

M E M O R A N D U M

November 2, 2021

TO: Health and Human Services Committee
Education and Culture Committee

FROM: Vivian Yao, Legislative Analyst
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SUBJECT: Briefing: Impact of COVID on School Health Services

PURPOSE: Briefing and Discussion; no vote expected

Expected for this session:

- Dr. Raymond Crowel, Director, Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS)
- Dr. James Bridgers, Acting Public Health Officer, DHHS
- James D’Andrea, Chief of Staff, Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS)
- Dana Edwards, Chief, Districtwide Services and Supports, MCPS
- Heather Dublinske, Coordinator, Student Welfare and Compliance, MCPS

Issue Context

Following recent Council briefings regarding the COVID-19 pandemic response and planning efforts of DHHS and MCPS, HHS Chair Albornoz and E&C Chair Rice scheduled this joint committee discussion to provide more in-depth review and discussion with the agencies in two primary areas:

- The stress and impact of additional COVID related duties on School Health Rooms and School Health professionals; and
- Coordination of school health services between DHHS and MCPS in areas such as COVID testing, vaccination, and contact tracing.

DHHS and MCPS will provide overview comments on these issues and updates on the following:

- Current operating status of the school-based health centers and high school wellness centers;
- Current status of School Health Room staff vacancies and turnover;
- What personnel resources are currently allocated to additional COVID-19 related duties such as testing and contact tracing; and

- The status of the School System Medical Officer position and the MCPS COVID Advisory Group.

Background Information: School Health Services

DHHS and MCPS partner to provide health services in public schools through multiple programs: School Health Rooms; School-Based Health Centers; and High School Wellness Centers. The following table provides an overview outline of the staffing and functions of these school health programs.

	Locations	Staffing	Services
School Health Services	All MCPS Schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School Community Health Nurse (SCHN) • School Health Room Technician (SHRT) 	COMAR-mandated school-health services: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respond to and care for students who become ill or have health concerns during the school day • Assess information from parent and health care providers • Provide complex care coordination for students with special health needs • Train school staff to support individual student health needs • Develop and implement health promotion and disease prevention programs to education the community about public health concerns • Consult on health issues relation IEP and Section 504 plans • Link students and families to community resources
School-Based Health Centers (SBHC)	9 SBHC elementary school sites: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leleck • Harmony Hills • Gaithersburg (Washington Grove) • Highland • Rolling Terrace • Weller Road • Wheaton Woods • Summit Hall (Rosemont) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SCHN • Certified Nursing Technician • Mental health provider* • Nurse Practitioner* • Pediatrician* <i>(*These positions are provided through contract)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In addition to providing above referenced school-health services, SBHCs provide preventive and sick care services to children in a familiar setting. Children are more likely to return to class and remain healthy and ready to learn and visits to the emergency room and hospitalizations are reduced. • Health Services are offered to children enrolled in the schools served by the centers, their uninsured siblings and Care for Kids children living within the zip code of the school. • Services include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Routine or sports physical exams • Sick Care: diagnosis and treatment minor/acute/chronic health problems

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New Hampshire Estates (Oakview) 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Referral and case management of children with acute and chronic conditions • Health screenings • Immunizations • Prescription and dispensing of medications • Lab testing • Access to dental care • Dental varnish
High School Wellness Centers (HSWC)	5 HSWC sites: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Northwood • Gaithersburg • Watkins Mill • Wheaton • Seneca Valley 	(Same staffing model as SBHC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HSWC services are tailored to the needs of the high school student population.

School Community Health Nurse (SCHN) Capacity

Council staff notes that the Council has been concerned about the understaffing of SCHNs for a number of years **prior to the pandemic** and has been working with the County Executive to expand the staffing complement of SCHNs. Prior to approving a special appropriation in FY20 to add 6 SCHN positions to School Health Services, the Council acknowledged the following factors impacting SCHN workload:

- **Increasing enrollment and school size:** As schools increased in size due to growing enrollment and facility additions, SCHN to student ratios also grew with no increase in staffing or change in school assignments.
- **Increasing complexity of health conditions and regulatory requirements:** The health conditions managed by SCHNs have increased in complexity and changes in regulatory requirements have increased SCHN's workload. School health staff provide support for teen pregnancy, opioid use, anaphylaxis, diabetes, new immunization requirements, sickle cell disease, trauma, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and dysautonomia. They also provide health education, case management for social determinants of health like homelessness, and a safety net for marginalized and high risk students.
- **Noncompliance with American Academy of Pediatrics Standards:** Although the Academy has recommended a full-time nurse in every school, SCHNs were typically assigned to 2-4 schools.
- **Unacceptably high SCHN to student ratios:** The nurse to student ratio of 1:1,824 in FY19 was nearly three times that recommended by the National Association of School Nurses for the general population (1:750). The ratio also far exceeded that in all other jurisdictions in Maryland often by 200-300%.
- **Consequences of high SCHN workload:** The large demands placed on school health nurses create stress for all school health staff, result in high turnover of SCHN staff, and ultimately compromise the care and safety of students.

In FY20, the Council understood that a minimum of 26 SCHN positions would need to be added to ensure a dedicated SCHN position at each high school and middle school. Additional positions would be needed to have a dedicated SCHN at each elementary school with a population of over 850 students. The Council added six SCHN positions through an FY20 special appropriation and approved an additional ten positions as part of the DHHS FY21 Operating Budget for a total of 16 additional SCHN positions in FY21. No additional positions were added to the FY22 Operating Budget to provide dedicated SCHNs at the high school and middle school levels due to uncertainty during the pandemic.

Issues for Discussion and Consideration

The COVID-19 pandemic has added significant stress and responsibilities to school health rooms and school health professionals. Council staff notes that the critical functions and significant workload for School Health staff that existed prior to the COVID pandemic limits the ability for these staff to handle additional ongoing responsibilities without burnout. Current and updated data on staff retention and recruitment will inform the extent to which the County needs to provide additional School Health Staff supports.

School Health Staffing:

- What strategies are being implemented to resource and support additional COVID related duties in school health services, and to address current staffing shortages?
- Are retention and recruitment strategies such as incentives or increasing positions from part-time to full-time being reviewed and considered?
- What additional supports are needed for School Health Services in schools and geographic areas of the county with higher levels of COVID cases?
- Will the County continue to raise SCHN staffing levels to the level targeted in FY20 and assess whether additional positions are needed beyond this previous target?

Agency Coordination:

- How will the School System Medical Officer and the MCPS COVID Advisory Group facilitate coordination between MCPS and DHHS? How will they partner with the existing Montgomery County School Health Council?
- How can the partnership between DHHS and MCPS around school health issues facilitate joint communication and increased outreach to families?