind the calm and capable demeanor often stands a professional carrying the emotional weight of the entire student body.

School nurses must take charge of their mental well-being and acknowledge the emotional weight of school nursing. Mental health support for the school nurse may include:

- Providing regular opportunities for debriefing and peer support
- Encouraging self-care during the workday, not after burnout sets in
- Recognizing their vital contribution to the school and community
- Including themselves in mental health strategies and support meetings.

When the school nurse is supported, the entire school benefits. A well cared for nurse brings calm, continuity and confidence to the students who need stability the most.

Health Counseling

In nursing, counseling is often labeled "health counseling." The North Carolina Board of Nursing recognizes counseling as a component of nursing practice for the Registered Nurse, consistent with G.S. 90-171.20(7)g. "Teaching and counseling include, but are not limited to: (a) assessing the client's needs, abilities and knowledge level; (b) adapting teaching content and methods to the

identified needs, abilities of the client(s) and knowledge level; (c) evaluating effectiveness of teaching and counseling; and (d) making referrals to appropriate resources" (21 NCAC 36 .0224).

Health counseling is an important component of the nursing process. School nurses are in a unique position to provide long-term health counseling and problem solving. Best practice recommendations should be utilized in the provision of services. To maximize a school nurse's delivery of health counseling, a nurse should learn and actively practice the skills and strategies that are needed, such as the use of motivational interviewing techniques and skills developed through other health counseling training. Additional resources may be found at the Division of Child and Family Well-Being Adolescent Health Resource Center.

Resources

Center for Disease Control and Prevention Mental Health Tools and Resources

National Association of School Nurses. (2021). The behavioral health and wellness of students (Position Statement). Silver Spring, MD: Author.

National Association of School Nurses Mental Health Resources for School Nurses

NC Department of Health and Human Services (suicide) Toolkits

Shannon, R., & Yonkaitis, C. F. (2025). *School Nursing: A Comprehensive Text* (4th ed.). F. A. Davis Company.