

School Nurses' Roles in Public Health Risk Communication

Deana Wilhoite, MS, RN¹, Regina (Gina) H. Johnson, MS, RN¹, Yvonne Chen, PhD², Maryellen Potts, PhD¹, Gina Alexander, PhD, MPH, RN³, Ann Marie Statler, PhD, RN⁴, & Jill Peltzer, PhD, APRN-CNS¹
 University of Kansas School of Nursing¹, University of Kansas School of Journalism and Mass Communications², Texas Christian University Harris College of Nursing & Health Sciences³, & Wright State University College of Nursing & Health⁴

Background

- Vulnerable populations suffer disproportionately from public health disasters and other emergencies.
- Crisis and emergency risk communication (CERC) is critical in public health emergency preparation, response, and recovery.
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, populations at risk for serious consequences have limited ability to access and respond to information.
- School nurses can bridge this communication gap because they comprehensively respond to health issues impacting students, families, and the community.

Purpose and Aims

Explore school nurses' knowledge, experiences, and preferences for disseminating evidence-based risk communication to children and families

- Describe school nurses' knowledge, experiences, and preferences in risk communication methods for disseminating information about COVID-19.
- Describe school nurses' perceptions of the usability of state health department COVID-19 and pandemic-related risk communication webpages.

Research Design & Methods

Exploratory mixed-method design was used.

- **Participants:** School nurses who work full-time or part-time in public or private schools in the United States
- **Data Collection:**
 1. Online survey examined school nurses':
 - A. Current practice in public health emergencies
 - B. Knowledge, experiences, and preferences about providing risk communication to school-aged children and their families.
 2. Virtual focus group to expand understanding of school nurses' knowledge, skills, and perceptions of role in public health emergency risk communication
 3. Content analysis of health department websites

Health Department's Website Content Analysis

- Ongoing content analysis of state & local health departments
- Once content analysis is completed:
- We will recruit a sample of school nurses to complete usability testing of health departments, using 5 case studies that focus on risk messaging, both locally and nationally

Sample Survey Questions

Student Population:

1. Factors influencing vulnerability, including access to technology

COVID-19 Specific Questions:

1. Describe your role as a school nurse during public health emergencies, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. During the current COVID-19 pandemic, have you provided information about COVID-19 to students and their families?
 - a) If yes, what kind of COVID-19 information has been provided?

Risk and Crisis Communication:

1. Rate your knowledge about crisis and emergency risk communication resources

Centers for Disease Control & Prevention Risk Communication Best Practices

Be First: information is quickly disseminated.
Be Right: information includes what is known, not known, and being done to fill in the information gaps.
Be Credible: information is honest, timeless, and includes scientific evidence.
Express Empathy: acknowledgement of what people are feeling and their challenges.
Promote Action: messages are simple, easy to remember, and in different ways to reach populations with limited ability to access and navigate information.
Show Respect: acknowledgement of cultural beliefs & practices and collaboration with community to tailor messaging as appropriate.

Preliminary Data

Preliminary State Health Department Findings to Date

- Communication of executive orders on website
- COVID-19 information easy to find
- Analyzed content was factual
- Language encouraging the public to "protect oneself" or "limit the spread"
- Areas for website improvement:
- Culturally competent information
- Empathetic statements
- Accessibility features

School Nurse Survey Findings to Date

	N	Mean or Percent
Years of Experience as School Nurse	18	10 (Range 1 – 25)
Highest Level of Nursing Education	18	28% ADN 50% BSN 22% MSN
School Setting	16	56% Suburban 44% Urban
Percent of Families Experiencing Difficulty with Information Accessibility	16	62% of respondents reported that at 25% of student population have information access issues
Coordination with Health Departments	16	75% Yes 25% No
CERC Knowledge	16	2.18 (1-4 scale) 43% Somewhat Knowledgeable
COVID-19 Information to Students	16	75% Yes 25% No
School Nurses' Descriptions of Role during COVID-19		Symptom surveillance; contact tracing; protocols for students' safe return to school; communication & coordination with health departments

Implications for Policy & Practice

- **Strengthen** partnerships between school districts and local health departments --
 - Build school nurses' capacity to lead CERC efforts during public health emergencies.
- **Create** interdisciplinary teams including school nurses, mass communications experts, and public health departments to ensure public-facing information is relevant, timely, and accessible.

Next Steps and Conclusions

- Develop and test an evidence-based public health emergency preparation, response, and recovery risk communication toolkit for school nurses.
- Amplify the voices of school nurses at the local, state, and national levels to demonstrate their value as members of public health teams in mitigation, response, and recovery.
- School nurses are the "**public health's eyes and ears for the nation's children and families**" (APHN/NASN, 2016)
- Thus, school nurses are play a critical role in optimizing and supporting the health of children, families, and communities during public health emergency mitigation, response, and recovery efforts.