

THE PROVISION OF SUPPORT IN NSW GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS FOR CHILDREN REQUIRING HEALTH CARE PROCEDURES

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CURRENT FOCUS ON HEALTH CARE

The NSW Department of Education and Training has a focus on student health which is in line with the commitment by the Department to work collaboratively with other government departments and health care professionals in this vital area. Recent efforts by the Department have aimed to bring greater coordination and cohesion to the support provided as well as to provide some training for teachers' aides (special) who manage and supervise health care procedures in schools.

The Department of Education and Training does not employ specific staff in schools to exclusively support the health care needs of students. Nevertheless it is recognised that comprehensive health care planning is needed for some students and that this planning will incorporate the support provided by parents, other relevant government departments and health care professionals.

Recent debate about the issues of prescribed medication and health care procedures in schools has prompted action which has resulted in:

- clarification of the roles of school staff
- establishment of clear procedures for supporting student health
- cooperative ventures with other departments and organisations
- the delivery of training and development for relevant school staff.

There is no doubt that various industrial organisations have played a role in setting boundaries and specifying changes to working conditions for their members in this area. There has also been a new wave of consultation and collaboration between government departments, unions and health care service providers in arriving at improved health care arrangements for students.

HEALTH CARE PLANNING

For a variety of reasons, students with disabilities who also have significant health care needs are now enrolling in increasing numbers in government schools. The focus is very much on the individual needs of these students and school-based planning for their educational and other needs is both systematic and highly collaborative. Parents have a central place in the planning process.

Students with significant health care needs may be enrolled in regular classes, special classes in regular schools, and special schools and hospital schools throughout NSW. Where a student's health care needs have significant implications within the educational setting, schools are supported in developing health care plans as part of the overall learning support cycle suggested for students with disabilities.

Health care planning at the school level may involve a range of people including the student, parents and other family members, advocates, school staff, departmental district office personnel, local health care services and family medical practitioners and medical specialists. At the school level the consultation with parents and service providers and the collaboration between school and generic health care providers are key issues.

While schools are primarily concerned with the educational needs of students they are required to develop a health care plan for students with health care needs. Schools have a duty of care to support arrangements for the provision of health care. In this regard many schools have formed valuable partnerships with local health care services and support agencies which facilitate support for students at school and ensure access to appropriate curriculum and instructional programs.

SHARED AND KEY RESPONSIBILITIES

Students with significant health care needs may also have high support needs in other areas. Teachers' aides (special) have a key role in assisting teachers to provide support to students with high support needs. Teachers' aides (special) provide teachers with assistance in school routines and classroom activities. Teachers' aides (special) who agree are nominated to undertake training in health care procedures which prepares them to manage a range of significant health care procedures.

Training and development support to schools is available in a number of areas relating to health care, including:

- cardio pulmonary resuscitation (CPR)
- first aid
- emergency care
- administration of prescribed medications and asthma treatments
- health care procedures
- occupational health and safety.

In the case of students who require support and assistance with tube feeding, catheterisation, and the suctioning of fluids, and where local health care services are unable to provide a routine service, teachers' aides (special), with their consent, may be nominated to assist with such procedures in school. This support is defined by a protocol agreed to by the Department of Education and Training, the Public Service Association of NSW and the New South Wales Nurses Association, which sets specific boundaries on the support offered by teachers' aides (special) and ensures a minimum standard of training and accreditation.

Flexibility is also offered by the protocol which provides for special consideration in situations where a student's health care needs require support beyond the boundaries set. The result of an approval of special consideration may see, for example, a trained teacher's aide (special) perform clean intermittent catheterisation at school where no other support is available. In all special circumstances, the involvement and consent of parents and medical practitioners are essential in describing the procedure and training required.

EMERGENCY CARE AND A WHOLE SCHOOL RESPONSE

Schools are routinely faced with the prospect of emergency care for students. Some students who have medical conditions which require emergency care as a routine part of their school day are catered for on a whole school basis. It is essential that school staff are aware of the student's condition and the emergency care required. Schools must have emergency and contingency plans for such students and ensure that no one person alone has responsibility for such matters.

CONCLUSION

Health care for students is an issue for all schools. In particular, the learning and health care needs of students with a range of medical conditions are enhanced by appropriate management of these needs in schools. Whether the need is for preventative health care, short term care, first aid or emergencies, or ongoing, routine health care support, schools in NSW are able to plan for and meet the needs of students through a consultative and collaborative process involving the home, the school and government departments and other agencies.

The NSW Department of Education and Training is currently finalising revised policy and procedures for managing the health care needs of students in schools. This will address the issues of the administration of medication and the performance of specific health care procedures in schools. Support to schools in this important area is provided through the district offices throughout the state and from state office specifically by officers from Student Services and Equity Programs who work in areas of student welfare and disabilities.