

A LETTER OF THANKS TO THE MASSACHUSETTS SCHOOL NURSES

January 5, 2021

As a strange, challenging year ends and the new year begins, it seems fitting to send a message of thanks to you, the hundreds of Massachusetts school nurses who daily provide dedicated services to students, parents, faculty and the broader community. Too often we fail to show gratitude, admiration and appreciation as you tirelessly make your students' world a better place. I had the honor of working with many of you for twenty-three years and know school nurses' impact on student lives, health and education. While school nursing is always challenging, in 2020 you were called upon to expand your roles and responsibilities during a surging pandemic--- leaving anxiety, illness and painful loss in its wake.

I can only guess at your endless contributions: adapting to changing onsite and virtual learning modes, screening children for covid-19, tracing contacts, identifying students at mental health risk, managing chronic illnesses, reaching out to those who are deeply affected by isolation and loss of daily rituals, mastering virtual assessments---and the list goes on.... Through all this you have had to combat the changing directives from political and health leaders, problem solve on situations where there are no definitive answers, face shortages of personal protective equipment, coordinate with school officials, reassure fearful staff and parents---and remain calm in the maelstrom of competing demands, often with limited support and guidance. Meanwhile you have had the burden of keeping yourselves and your families safe as we all traverse the uncharted course of this virus. But, most of all, I am sure you have missed your daily interactions with the students you love!

So, I want to give thanks to you, the professional school nurses of Massachusetts. I have some small understanding of how much you give to your school communities. And I have great faith that your efforts will continue to help and heal our students. During the next year you, with your local public health nursing colleagues, may be called upon to assist with vaccination programs while supporting students re-entering the school system. Countless numbers will meet new challenges: making up for lost classes, renegotiating friendships, adapting to school structure and rituals, and, for many, beginning the process of healing from a traumatic experience.

This year I have been heartened by the widespread public recognition of nurses' essential value to our nation's health, a hope I have held throughout my nursing career. While much of the press has focused on hospitals, nurses in other settings, such as schools and communities, also are receiving much gratitude. (Of note, schools across the country are beginning to add nurses---a long overdue process!)

Thus, as the incredible 2020 draws to a close, please know that your contributions to the health of your students, families and school communities are incredibly valued. You are the heroes of our student health, performing big and small miracles every day---while adapting to a changing school world. So, congratulate yourselves, be proud of your accomplishments, and graciously accept the heartfelt thanks of so many.

Sincerely,

Anne H. Sheetz, RN, MPH, Former Director of School Health Services