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LEGISLATIVE EDUCATION STUDY COMMITTEE
BILL ANALYSIS
55th Legislature, 2nd Session, 2022

Bill Number	<u>SB58/aSEC</u>	Sponsor	<u>Stefanics</u>
Tracking Number	<u>.221374.1</u>	Committee Referrals	<u>SEC/SFC</u>
Short Title	<u>Increase School Nurses</u>		
Analyst	<u>Estupiñan</u>	Original Date	<u>1/26/2022</u>
		Last Updated	<u>2/1/2022</u>

BILL SUMMARY

Synopsis of SEC Amendment

The Senate Education Committee Amendment to Senate Bill 58 (SB58/aSEC) removes language specifying that the Public Education Department (PED) licenses an individual as a school nurse.

Synopsis of Original Bill

Senate Bill 58 (SB58/aSEC) would increase the number of individuals who are licensed by the PED to serve as a school nurse. The bill defines “school nurse” and specifies those individuals must be professional registered nurses who provide services at a school building.

FISCAL IMPACT

SB58/aSEC appropriates \$1 million from the general fund to PED for expenditure in FY23. Any unexpended or unencumbered balance remaining at the end of FY23 shall revert to the general fund.

Salaries for school nurses range significantly throughout the state, with previous LESC analysis on similar legislative proposals noting that the New Mexico School Nurses Association found some school nurses earn as little as \$30 thousand each year. According to a PED analysis during the 2021 regular session, the average salary of a school nurse excluding benefits was \$47,213. If the cost of benefits is not taken into consideration, the appropriation in SB58/aSEC would be sufficient to hire approximately 21 school nurses, at the current average statewide salary of \$47,213.

This estimate does not take into consideration potential fluctuations in compensation that may occur as a result of legislative proposals to increase the compensation of teachers and other school staff. Passage of these proposals may reduce the number of school nurses the appropriation in SB58/aSEC would be sufficient to assist districts in hiring.

It is important to note districts are competing with public and private public health facilities for these certified personnel. According to a 2020 program evaluation from the Legislative Finance Committee, the average annual salary of a professional registered nurse in New Mexico was \$71,310, with that average decreasing to \$66 thousand if excluding Albuquerque, Santa Fe, Farmington, and Las Cruces.

Therefore, there is a financial incentive for registered nurses to pursue a career in those public and private facilities, rather than pursuing a significantly lower-paying position with public schools.

SUBSTANTIVE ISSUES

Role and Impact of School Nurses. Ensuring students have access to a school-based nurse is critical in meeting their diverse health needs. These school-based nurses play an essential role in assessing, intervening, and monitoring the increasingly complex range of chronic illnesses many students in New Mexico are now experiencing, including asthma and diabetes. Research has shown school nurses also reduce chronic absenteeism by engaging students and their families regarding their unique health needs, assisting them in accessing physical and mental health services, and providing students with a sense of safety on their respective campuses.

In the 2018-2019 academic year, 43 percent of students in New Mexico had an identified medical diagnosis, with school health offices recording approximately 1.9 million visits. In the latest version of the School Health Services Annual Summary Report, as jointly released by PED and Department of Health (DOH), a total of 263,884 hearing, vision, special education, substance abuse, and depression screenings were completed by school health professionals. School nurses were also responsible for 21,961 student prescription medications, with the four most common student diagnosis being: allergic disorders, asthma, ADD/ADHD, and eye disorders.

These statistics do not take into consideration the impact of the ongoing pandemic, where more students may require medical care or mental and behavioral health screenings and assessments.

Nurse Shortage. As of 2019, 18 of New Mexico's 89 school districts lacked a full-time nurse. When assessing the nursing shortage on the basis of nurse-to-student ratio, the northwest public health region of the state continues to have the lowest number of nurses per student. This public health region of New Mexico includes San Juan, McKinley, and Cibola counties.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends schools have one full-time nurse for every 750 students, while the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends a minimum of one full-time professional school nurse in every school. As of 2019, there were 518 licensed school nurses, assisted by 7 licensed practical nurses and 513 health assistants, providing care for 321,450 students on 810 campuses throughout the state.

According to the New Mexico Health Care Workforce Committee 2021 Annual Report, there were 15,588 practicing registered nurses in the state, with an additional 6,223 registered nurses needed to meet the national benchmark of 94.3 per 10,000 inhabitants. Of note, the number of registered nurses in the state has declined by approximately 14.2 percent from a high of 18,173 in 2017.

Potential Savings Associated with School Nurses. Research has shown that investments in school nurses are associated with significant savings for numerous stakeholders, with every dollar spent on school nursing contributing to savings of \$2.20. Those savings are largely derived from the prevention of emergency room visits, fewer parents missing time at work to care for sick children, and fewer disruptions in the productivity of teachers.

ADMINISTRATIVE IMPLICATIONS

Pursuant to Section 24-1-4 NMSA 1978, DOH is required to provide medical oversight and support to school nurses through consultations, trainings, and the receipt of reports on regional trends in public

health from school nurses. Expanding the number of school nurses in New Mexico would increase the administrative burden on regional health officers, which may experience challenges in providing oversight and content expertise to schools.

TECHNICAL ISSUES

According to previous LESC analysis on similar legislative proposals, the New Mexico Board of Nursing does not issue licenses for school nurses. Instead, that authority is vested entirely in the PED. Therefore, language in SB58/aSEC defining a school nurse as an individual who, “is licensed by the public education department and the board of nursing...” is incorrect and would benefit from clarification or a subsequent amendment.

OTHER SIGNIFICANT ISSUES

Public Health Response to Covid-19 pandemic. Throughout New Mexico, school nurses have been frontline workers in regional efforts to sustain contact tracing, ensure students complete mandated quarantines, and staff vaccination and testing sites in school districts. The American Rescue Plan, as enacted by Congress in early 2021, allocated approximately \$500 million to school-based health services. Much of which will likely be spent on training, scholarships, and administrative staff rather than on recruiting more people to serve as school nurses.

Disparities in Compensation. Apart from the nationwide shortage of registered nurses, there is also a financial incentive for those individuals to pursue a career in a hospital or other medical setting. Many of those institutions offer compensation packages that exceed those of school nurses by approximately \$10 thousand to \$20 thousand.

Aging of Nursing Workforce. Between 2000 and 2018, the average age of employed registered nurses in the United States increased by 5.2 years to an average of 47.9 years. Nationwide, 47.5 percent of registered nurses are now over the age of 50.

Insufficient Capacity of Nursing Pipelines. In one 2020 study by the American Association of Colleges of Nursing, approximately 80 thousand qualified nursing school applicants were denied from baccalaureate and graduate programs due to a lack of qualified faculty, clinical study sites, classroom space, and budget constraints.

RELATED BILLS

SB50 – Expand Nursing Programs at Colleges

SB56 – Nursing Student Loan Repayment

SB67 – Expand School-Based Health Clinics

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- LESC Files
- Legislative Finance Committee (LFC)
- Public Education Department (PED)
- Department of Health (DOH)

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