

Healthy School Environments Through State and Local Advocacy

School Nurses in Action

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Because school nurses are often the only medically trained health professionals on staff at schools, they have a unique perspective, says Donna Rehm, a school nurse in Orland Park, Illinois, whose voice tipped the balance in favor of a law to protect children's health by requiring green cleaning in all Illinois schools. Rehm says, "The school nurse is the individual in the school setting, who not only comes with the knowledge and experience related to student health needs, but also brings an expertise in how these needs can be met within the educational setting."

Rehm says that she began learning about advocacy through a workshop hosted by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) in 2001. Interested in learning more, she then attended a School Nurse Advocacy Day hosted by the Healthy Schools Campaign (HSC), a not-for-profit organization that advocates for healthier school environments by promoting fresh, healthy school lunches; green cleaning; opportunities for physical activity; and health-promoting policies at school.

Rehm's story is one that proves the power of an individual to make a difference. While giving a workshop to students on CPR, Rehm says she noticed the smell

of harsh aerosol cleaning chemicals and realized how her students, who would be focusing on deep breathing and mouth-to-mouth in the workshop, would be inhaling these chemicals.

When HSC contacted Rehm and asked her to reach out to her legislator in support of the Green Clean Schools Act, a bill that would require healthy, environmentally responsible "green" cleaning in Illinois schools, she decided to write a letter to her state legislator. Rehm's legislator had been identified as a key vote. He chaired the committee considering the bill and his vote would likely influence other undecided committee members. To move forward for a vote by the full legislature, the bill had to survive a vote in this committee.

She faxed him a letter that described her experience in the CPR class, expressed her concern for her students, and urged his support for the bill. The Green Clean Schools Act was passed by the committee a few days later with a vote of eight in favor and three against. It went on to pass the full legislature and become law.

Later, Rehm found out from HSC Deputy Director Mark Bishop how her voice had shaped the outcome. "I found out that my legislator had been on the fence about it for some time, but decided at the last minute to support it," she explained. "It turns out, someone came up to him after

[the vote] and asked, 'What changed your mind?' He said that a school nurse contacted him and that had made the difference. My voice—one person—had truly made a difference. And . . . that sort of went to my head." Rehm laughs. "Now I've lobbied in Springfield, I've traveled back and forth to Washington to lobby, and I'm on the national committee that actually plans the leadership conference I attended all those years ago with AFT."

Rehm's story highlights the often underutilized power of school nurses in making positive policy change, says Donna Fishman, School Nurse Program Director for HSC. Through HSC's popular School Nurse Leadership Program, Fishman works to give nurses the support and resources they need to speak up for student wellness and school environmental health. For example, participants develop and deliver PowerPoint presentations to their peers and learn public speaking skills during the training.

"For some of them, it's the first time they've given a presentation," Fishman says. "But then they can go back and give that presentation to school staff, the principal, or parents." So far, about 70 nurses representing 225 schools have participated in school nurse leadership training. A full 100% of participants reported some or great improvement in their knowledge on laws and policies related to nutrition



School nurse Donna Rehm with a copy of *The Quick & Easy Guide to Green Cleaning in Schools* at the 2007 NASN conference. Since raising her voice for state-level policy requiring green cleaning in Illinois schools, Rehm has gone on to become a strong school nurse advocate at the state and national levels.

and physical education, effective leadership skills, assessment, and evaluation. And a full 100% rated the networking opportunities "very valuable"—the highest possible rating.

Fishman says that with the right support network and confidence, school nurses can make a real difference in health policy. "We don't teach nursing," she says. "We teach leadership." ■

To learn more, visit Healthy Schools Campaign's School Nurse Resource Center online at <http://www.healthyschoolscampaign.org/schoolnurse>.

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