

Unlocking Data Collection

Practical Tips for School Nurses

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School nurses contend with a variety of challenges related to collecting and using their own data. Seemingly small steps can be taken to overcome these challenges, which will result in significant improvements in data collection and use. Improving the quality of data collection assists school nurses to identify and define practice issues and guide implementation of evidence-based practice within their schools and districts. This article provides school nurses with practical steps to collect and use school or district specific health data.

Keywords: data collection; electronic health record; EHR; school nursing practice

Data collection is a fundamental step in applying evidence-based practice to school nursing practice. Collecting data about the student population can reveal trends and areas of concern or improvement that would benefit from the application of an evidence-based intervention or approach. School nurses collect data every time they document. An electronic health record (EHR) may make it easier to pull key data points from documentation. Even if a school nurse does not have an EHR, there are ways to document information in a way that can be used as data. This article shares why it is important to collect and use data and focuses on tips to facilitate the process.

Why Is Data Collection Important?

- Use of strategically selected indicators and data can be used to inform key

stakeholders (school administrators, school boards, community partners) of issues related to improving student health and subsequent education outcomes.

- Many school nurses have indicated they have saved school nursing positions or even gained additional positions because they used their data to articulate the need.
- School nurse collected data can be used to identify concerns, develop school health policies, monitor performance improvement, and measure parent satisfaction with school nursing services and care (Sheetz, 2012).

Where to Start?

- **Start small:** If you are not currently collecting or using data, identify one step in that direction. Focus on collecting and using one or two data points. The data points should be ones that best tell your story. The data point could address a priority of your principal or district, making it more likely they will listen; or choose data points that best explain why your role is valuable and is part of your documentation already. Examples can include:
 - **Chronic disease surveillance data:** This may include the number of students with chronic conditions, type of nursing services provided to this population, number of visits to the health office with subsequent disposition, and number of absences.

- **Data related to health services provided by school nurses to the general student population:** Such health services may include number of hearing and vision screenings, number of health office visits, and number of school nurse emergency responses (epinephrine administration, CPR, traumatic injury first aid).

Tips

- **Manual data collection:** If you do not have an EHR, develop a form on paper or an Excel or Word document that you can use to easily track your key data points every day. For example, you may track if students return to class or go home after seeing you in the office. The tracking form could include students' initials so as not to have personalized information shown and two columns, class and home, that you check to indicate the outcome of the health office visit. At the end of the day or week, tally the numbers and record final numbers.
- **Use an EHR:** The use of an EHR is an effective and efficient mechanism to collect and review data. If an EHR is not available, advocate for the purchase of one and collaborate with administrators in the EHR selection process to ensure the system allows health data to be collected and managed effectively (Hiltz, Johnson, Lechtenberg, Maughan, & Trefry, 2014; Johnson & Guthrie, 2012).
- **Take advantage of your EHR's capabilities:** If already using an EHR,

consult with the EHR vendor or the district information technology (IT) support person to ensure that the functionality and capabilities of the EHR are being fully utilized in health data collection and management. Take advantage of formal training sessions to increase understanding and use of the EHR.

- **Eliminate manual data collection where possible:** If data are being collected and recorded manually, despite access to an EHR, collaborate with the vendor and/or district IT to learn how the EHR can be used to meet specific school nursing data collection and documentation needs.
- **Collect data in a uniform manner:** The use of a standardized coding system and nursing language allows data to be aggregated effectively (Johnson & Guthrie, 2012). Uniform data-collection practices result in data that can be used to generate reports to demonstrate outcomes of school nursing interventions and display other meaningful comparisons of data such as absences among students with chronic illness. Specifically including standardized language will facilitate data collection and promote the Quality Improvement principle of NASN's Framework for 21st Century School Nursing Practice (NASN, 2015). NASN is working on an initiative to provide support and guidance on collecting uniform data; stay tuned for more information.

Special Considerations

- **Take advantage of existing data:** Generate reports based on existing data to demonstrate the relationship between student health outcomes and

education to share with school administrators, school boards, and community members. Administrative support for school nursing data-collection activities and resources may increase when relevant, aggregated student data are shared with key stakeholders.

- **Take advantage of educational opportunities:** Attend conferences and webinars and use toolkits offered through NASN related to data collection to improve your understanding of data collection and EHRs. Also, reach out to your district's services for IT, research, or development to learn of experts in your district who could help you better collect data or provide tips on how to present your data.
- **Develop an audit system to monitor data collection:** A system audit improves the accuracy of data collection (Bergren et al., 2017). This may include critically reviewing the data on a regular basis to identify trends and possible errors.
- **Apply evidence-based practice:** Collecting data in a meaningful way will reveal trends or areas of concern among the student population. After identifying trends, use the steps of evidence-based practice to apply the best intervention to enhance school nursing practice and improve student outcomes.

School nurses are in a position to collect and use data effectively to improve student health and education outcomes. School nurses should strive to incorporate data collection into routine school nursing practice. Implementing these practical tips will lead to significant

improvements in the ability to demonstrate student health driven outcomes, advocate for and secure health resources, and implement evidence-based practice changes based on student health needs identified via data collection. ■

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