Research Article

Creating An Interdisciplinary Learning and Networking Opportunity for School Nurses - A Quality Improvement Project

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Abstract

Approximately 95,776 school nurses are employed in the United States. The number of students with complex physical and mental health conditions has placed a unique burden on the school nurse. Many school nurses are responsible for treating acute illness, managing chronic diseases, administering medications, tracking immunizations, and other administrative tasks. While looking for continuing education and networking opportunities for school nurses in Central Illinois, the options are few, and many require several hours of travel. There was an identified opportunity to create a school nurse conference to provide additional continuing education and networking opportunities to school nurses in Central Illinois.

This quality improvement project aims to provide an affordable, multi-disciplinary educational and networking conference for school nurses in Central Illinois. The increase of knowledge in our school nurses and the creation of new networks of support and collegiality will not only support these nurses but also benefit the students served.

Keywords: School Nurse; Nursing; Continuing Education; Professional Networking

Introduction

According to the National Association of School Nurses, approximately 95,776 FTE school nurses are employed in the United States [1]. The number of students with complex physical and mental health conditions has placed a unique burden on the school nurse. Approximately 13 to 18% of children in school have a chronic health condition, with an additional 7% medicated for emotional and behavioral issues. This would indicate that 1 out of 4 school-aged children have a chronic health concern [2]. School nurses often work alone with little clinical support from other staff members. Many school nurses are responsible for treating acute illness, managing chronic diseases, administering medications, tracking immunizations, and other administrative tasks, and some are even responsible for providing health education and teacher support [1]. While looking for continuing education and networking opportunities for school nurses in Central Illinois, the options are few, and many require several hours of travel. There was an identified opportunity to create a school nurse conference to provide additional continuing education and networking opportunities to school nurses in Central Illinois.

The Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) model of improvement was used for planning and evaluating the conference. The model was chosen as it is designed to test a change (plan it, try it, observe the results, and make changes based on what was learned) [3]. This model provides the flexibility to develop continuing education opportunities to fit the community's needs, a structure for evaluation, and a thoughtful approach to change.

This quality improvement project aims to provide an affordable, multi-disciplinary educational conference for school nurses in Central Illinois. The goal of the conference is to provide not only an opportunity for learning but for networking as well. The increase of knowledge in our school nurses and the creation of new networks of support and collegiality will not only support these nurses but also benefit the students served.

Methods

Intervention

The process started with assessing how many school nurse conferences were available locally to nurses in Central Illinois. A search of the Illinois Association of School Nurses website showed that one to two conferences are available each year, depending on the year. The conferences are often held in northeastern Illinois, with the second conference in Central Illinois in a neighboring city. The timing of these conferences is typically during the academic year. After reviewing the number of conferences, it was determined that developing an additional school nurse conference would benefit the local communities.

Next, a short survey was sent to 20 local school nurses to inquire about topics of interest for a potential conference. The survey asked, "If Bradley University's Department of Nursing were to host a local school nurse conference, what topic(s) would you be interested in learning more about?" The surveys were sent with a stamped return envelope. Eleven surveys were returned with the following topic themes: Asthma, Post-COVID Classroom Management, Mental Health, Aspiration Risk, Food Allergy, Common Injuries, Diabetes, and Migraine.

After the themes were generated, an e-mail went out to faculty and staff in the College of Education and Health Sciences, which includes the Departments of Nursing, Teacher Education, Counseling, Family and Consumer Sciences, Kinesiology, Physical Therapy, Occupational Therapy, and Speech Therapy asking if anyone would be interested in presenting at a University hosted school nurse conference. Many faculty were interested in giving and sharing their expertise and knowledge in the development of the conference.

Once speakers were secured, University Conference Services and the Department of Continuing Education were contacted to schedule and plan the conference. A date in the Summer was chosen as no local summer conference opportunities were available to school nurses. Nurses surveyed also indicated that attending conferences during the academic year was difficult as finding a substitute nurse to cover the missed school day posed challenges.

One goal of conference planning was to have little to no out-of-pocket expenses for the host University. Therefore, careful planning and consideration were put into place to make sure the conference was affordable but also was able to provide continuing education hours in addition to breakfast and lunch. It was determined that a fee of $100 would not only cover all costs (including marketing materials) but also provide a surplus of funds to support future educational offerings.

Once the date and topics were determined, a Save-the-Date was sent to all school nurses in Central Illinois in the fall using a database from the Illinois State Board of Education. A formal invite with the ability to register for the event was sent out the following spring. A total of 242 formal invitations were sent. Of the 242 invitations, 52 people registered and paid for the event. Of the 52 registered guests, 48 participants showed up for the event.

Measures

A digital survey was developed to elicit feedback from participants. The survey was designed in Qualtrics, allowing for anonymous feedback and providing some statistical analysis. The goal of the survey was to gather accurate input from participants to make improvements for future events and improve the experience of participants. The survey was accessed via a QR code and was open for 24 hours following the conference's conclusion. The survey consisted of the following questions:

- How likely are you to recommend this event to a friend or colleague? (1-10 Likert scale)
- What did you like most about the event? (Free response)
- What did you least like about the event? (Free response)
- How satisfied were you with the presenters? (Extremely dissatisfied, Somewhat dissatisfied, Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, Somewhat satisfied, Extremely satisfied).
- For future conferences, is there a topic(s) you would like to learn more about? (Free response)
- Is there anything else you would like to share with us? (Free response)

Analysis and Results

Of the 52 conference participants, there were 35 who completed the conference survey. Only one qualitative measure was present in the survey, which assessed whether a participant would recommend the conference to a friend or colleague. A Net Promoter Score (NPS) was calculated to gauge participant satisfaction. The question, "How likely are you to recommend this event to a friend or colleague?" obtained a Net Promoter Score of 48.57. The net promoter score is obtained by subtracting the percentage of detractors (score of 6 or less) from the percentage of promotors. A score of 48.57 would indicate that almost half of the participants are promotors (scored 9 or 10); however, it also shows that approximately half the participants provided a neutral (score of 7 or 8) or were detractors.

The question "How satisfied were you with the presenters?" showed that 20 out of 35 participants were extremely satisfied with the presenters (57.14%), 12 out of 35 were somewhat satisfied with the presenters (34.28%), 1 out of 35 was neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with the presenters (0.02%), and 1 out of 35 was extremely dissatisfied with the presenters (0.02%).

Given the Net Promotor score, reviewing the qualitative questions to elicit specific feedback about the event is essential. The qualitative questions were analyzed using POC HOC analysis with an iterative process to identify themes. Themes from the question "What did you like most about the event?" include breadth and depth of information, disease-specific education, convenient conference location, and variety of speakers (Speakers from disciplines out of nursing). The question "What did you like least from the event?" generated the following themes: The need for more bathroom breaks, lack of paper handouts, and the day was long (07:30-16:00). For the question, "For future conferences, is there a topic(s) you would like to learn more about?" generated a variety of topic ideas. Common themes included seizure care, infectious disease, children with complex medical needs, first aid management (hands-on), collaboration techniques with primary care offices, human trafficking, and setting boundaries. Finally, themes from the last question, "Is there anything else you would like to share with us?" included: Would like more time to network and please offer the event next year.

Discussion

Summary

The overall goal of this project was to develop a school nursing conference that provided continuing education and networking opportunities. This goal was achieved using minimal human and capital resources. Specific strengths of the project included the low out-of-pocket cost to run the event. The total cost of the event, including staff stipend, lunch, postage, marketing, and CEUs, was $2,195.70. The event generated $4,800 from registration fees, which left a profit of $2,604.30 to be used to improve the event. Additionally, the presentations were given by experts in the field, which included Advanced Practice Registered Nurses, Licensed Clinical Professional Counselors, Dieticians, Occupational Therapists, Speech Therapists, Physical Therapists, and Teacher Educators. The multi-disciplinary expertise added a significant amount of depth to the quality of the presentations, which was noted in the survey by participants.

Interpretation

The survey indicated that many participants enjoyed the event and would recommend it to a friend or colleague (NPS of 48.57). Most of the participants enjoyed the presenters and appreciated the variety of topics, the multi-disciplinary speakers, and the focus on the impact of the school nurse. There were also areas of opportunity identified as well. For example, multiple comments alluded to the day being too long, insufficient bathroom breaks, and the lack of paper handouts. This information is valuable as it will be used to adjust and change future events.

Including school nurses on the planning committee is a significant area of opportunity. One individual planned the conference, and a change moving forward will be to use a committee of professionals for planning and development. Including school nurses on the planning committee will help ensure that the experiences of nurses in the community are brought forward and used for program development.

Limitations

This project has a couple of limitations to the generalizability of the work. First, the conference coordinator works for a mid-sized University with access to multiple resources (grad assistants, free use of room space, and conference planning departments).

Individuals without access to these resources will need more time and, arguably, money to achieve the same result. Last, many of the multi-disciplinary speakers were tenure-track professors. These individuals were eager to speak as the time can be used for their tenure and promotion portfolio. Institutions/schools without tenure-track faculty may have difficulty recruiting speakers for an event.

Conclusion

School nurses play a significant role in the safety and development of our students. However, despite the significance of the school nurse's impact, these individuals often work in isolation with limited resources, support, and access to affordable educational opportunities. While the development of a school nurse conference does not fix all of those issues, it can tremendously impact local school nurses. The conference provided local school nurses an affordable opportunity to participate in high-quality continuing education and networking. The conference's development and planning were done by one conference coordinator at no net cost to the institution; however, the revenue generated from the first conference will be able to support future conferences and even expand offerings (e.g., hands-on first aid training). Moving forward, a committee will be used for conference planning to bring more ideas and resources to the planning process. While the focus of this conference was school nurses, it would be transferable to other specialties, such as in-school physical therapy, occupational, or speech therapy.

Bibliography

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