

School Nurses

In the Eye of the Storm

“Traumatic events are extraordinary, not because they occur rarely, but rather because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life.”—Judith Herman

The collective trauma of coronavirus disease (COVID) continues to unfold in real-time with no clear ending, only brief periods of remission, followed by upticks in cases. Some people have referred to the pandemic as an unending storm. Although we may all be in the same “storm” of the coronavirus, what has become clear is that we are riding out this storm in very different “boats.” While some of us are experiencing the pandemic in a yacht, others are clinging to a buoy for dear life, or in an oarless rowboat with a hole in the bottom. COVID has revealed the structural inequities of our society that have long impacted our most vulnerable populations, especially children and communities of color. This inequity has never been more apparent than through my lens as a school nurse.

In the midst of the darkest days of COVID, it felt like regaining any sense of normalcy was never going to happen. Living through the pandemic, a volatile election cycle, an insurrection, the epidemic of racism, and escalating gun violence all shook the fragile foundation of our country. Our country is also grieving the loss of >600,000 loved ones. For each death, nine family members and friends are impacted, so that number is in the millions (Swayne, 2020). More than 43,000 children have lost one parent to the coronavirus, an unprecedented

rise of >20% over any other year (Miller et al., 2021). This is collective trauma of pandemic proportions.

In my 20 years as a school nurse, the summer of 2021 feels a bit like the summer of 2020 and we wonder what school will look like this fall. As we limped to the end of the 2020-2021 school year, it felt like the intensive public health mitigation strategies we had painstakingly implemented ended abruptly. Suddenly masks became optional, physical distancing measures were lifted, and podding cohorts of students were no longer required. It was a head-spinning end of the school year as community safeguards were lifted with little thought to how this shift would impact schools.

Fall 2021 brings a fresh school year, yet this one feels eerily similar and as unwelcome as Fall 2020 because we are still grappling with the virus. We will re-enter our schools, many of which have been shuttered for more than 16 months, with the weight of the Delta variant literally hanging in the air. The lack of cohesive public health mitigation strategies complicates school safety. The majority of children will not be fully vaccinated by the time school reopens.

Prior to the pandemic, school nurses spent up to 34% of their time on mental health issues (Bohnenkamp et al., 2015). We are bracing for a tsunami of mental health concerns for students and staff as schools reopen. The physical and social isolation, loss of loved ones, loss of normalcy in terms of schedules, and absence of the ebb and flow of a school calendar are just a few

of the challenges school communities face in September.

In October 2020, as the crisis of COVID continued to ravage our nation and world, I began to hold school nursing support groups. They are convened twice per week via Zoom and have provided the privacy and safe spaces for school nurses to share their real-time experiences being on the frontlines of COVID in school settings. The results are troubling, as school nurses are bearing the brunt of the politicization of public health that plays itself out in parental refusal to comply with in-door masking, a less than robust response to COVID vaccinations in some areas of the country, intimidation, bullying regarding quarantining students, and lack of cooperation with contact tracing protocols.

Over the past 10 months, 80 hours of support groups with hundreds of school nurses reveal a snapshot of a beleaguered workforce that is questioning their fortitude to return to school in the fall. For privacy, no names, locations, or school districts were recorded, only the numbers of participants in each group were counted. I collected themes and wrote down anonymous quotes that illustrated the depth of the distress. Here are some examples:

“I have been a nurse for 24 years and I have never felt more demoralized, questioned, or made to feel incompetent.”

“I feel put in the middle of everything, between parents, administration, teachers, and pediatricians.”

“I am done with people fitting the guidelines for their own narrative. I have been a nurse for 17 years and it might be my last.”

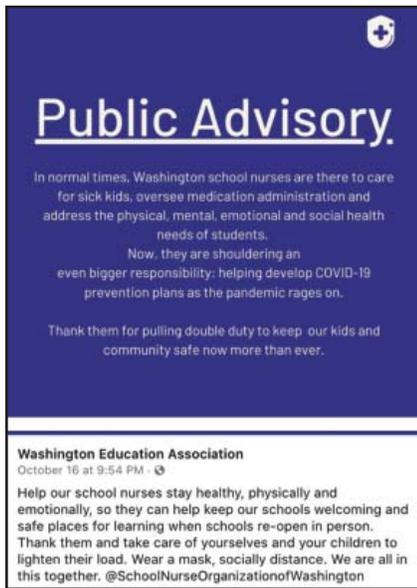


Figure 1. Public Advisory issued from the Washington State Education Association. From @washtingtonea, October 16, 2020, <https://twitter.com/washtingtonea/status/1317246703590887424?s=20> (in the public domain; permission is not required).

“Why do I have to prove my worth to the administration?”

“Worry is the word of this pandemic.”

“I have little hope. My cousin died this week of COVID, we buried him yesterday. That’s why I am here.”

“This is a bittersweet day. I resigned from my school nurse position. This year took its toll on me. I’m feeling lost.”

We are certainly in extraordinary times, further exemplified by a Public Advisory issued from the Washington State Education Association (Figure 1). The message specifically speaks to the well-being of the state’s school nurses. Are school nurses okay? Is anyone checking on our health and welfare? As we spend endless hours devoted to keeping school communities safe across the nation, who is checking in on us?

This message struck me as equally brilliant, thoughtful, and devastatingly sad. We have reached a tipping point in our country and our school communities. As I peruse the message boards across social media, I understand why this message is so needed, appreciated, and should be a national response. School nurses are struggling, they are sharing those struggles privately, but maybe we need to speak the truth about how underwater we feel trying to manage this unprecedented pandemic with few tools.

There are silver linings in the midst of so much loss, death, illness, and social upheaval. We have to do a better job at remembering them, quantifying what is going well, but time and bandwidth are in as short supply as personal protective equipment was at the beginning of the COVID pandemic. We are working our way through the maze of ever-changing messaging regarding re-

sponses to the pandemic. We are collaborating through social media networks providing safe spaces to share collective experiences. School nurses are supporting each other in amplified ways that will continue beyond this current national emergency, that much I know for sure.

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