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Arizona's school nurse shortage can keep students out of the classroom



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The Big Shortage

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Tyson Coon, 7, has a legal right to a nurse in his classroom. On a good day, he has four to six seizures.

But in many Arizona schools, there is no nurse. The overall nursing shortage and cash-strapped district budgets make it a persistent staffing gap.

That pushed Tyson's mother, Brandilyn Coon, to cobble together a second-best option.

She moved her son out of his public school using a voucher. That allowed her to find a private school where she could assist in the search for health care staff. Then she decided to become a licensed health aide herself, so she can be with him at school and offer health services when no one else is available.

“It’s kind of a uniform experience that our children will miss school,” said Coon, who often communes with parents of children identified as medically fragile, those whose health or life are in danger without frequent skilled care or technological intervention. “Because of the shortage, all of us parents have been providing a really high skill level of care.”

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The school nurse staffing gap is one with exceptionally high stakes. For students like Tyson, who communicates via computer and uses a wheelchair, having a productive school experience depends on whether schools can afford, and find, a skilled care provider. Even for students with common medical needs, not having a nurse in school could mean missing out on learning.

“If there’s not a nurse on their site, they might not be able to take their asthma inhaler,” said Sarah Portle, a former school nurse who is now a program manager for a new state-led effort to increase the number of school nurses. “Nurses can help with interventions that get that kid feeling better and back to class so they can learn.”

No school nurse requirement

Arizona law does not dictate who can staff a school health office and there is no requirement to have a school nurse. Instead, districts will teach staff members CPR or the medical needs of specific students.

But advocates say that may not be enough.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that every school have an on-site nurse. There is no state-level data to judge how Arizona schools are doing in meeting that goal.

Anecdotally, the number of school buildings with nurses seems low.

When Melinda Weible, a former Phoenix-area assistant principal, first began working with the Arizona Department of Education to help increase the number of nurses in schools, she was shocked by how few registered nurses were employed at schools in the state.

The district she worked in had a registered and licensed nurse or licensed practical nurse at every school, but many districts have neither.

“It makes me sad,” said Weible, who hears about principals and other staff stepping in to help students with chronic conditions like diabetes and asthma. “Principals are not trained in that way, but the responsibility falls on them.”

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Rural districts, she said, sometimes rely on ambulance services when a student has a health problem.

“It could be a matter of life and death between having a school nurse or not,” Weible said.

Even when schools have the money to hire nursing staff, finding a registered nurse is difficult because of the nationwide nurse shortage and competition with other employers.

It is challenging to convince nurses to take a school-based job that earns significantly less than one in a hospital or other care setting. Weible said she stresses the shorter hours in schools and the lower job stress.

“There’s a significant difference in earning power between acute care and school nursing,” said Weible. “But there’s also a significant difference in the work-life balance. They can have the same hours as their kids. They can have the summers off.”

The competitive dynamics have only deepened during the pandemic. Nurses are increasingly burnt out, and hospitals have redoubled their efforts to attract nursing staff with signing bonuses or other perks. Even that extra compensation doesn’t compare to the thousands of dollars a week that travel nurses can earn because of the ongoing COVID-19 pressure on hospitals.

Long-term solutions

The school nursing shortage is part of a larger struggle to train and recruit nurses in Arizona, where the lack of nurses is among the worst in the country. There is not enough nursing faculty to teach all students interested in the profession, creating a training bottleneck.

A new effort, the Arizona School Nurse Access Program, aims to establish a lasting pathway to school nursing.

Under the administration of the state education department, with funding from the Arizona Department of Health’s federal COVID-19 relief funds, the program is investing money in school nurse staffing, training and support. Program partners include the School Nurses Organization of Arizona and the Arizona Foundation for the Future of Nursing, the philanthropic arm of the Arizona Nurses Association.

The Arizona School Nurse Access Program plans to fund up to 60 nurse positions at schools, provide \$10,000 to equip each new school nurse’s health office, and disburse a \$2,000 completion bonus when a new school nurse finishes the first year of their contract.

The program is also helping to build a school nurse curriculum for the Maricopa County Community College District and connecting new school nurses with experienced mentors. Mentors will be paid, and program staff hopes these relationships will guard against isolation and burnout.

In addition, the program wants to show schools why it’s worth having a nurse on staff, even if those positions are more expensive and harder to fill.

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“Our goal is to show these sites the importance of having a nurse and make sure they are paying the nurse the appropriate salary to retain them,” said Portle, who worked as a school nurse for 15 years before becoming the manager of the Arizona School Nurse Access Program. “Healthy learners are the best learners.”

Portle said she hopes schools will see the value in having a nurse on site and keep these jobs filled, even if they eventually have to fund the positions themselves. Arizona State University is on board to study the program's effectiveness over the next several years, she said.

Pandemic relief funds are not the only public money allocated to ease the nursing shortage. This summer, Arizona's Legislature made a cash infusion for nursing education that could help funnel new nurses into the profession and chip away at the state's health care workforce shortage.

The state budget finalized in June includes more than \$90 million to expand the nursing workforce. That includes \$44 million for grants to accelerated nursing programs and \$45 million for a three-year pilot program for the state's public universities and community colleges to expand their other nursing programs.

Training for parents

There is no perfect solution to meet all of Tyson's nursing needs amid the staff shortage. But a law passed last year gave Brandilyn Coon a new option to support Tyson while he's at school.

House Bill 2521 allowed a parent, guardian or family member of a person who needs long-term medical care to be deemed a licensed health aide after training. Arizona is among a handful of states that offer parents and guardians this role so they are eligible for compensation.

Coon was trained by a company called Team Select Home Care. The company has been offering families with medically fragile children instruction for free since April. Team Select in part wants parents to take on care work so nurses become available for other jobs. The company also wants to give medically fragile children more flexibility in how they can engage with the outside world, said president and CEO Fred Johnson.

Coon is now personally helping meet Tyson's medical needs in school. Getting him a step closer to the inclusive education all special education students deserve has been worth it, she said.

Tyson's private school has allowed her to help recruit and train a nurse, but she hasn't been able to find one. Tyson has an in-classroom aide, though, and with her new license and the school's flexibility, Coon can come in herself when his aide is unavailable.

That means Tyson can take a portion of his classes with general education students, an experience Coon said is deeply important to her.

"He talks through a computer, and his body moves differently, but he's still able to learn and understand and socialize with peers of his age. And so, to me, it's been super important to expose him to that," she said.

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