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State school nurse “could have been very useful” during Wyoming's COVID-19 response

By Kathryn Palmer, Wyoming Tribune Eagle
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CHEYENNE – As Wyoming’s local and state education officials grapple with how to handle a global pandemic, a new state law has the potential to aid in future crises.

The COVID-19 outbreak has exposed some of the gaps it could fill.

“There’s no medical professional in the Department of Education who can provide information,” Janet Farmer, Laramie County School District 1’s head nurse, said. “There’s no way to get information to school nurses in the field. There’s no one to give information to state leaders. There’s no master contact list for all nurses in the state.”

Farmer said oftentimes, the estimated 140 school nurses in Wyoming are “the only providers within their district,” and “work in silos,” with little cohesive direction.

Streamlining communication between the three state agencies school nurses answer to, the Departments of Health and Education, and the State Board of Nursing is one of the reasons why she testified in support House Bill 165, which Gov. Mark Gordon signed into law Monday.

The new law creates a state school nurse – something 41 other states already have. It’s a long-awaited victory for school nurses, but it’ll be up to the Wyoming Department of Education to find the funding for it.

The state school nurse also would set standards for health care in schools, provide training and collect data about the health needs of the state’s 48 districts. Some of that data can be used to apply for federal grant money.

In a public health emergency, like the one Wyoming and the rest of the nation are experiencing now, the state nurse would ideally be able to communicate that data to the Department of Health, and offer guidance to educators and district-level nurses on how to proceed.

“The state school nurse could have been very useful last week,” said Michelle Cordova, president of the Wyoming School Nurses Association, which supported the legislation. “We needed someone to be a liaison between the Department of Health and the superintendents, and provide accurate health information to all of the school districts.”

Instead, Cordova said, the state’s education officials called the nurses association last week amid the uncertainty over school closures. Her organization is “not in the business of writing policy,” so she couldn’t offer much help.

Having someone who can offer policy opinions is one of the reasons why a state school nurse is “something we’ve been wanting for several years,” said Cordova, who also is a school nurse in Sweetwater County.

The school nurses association has supported similar bills that were introduced in 2007 and again in 2015, but neither made it to the governor’s desk.

“Some of the discussion surrounding this was a fear of growth of government,” said Brian Farmer, a lobbyist for the Wyoming School Boards Association, which supported the bill.

But the unexpected spread of COVID-19, which pushed most of the schools to close until early April, is showing just how much Wyoming could benefit from better coordination between school and health officials.

“There is certainly no lack of resources from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the U.S. Department of Education and other government entities,” Farmer said. “But that all has to be boiled down to Wyoming’s position. What is Wyoming going to do about this? Something like the state

school nurse would be able to assist the state superintendent as she and her staff deal with these difficult decisions in the best interest of students and their families.”

Streamlining public health information across Wyoming’s public schools motivated a group of school nurses to push the legislation past the finish line. They reached out to Rep. Sue Wilson, R-Cheyenne, who sponsored – and helped pass – HB 165 this year.

“I deliberately set it up to not have state funding,” said Wilson, whose bill recommends the Department of Education apply for grant funding to pay a state nurse a salary of \$158,150.

“It’s not just getting a bloody nose. There’s a lot school nurses have to deal with, from vaping to pregnancy to suicide,” Wilson said about why she sponsored the legislation, which, if the department can find the money, will take effect in July.

For now, though, as the number of COVID-19 cases keep multiplying, “school nurses don’t have any clinical support,” Wilson said. “They’re out there on their own.”

WTE state government reporter Tom Coulter contributed to this report.

Kathryn Palmer is the Wyoming Tribune Eagle’s education reporter. She can be reached at kpalmer@wyomingnews.com or 307-633-3167. Follow her on Twitter at [@kathrynbpalmer](https://twitter.com/kathrynbpalmer).

At a glance

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