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Appropriations Committee

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THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

House Ways and Means Committee

HB 1004: Public Schools - Health Services - School Nurses

Friday, March 3, 2021

Favorable

Chair Atterbeary and Members of the House Ways and Means Committee, I am pleased to be able to present **House Bill 1004** to you today to propose that there should be at least one nurse in every school based on my experience as a nurse and also as a parent.

School nurses strengthen and facilitate the educational process by improving and protecting the health status of children and in the identification and removal of health related barriers to learning. The major focus of school health services is the prevention of illness and disability and the early detection and correction of health problems. The school nurse is uniquely qualified to serve this role.

Many of you might have memories of the school nurse's office as the place where students went for help for minor scrapes and injuries; or to step out of class because of a headache or nausea. Today, school nurses are needed to address a much more complex student body.

As we move out of the last two years, I have come to realize that we do not currently have a nurse in every school and where we do have them, we have placed a nearly impossible burden on them. We want them to continue to provide the comprehensive school health services as they had before, and now we are asking them to help heal our children from the extraordinary stresses, both physical and emotional, placed on them by the pandemic. Here is what we have asked our school nurses to do:

- **Ensure students can access behavioral health services.** There is an absolute crises in children and youth mental health. Because of skyrocketing youth suicide rates, our leading medical organizations in the field – the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and Children's Hospital Associations – have declared a "National Emergency in Children's Mental Health." Last month the House of Delegates validated this crisis for students by overwhelmingly passing Delegate Washington's HB 118 which acknowledges the stark reality that mental health needs are lawful absences and will, after an absence, have students meet with a mental health specialist within a period of time. A school nurse will strengthen and support this process.

- **Manage the care of chronic diseases of our students.** A growing number of children are suffering from chronic diseases such as diabetes, high blood pressure, obesity, and asthma. Nationally, 25% of children have at least one chronic disease.
- **As a result of mainstreaming, the school health care services need to treat and serve children with complex medical conditions in schools.** These include children with conditions with cerebral palsy, severe epilepsy, and multiple physician disabilities, among others. These children deserve to be able to stay in school as much as any other child.
- **Support parents in obtaining the basic health services that all children need.** Currently we require mandated hearing and vision tests (Education article 7-404); mandated physical examination before entering the school system for the first time (COMAR- 13A.05); childhood vaccinations (COMAR 10.06.04); and the new availability of COVID-19 tests in the *Maryland K-12 COVID Testing Program*. These investments in protecting the health of our students will only work well with the support and guidance of a school nurse.
- **School nurses ensure children get regular care from primary care providers, dentists, and behavioral health when needed.**

In the schools where we do have nurses, we have entrusted them to keep our children safe and healthy. Yet we have not provided the resources needed to ensure there is a nurse in every school. I have attached data that I received from the **Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE)**:

- Maryland has an average of 0.74 nurses in each school; and there are wide disparities in nurse staffing. My own county of Prince George's has 0.95 nurses in every school, but other counties are not so well positioned. The following counties have fewer nurses per school than the state average: Anne Arundel (0.62), Baltimore City (0.30), Calvert (0.72), Frederick (0.38), Garret (no RNs in the school system), Kent (0.40), Montgomery (0.57), Somerset (0.67), and Washington (0.36).

When there is not a nurse on site, schools rely on certified nursing assistants or even unlicensed school health aids. While these staff provide important support services, they are not a substitute for a nurse. Only the school nurse can coordinate complex health services, manage chronic diseases, regularly administer medications, and integrate behavioral health services into the schools.

I know that this bill requires an investment, and that the funding streams are complex of how state and local agencies fund school health. Our groundbreaking investments in our education system with the Blueprint funding, which DLS Accounting and Implementation Board estimates at a \$3.5 billion by FY 30, and \$400 million in capital expenditures alone this Fiscal Year are foundational but will not work as intended without ensuring that our students are healthy. You can have the best teacher and well-built school, but without healthy students the investments will not work.

We need school nurses to ensure students are healthy, safe, and able to learn. I ask for a **favorable vote for HB 1004** and I look forward in working with the Committee to ensure that every child has access to school nurses to keep them healthy, safe, and able to stay in school.