



So Shines a Good Deed: Linda Pietens on the Role of the School Nurse

With children's health issues in the spotlight nationally, HSC School Nurse Consultant Linda Pietens brings valuable insights to the school nurse's role in promoting healthy schools. With a wealth of knowledge from 18 years as a school nurse and a consultant, Linda views the school nurse as a powerful voice and role model for student wellness.

The Dangers of "Hurry-Up" Meals

Recently, Linda has seen various health problems formerly associated with much older people, including obesity, high blood pressure and Type II diabetes, becoming more prevalent among school-age children. She sees these chronic conditions as being caused in large part by poor diet and by lack of regular exercise.

"Unfortunately, we have such a "hurry-up" mentality today, that very often, whatever can be consumed quickly as a meal is considered acceptable, and these are often not good choices for children," she says.

Linda believes the school is positioned as a role model for healthy meals, as what is served at the school is often viewed as an acceptable meal. However, foodservice directors can face significant challenges in putting together low-cost yet appealing and nutritionally sound meals. Schools may have logistical challenges in serving meals that are prepared

elsewhere. They may have financial limitations, or lack the capacity to buy and prepare fresh produce. Children eat prepared lunch foods indiscriminately, Linda says, and are often rushed to eat lunch quickly and leave for the following class.

Promoting Wellness Daily

Despite these very real-world school challenges, Linda believes the school nurse can make a difference in the school environment. Here are some of her suggestions about how nurses can play a leadership role in promoting a healthy school:

- Set up a school wellness committee with representatives from physical education, foodservice, teaching and administrative departments who can promote school wellness in their respective areas.
- Encourage teachers to promote healthy snacks when "treats" will be served on special days.
- Educate parents about wellness and nutrition, as parents often need help on this topic as much as their children. Nutrition education is very important for the family. Encourage children to read labels on food boxes and cans to determine whether these are good nutritional choices.
- Write articles for the school newsletter on different aspects of wellness.

- Set up times to talk with PTA and parent groups about wellness.
- Nurses can be very influential and nurturing with children on an individual basis. For children who have missed breakfast, for instance, talk about some good alternatives to the "quick and easy" competitive foods.
- Be a role model at all times and always practice what you preach. Always be seen eating healthy foods, for example.
- Remember that you may not see immediate changes. Sometimes the seeds you plant may take time to flower.

The Healthy Schools Campaign has several ongoing projects which promote the leadership role of school nurses in wellness. These include a School Nurse Advisory Committee, a leadership training program and research assessing the role of nurses as agents of change in obesity-prevention programs. For more information on how to get involved, contact HSC at (312) 419-1810 or mark@healthyschoolscampaign.org.

