



Georgia Association of School Nurses

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Children's Health at Risk If Georgia Legislature Cuts School Nurse Funding, Forsyth County Mom Says

ATLANTA, GA...A 10 percent cut in state funding for school nurses would jeopardize the health of Georgia's children, said Suzanne Brown, a Forsyth County mother, during a public hearing to legislators on the House Appropriations Education Subcommittee at the State Capitol on Feb. 25.

Brown's daughter, who has severe food allergies, suffered a life-threatening anaphylactic reaction when a teacher at her previous Florida school gave her a piece of candy right before dismissal. No teacher or staff member noticed red hives form on the child's face and the back of her knee, but fortunately Brown arrived to pick up the then-pre-K student in time to administer a life-saving epinephrine (EpiPen) shot.

"Without the quick response by a licensed nurse, my daughter could die," Brown said. "If you allow cuts to the school nurses, the responsibility then falls on to the teachers. I have to rely on her teacher to recognize the signs and symptoms of anaphylaxis."

Brown moved her family to Forsyth County specifically because its school system had a nurse in every school, she added.

When Georgia started funding school nurses in 2001, the legislature allocated \$30 million for the program, but that amount has gradually declined. An original 2010 budget passed by last year's legislature stipulated \$27.5 million to be divided among the state's 1900 schools to support school nurse services, but that budget already has been amended this year to \$26.4 million.

That comes to less than \$14,000 per school, covering less than one half of the average full-time salary of a registered nurse, meaning systems like Forsyth County, that wish to employ a full-time nurse in every school, must supplement state funds with alternate funding resources, such as local taxes or Medicaid funds.

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With only one full-time school nurse per every 2,317 students, Georgia already ranks 45th in the nation when it comes to the ratio of school nurses to students, said Connie Trent, health services facilitator for Forsyth County Schools, speaking at the same hearing. That's only one third of the recommendation of one full-time school nurse for every 750 well students and more for special needs kids, urged by the National Association of School Nurses (NASN) and Healthy People 2010.

If the proposed cuts are approved, many counties will not be able to keep their school nurses, Trent testified, adding that \$2 million would represent 10 percent of the Forsyth County Schools' budget for nurses.

"Who will take care of our kids?" she asked. "School nurses are licensed professionals. You wouldn't call the check out person at Wal-Mart if you needed your appendix out."

In addition to delivering emergency treatments such as EpiPen shots, school nurses train teachers and staff how to perform CPR and use an automated external defibrillator (AED) to treat cardiac arrest, Trent said. They review immunization records to meet state compliance standards, and they teach children about best practices to stay healthy, she added.

A nurse in a school of 1,000 students may see up to 60 children in one day, and with 300,000 Georgia uninsured children, school nurses are the only health care professional some children visit, Trent said. Vision screenings supervised by an Otwell Middle School nurse recently identified two children with serious eye disorders—glaucoma and a partially detached retina, she added.

Before the advent of school nurses, chronically ill children were forced to stay home out of necessity, Trent said. Now, in Forsyth County alone, its 35,000 students include 109 with diabetes; 3,717 with asthma; 2,158 with food allergies; 608 with insect allergies; and 283 with seizure disorders.

This year is not the first time that Georgia's school nurses have faced significant state budget cuts. The initial fiscal year 2009 state budget proposed by Governor Sonny Purdue removed all funding for school nurse programs. That amount was restored after a public outcry.

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The Georgia Association of School Nurses (GASN) was organized in 1991 to unite school nurses committed to providing quality health care services to school children. GASN remains dedicated to promoting excellence in school health through its continued education programs and advocacy. For more information, visit www.gasn.org.

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