

NEUSHA Summer Academy 2022

School Nurse Narratives from Nurses attending in person

Prompt: Please share a brief narrative about working during COVID that highlights a positive interaction, an achievement, and/or success, no matter how small.

Susan Almquist, MS, RN, NCSN

A positive outcome of the need to respond to COVID-19 was the pulling together of staff, from the principal down to cafeteria and custodial staff and a strong PTO parent group. All were very appreciative of each other's skills in 'the struggle'. I'm sure our students profited from the safety net that was formed and that the sense of community will continue to be a positive force for them in the future.

Meg Burch, MS (Epidemiology), RN, NCSN

My name is Meg Burch. I am currently a Regional School Nurse Consultant serving Franklin and Berkshire counties in the Western Region of Massachusetts. In the Spring of 2020, I was District Nurse for Frontier Regional and Union #38 Schools and a Public Health Nurse working for the Cooperative Public Health Service, a program of Franklin Regional Council of Governments (FRCOG).

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic. Two days later, most schools in Massachusetts closed "for a few weeks" ahead of Governor Baker's announcement on the 15th. We all know what happened next. The role, job, and workload of school nurses were all profoundly changed and expanded in ways unimaginable before the Spring of 2020. Before I share a successful model of collaboration, I want to take a moment to acknowledge, appreciate, and honor the extraordinary work of school nurses over the past two and a half years.

Responding to COVID -19 required school nurses to expand their responsibilities, take on new leadership roles, and manage the challenges of a pandemic. Nurses honed and developed skills in communication, care coordination, planning, and advocacy. Existing partnerships were expanded and new collaborative relationships were developed.

For School Nurses in Franklin County, a rural area with 26 mostly small towns, this meant working with 26 local boards of health and public health nurses who covered anywhere from one to 18 towns. And in most cases, the jurisdiction of Public Health Nurses did not align geographically with school districts. The networking and collaboration of School and Public Health Nurses grew out of the need for a coordinated response and increased communication among stakeholders.

In the spring of 2020 Phoebe Walker, Director of Community Services and the Cooperative Public Health Services team convened a virtual meeting of School Nurses and Public Health Nurses to collaborate and coordinate our COVID-19 response. The initial meeting was a success and meetings have been held regularly since.

School and Public Health Nurses shared protocols for care coordination, COVID case management, contact tracing, COVID-19 testing programs, safety in the school setting, and even some

non-Covid topics such as the updated vision screening protocols. Nurses discussed ever changing guidance from the state and the impact on school health and their workload. Meetings with state legislators and CIC health management were convened so that school and public health nurses could provide feedback and successfully advocate for our districts to receive the support needed to implement school-based testing. The meetings set the stage for an early roll out of vaccination clinics held at area schools that ensured access for students in all districts throughout the county. The meetings were a forum for collaboration, problem solving, shared experiences and much needed support for school nurses.

At the last meeting in June the group unanimously agreed to continue the ongoing meetings indefinitely. This group decision reflects the benefits to all involved and the recognition that the collaborative effort strengthens school nurse practice in our region.

Doreen Crowe, MEd, BSN, RN

My name is Doreen Crowe. I'm the Director of Nursing for Arlington Public Schools in Massachusetts. I previously worked at Wilmington Public Schools. As I reflect on the past two years of the global pandemic, I realize that many school nurses and school nurse leaders either retired, in some cases retired early, or became burned out and made a change in their work setting. Although this is discouraging and disappointing, I think it's important to recognize the positives or silver linings of COVID-19. During the pandemic, a light has been shined on school nursing. We rose to the challenge and managed to continue focusing on the health and safety of our school communities. We collaborated with local health departments, served on recovery planning teams, performed ongoing illness surveillance, contact traced, and implemented a rigorous testing program - pool testing, test & stay, distribution of at-home testing kits. In Arlington, we also implemented a test-to-return program (not required by DESE). It was very successful. About a third of the time, students/staff tested positive and remained out of school/work to prevent further spread of the virus. Parents/guardians/caregivers all have a deeper respect for the role of the school nurse in the school setting. I've received multiple emails from families thanking us for all we've done during this challenging time. Our greatest successes - sharing our knowledge, educating communities, and using our collective VOICE to advocate for the health & well-being of our students, staff, and school communities. Shout out to the Arlington nursing team. It's both an honor and a privilege to be leading a stellar group of nurses.

Jennifer Faragi, BSN, RN, School Nurse/Director of Health Services

Like many other school nurses, during our first full school year with Covid, I spent many long hours working with our local Board of Health and contact tracing for our cases. This involved late nights in the building, calling parents of close contacts and extensive teaching regarding current guidelines, symptom management and how to navigate the return to school. I got to know our students and their families well and they got to know me. As the number of cases in our community grew, our administrative team became integral as we worked evenings, weekends, and holidays together to support our students and their families. Our second school year of Covid brought new challenges. Guidelines changed yet again and symptomatic testing in school became part of our daily routine. Our number of vaccinated students grew but Covid threw us a curveball and many of our numbers were vaccinated students. I worked very hard to destigmatize testing and focus on "taking care of ourselves and taking care of others." I saw the first change in mindset with our winter athletic teams. One of our coaches reached out to me asking if

the team could be tested prior to their match. They had a vaccinated student test positive and given the close contact of their sport the students were concerned about sharing Covid. Testing was made available each morning and the entire team came together before the start of the school day. They tested together and supported one another. They led the way for our other winter sports teams and soon after some of the other teams were asking to test as well. Students would also stop by to ask questions about Covid, share concerns about a possible exposure or ask to be tested if they were not feeling well. Testing positive would mean missed academic time as well as athletics and extracurriculars but they came anyway. I have never been more proud of our students. When asked to share a positive experience I am flooded with many emotions. There is not just one experience that can sum up how Covid has positively impacted me. The relationships formed throughout this two-year journey is what I hold close to my heart. It's the energy that keeps me going.

Barbara Grant, BSN, RN

My name is Barbara Grant, I am the Director of Nursing at the Brandon School in Natick, Massachusetts. I am the former nurse leader for Roxbury Prep Charter school in Boston that is where my COVID experience was. It was a roller coaster year for sure and here is my story.

This past year we were all tested more than ever. There were times I felt I had lost my professionalism, dignity, and support. Then there were times when I felt I won when I saw all the students keeping their masks on and sharing their worries and concerns, in my office. I cried when I had 85 test and stays one morning and for the first time in my career wanted to quit feeling like a failure. I laughed with my students doing the Sturdy in my office and in line in the morning during arrival as I told them how Boogie their masks looked when they blinged them out. I learned how to cope and help my nursing team cope..answering their calls at 6:30am on my way to work and hearing their frustrations and giving them support and hope and again at the end of the day on my way home. I loved my students watching them grow and mature during a very difficult time in their school experience. Watching them graduate in person was so exciting for them. The highlight was how they honored me as one of their hero's that helped them get through the year during their graduation.

As for COVID...you may have challenged us as school nurses, but we are still here..we did not break. In closing I would like to share a saying that I hung on my wall that helped me during the tough times:

When you come out of the storm
You won't be the same person that walked in to it
That is what the storm is all about
When you can't control what is happening to you
You can control how you respond to it
That is where our power is..as nurses.
Author Unknown

Judith Hinckley, BSN, RN, Health Care Supervisor (MA)

I found a job because of COVID. I am an RN with a BSN from Boston University in Massachusetts. I spent 22 years as a community health nurse doing everything including becoming nationally certified in infusion. I contracted MRSA from a client and the treatment left me disabled. I can no longer due the physical aspects of nursing. Because of the busing shortage I was able to get a job with a day habilitation

program with intellectual delays who have aged out of the school system. Our program has adults ages 22 to 69. Average age is late 20's early 30's. My title is Health Care Supervisor. I started in May 2020 doing monthly, semi-annual, and annual reports. Nursing was limited to telephonic encounters assessing members needs and adherence to Covid precautions. We reopened in July with main concerns COVID precautions. My job entails administering meds making sure orders in place, treatments, etc. A large part of my job is education centered on increasing independence of members. I teach a healthy cooking class, Healthy Lifestyle classes and monthly health and safety in services. At first 2 of us shared the job, but in 2021 I worked 5 days a week. Amazingly the programs first case of Covid occurred in December of 2021. I also was able to work for CVS administering Covid vaccinations and between the 2 jobs got completely out of debt.

Margi Malone, Med, BSN, RN (MA)

The past few years have certainly been challenging while navigating the changing COVID protocols. Our nursing staff, administration and local board of Health carried the brunt of the concerns when dealing with families, students and staff. I am truly proud of the fact that we all worked together. There were times we were all overwhelmed.

Frequently our nursing colleagues never knew whether to cry or laugh. The phone rang off the hook as well as the volume of emails. Contact tracing could be a nightmare. We held it together and tried our best to be professional and caring.

However, if we heard one more detailed scenario of Uncle Joe bringing COVID to the Thanksgiving celebration. How about the parents who would spill the beans about other families being positive and never reported to the school? Even the rationale parents used to explain how their student could not possibly have COVID but played on the close-knit basketball or hockey team. Really? How about all the great parties and sleepovers over the holidays. One of my favorites were the eight young staff members who went out to eat together in one of those enclosed igloo settings. We called them the Igloo Eight. They all called in sick the following Monday. The one that really floored us was the parent who altered her son's immunization record with her information. She used the information so her son could play basketball. An astute nurse noticed the discrepancy. Yikes!

Not to make light of the situation and the devastation it caused to many families. I felt proud to be a collaborating group of professionals. We should all be proud of the efforts we made and the help we provided and will continue and will continue to provide.

Katie Martin, MSN, RN

My COVID story is really the story of my nursing team and my building team. It is a story of learning, laughing, crying, swabbing, symptom lists, spread sheets, more swabbing, wine, and the BEST colleagues ever.

Our story begins in September 2020 when, at that time all we really knew was that we needed a medical isolation room and full PPE. We didn't fully appreciate what COVID looked like in kids, and we were nervous about what the spread was going to look like in school. We were going to wear masks and stay 6' apart from each other (because, you know kindergarteners). Day 1 (or maybe day 2) a kiddo arrived in my health office and reported not feeling well with some vague symptoms of fatigue, nasal congestion and mild cough. What's a girl to do? You know...you call home and leave a message for the parent explaining their child's symptoms and that they need to be picked up. And you are in an isolation

room in full PPE because you just don't know and where can you even get a test at this point? And you wait and call and wait and call. Fast forward to 5:00pm when suddenly everyone one you know is texting you that YOU are on the news, and they are playing the voicemail that you left. Lots of feels associated with this but I learned that my school Mom's and community totally had my back. Viral news stories when you are the star are scary. On the plus side, the parents in our district were put on immediate notice that we were not messing around and would be sending their kids home if they were sick. Oh, and my colleagues now lovingly refer to me as "Nurse Sniffles".

We endured the safety protocols, enjoyed the days where we only had a third of our regular number of kids in the building, found our groove and some days had some fun! We kept our fingers crossed and watched for sniffles. In late January 2021 (with our windows wide open, #ventilation) we were early adopters and launched pooled testing as our numbers were starting to go up. Every Monday and Tuesday for the rest of the year myself and our principal did pooled testing- Batman and Robin, the dream team. And we prayed for negative pools. And we contact traced and we called families at 9:00 on Sunday night to let them know that their child had been exposed. My team and I wrote protocols and advised our administration of concerns and safety practices. We worked with the Board of Health. We were exhausted but totally rocking this COVID thing.

In February we vaccinated each other and cried tears of joy. We vaccinated our elderly community at mass vaccination clinics. We felt like we were making a difference and giving people an opportunity to get their lives back. We were all in!! And then we vaccinated our colleagues (#tearsofjoy). We were all going to get through this together, here comes the finish line. More than 96% of our staff are fully vaccinated!!

We came back in September 2021, and we pool tested and reflex tested every week, and we contact traced and tested and stayed and we tested the symptomatic persons (#Binax). It was a never-ending cycle of testing. But we persevered because we all believed it was our responsibility to keep our community safe. We saw little to no in- school spread of COVID. We had the numbers, we knew the cases, and our community supported us. We were who you called when you didn't know what to do- when in doubt, call your school nurse.

We vaccinated our school kids at mass clinics in the Fall. They lined up to get their shots from "their nurse" and we took selfies. We hosted clinics at our schools. Our collaboration with our local board of health yielded some of the highest vaccination rates in the state and we are SO very proud of our work.

In January we rolled out the test to return initiative. We went out on a limb and followed the science- we all knew that a person was still contagious on day 6 and that kids can't really wear masks all that well. We required that persons stayed home through day 5 and could test to return starting on day 6 and return if they were negative. We have the data, let's use it to keep our community safe. We pool tested through the end of the school year but thankfully we ended contact tracing. We distributed at home test kits, and we all kept testing through to the end. We took our masks off- still not too sure about that one but here we are.

We have come so far. We are holding our breath to see what this next school year brings, but no doubt, we will again exceed all expectations. We are nurses-smart, fierce, highly capable- this is our time.

Lea Tabenkin, MBA, BSN, RN, NCSN

My name is Lea Tabenkin, I am the Nurse leader for Hamilton Wenham School District, a suburban community in the North Shore of Massachusetts. We have 5 schools in our district, 6 nurses and around 1600 students.

Initially, as you all know, there was complete panic and disorganization when Covid first hit our communities. The schools literally shut down over the course of 2 days. Our nursing staff took on the roles of contact tracers working with public health nurses. The initial lack of information was replaced by ever changing instruction from all levels, local, state and federal. Our nurses would go to school, stay late, go home and then hop on the latest DPH, or Public Health forum to ensure we promoted current guidelines. At the time, lots of stakeholders challenged decisions and policies. Administrators, parents and community members met for hours on zoom hoping to create policy and appease angry parents who were concerned that their children were not safe, or that their children could not learn while wearing masks. Parents were unhappy with nurses who promoted the guidance, and a lot of fires were put out. Students were remote, then hybrid, finally in person and our nurses and the nursing staff continued to maintain contact through the summer and in some cases work before school to ensure we communicated the appropriate information to our students and staff.

One of our major assets to our team is that our Middle School Nurse, Maribeth Ting, who is with us today, is also the Public Health Nurse in Wenham. With close to 30 years working as a public health professional, she was instrumental in fostering collaboration between school nursing staff and public health. With her experience running vaccination clinics, using the MAVEN System and participating in weekly DPH meetings, we held covid and flu vaccine clinics for staff, and students in school and in the community. Maribeth, I applaud you and thank you for all you have done.

In addition to our collaboration with public health, we implemented surveillance testing and symptomatic testing early and utilized our sub nurses who were instrumental in the success of this program. Not only could they manage our offices, but they worked well with our team and testing students.

Our administrators also were supportive. Each morning the Superintendent, Eric Tracy or my Principal Bryan Menegoni would stop by my office and ask. "What can I do?" When implementing our robust testing program, our administrators, students, and staff promoted testing as a "community effort" to keep our schools safe which resulted in almost 80% student and staff participation.

This year we saw an increase in students with mental health issues along with increased absenteeism. Through mandated screenings we noticed an increase in vision and hearing referrals along with an increase in obesity. Finally, our nurses worked with parents to ensure that our students were seen by their PCP and up to date with their vaccinations.

Going forward, we learned to hit the ground running, collaborating with various teams, and promoting health within our community. I cannot thank my team enough. Hamilton Wenham has an outstanding group of nurses who will continue to be an instrumental voice in our community.