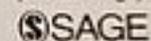


# What Does It Take To Be a School Nurse?

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Answering the question, what does it take to be a school nurse, starts with reflecting personally on my own story. I am a graduate of a diploma nursing program, and my first job was at a public health department where I was based in a public school to do district nursing, which included school nursing services to the school. I was the only nurse in the district office without at least a bachelor of science in nursing (BSN). I was hired because I was enrolled in a BSN completion program, and there was a position to fill. I had great experience in my diploma school in acute pediatrics, but not one of the students in the school needed that expertise. The school was in a very poor area, and the students and families for the most part were rural migrants having come to the city for work. Problems included malnutrition, dental problems, lack of follow through on vision and hearing screening, immunization refusal, health illiteracy, child abuse, and poor access to health care. I was totally dependent on my mentor and more educated peers. The first step of the six "As" of evidence-based practice is to "Ask the question" (Yonkaitis & Maughan, 2018). Let me tell you, I did not know enough to ask a question or, in fact, to be a school nurse. Subsequently with the completion of the BSN, MSN, and PhD, and from my initial experience, I champion the preparation of the school nursing workforce!

The National Association of School Nurses (NASN) calls for the BSN from an accredited college or university for entry into the practice of school nursing (<https://schoolnurse.net.nasn.org/blogs/nasn-profile/2017/03/13/education-licensure-and-certification-of-school-nurses>). The scope and standards of practice guide school nursing practice (NASN, 2017). Why are the baccalaureate and scope and standards important?

The baccalaureate in nursing is important because as a profession, nursing must identify and define its own necessary preparation rather than leaving preparation requirements to some other discipline. Nursing education programs are accredited by the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) or by the National League for Nursing (NLN). The accreditation criteria distinguish curricula outcomes for diploma, associate degree, and baccalaureate in nursing, all of which prepare graduates to be licensed as registered nurses (RN). BSN content goes beyond direct care to include population health, using evidence for practice and quality improvement.

The scope of practice at different educational levels is spelled out in scope of practice publications developed by nursing members of the American Nurses Association (ANA). The scope for all RNs is:

Nursing is the protection, promotion and optimization of health and abilities, prevention of illness and injury, facilitation of healing, alleviation of suffering through the diagnosis and treatment of human response, and advocacy in the care of individuals, groups, communities, and populations. (ANA, 2015, 3rd ed., p. 1)

The expanded role of the specialty of school nursing is reflected in the scope definition:

School nursing, a specialized practice of nursing, protects and promotes student health, facilitates optimal development, and advances academic success. School nurses, grounded in the ethical and evidence-based practice, are the leaders who bridge health care and education, provide care coordination, advocate for quality student centered care, and collaborate to design systems that allow individuals and communities to develop their full potential. (NASN, 2017, p. 1)

School nursing certification further validates a minimum preparation through testing for school nurses and is recommended by NASN (<https://schoolnurse.net.nasn.org/blogs/nasn-profile/2017/03/13/education-licensure-and-certification-of-school-nurses>).

Despite the efforts of professional nursing organizations, including NASN, AACN, ANA, and NLN, school nursing educational requirements and scope of practice are defined in many states by nonnursing professionals and based on budgetary and political decisions. Some school nurses still dispute the BSN imperative. What do we need to do to ensure a prepared school nursing workforce? We need research that shows the unique contribution of prepared school nurses on the health and educational outcomes of school children much like the landmark work by Aiken and her team that showed decreased mortality in hospitals with majority of nurses prepared at BSN (Aiken, Clarke, Cheung, Sloane, & Silber, 2004). Aiken was able to account for the unique contribution of educational preparation because important nurse sensitive outcome data identified through research were available. A NASN program is advancing an empirical accounting of students' needs as well as the nurses who are providing for health services (Johnson et al., 2017). The NASN effort will be a base for an "Aiken-like" study in school nursing.

I challenge researchers to take the lead and move school nursing to the 21st century. Let us avoid a poorly prepared school nursing workforce because of the perceived shortages. Let us work with educational leaders and policy makers to value a prepared workforce, including provision

of salaries that are commensurate with educational preparation. Finally, let us promote a workforce that is capable of implementing the full scope of school nursing practice.

Julia Muennich Cowell, PhD, RN, APHN-BC, FAAN  
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