



Nebraska School Health Data Report: Nebraska School Nurse Pandemic Response

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Nebraska School Health Data Committee

Mission:

To empower school nurses in data literacy, and to collect data and publish reports on student health and school nursing, in order to improve school health and enhance the school nursing practice.

Vision:

A strong school nursing workforce with a data-driven approach to improving student health, increasing student attendance, and enhancing student educational outcomes.

Introduction

During the 2021-2022 school year, Nebraska schools were open for in-person learning while the Delta and Omicron variants of SARS CoV-2 surged. This required school staff to assume extra responsibilities for infection prevention while providing students education. The 2021-2022 school year was different than the previous year, and despite more children becoming eligible for the Pfizer vaccine during this time period, numerous factors made it particularly challenging for COVID-19 mitigation. School nurses were again on the front lines of both a pandemic and an increasingly turbulent social environment, and through these challenges, worked diligently to provide a safe environment for students and staff to learn and work. This report will highlight the unique roles and responsibilities of the Nebraska school nurse during the 2021-2022 academic year and give context to the environment that shaped it.

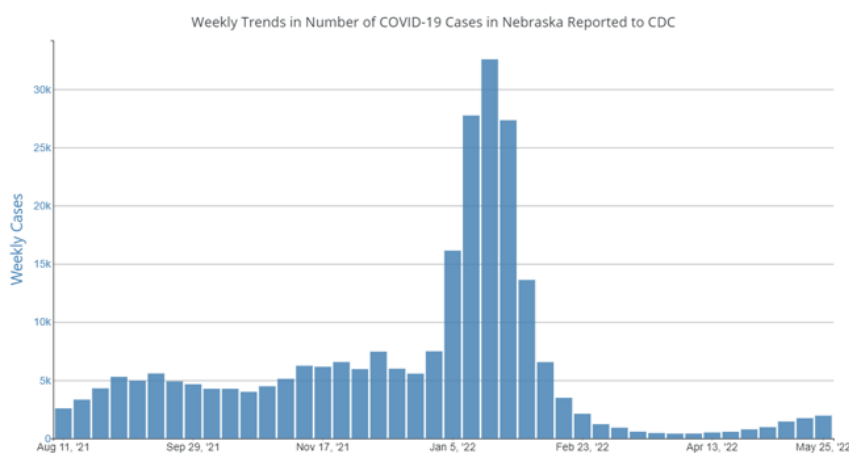


FIGURE 1: WEEKLY COVID-19 CASE COUNTS IN NEBRASKA DURING THE APPROXIMATE WEEKS OF THE 2021-2022 SCHOOL YEAR

While we knew that nurses were performing many extra duties to respond to the pandemic, we did not have an official record on what these activities were or how many nurses performed them. There had been no other studies in Nebraska to assess statewide school nurse activities during and related to the COVID-19 pandemic. By understanding the past activities of school nurses, we can more accurately see where they were utilized and see what, if any, gaps existed where school nurses may have been underutilized in providing a safe school environment.

"It was a challenging year where everyone was learning new information. I could not have done it without the support of all the staff at the school."

Leslie Echeverria, Omaha, Bryan Middle School





"In a normal year, being a school nurse is the most rewarding job I've ever had. Being a school nurse in a pandemic has made me incredibly proud of the role nurses play in maintaining the health and safety of our students and school community."

- Megan Stanek, Omaha, Beals Elementary/ Jackson Elementary



Methods

In April 2022, school nurses on the Nebraska School Nurse Listserv were invited to participate in a two-part survey. The survey was created in Redcap with a link provided via email. The first part of the survey was to measure their pandemic-related activities, the second to measure school nurse use of student information systems. This report will cover part 1 of this survey. The survey was anonymous, but respondents were asked to provide their zip code and nursing credentials to assess geographic reach and role. The survey consisted of a list of 18 different pandemic-related activities, and participants were asked to check every activity that they had assisted their schools with during the 2021-2022 school year. There was also an option to report if they had not assisted with any pandemic-related activities, and a box to write in other activities not listed. Results were analyzed by calculating how many additional tasks the nurses had and the overall percentage of nurses who had performed each activity.

**183 School Nurses
participated from 114
unique zip codes**

"Even with a mask covering your mouth, you can convey a smile and reassurance with your eyes."

Anne Stevens, Sidney Public Schools, Sidney, Neb.



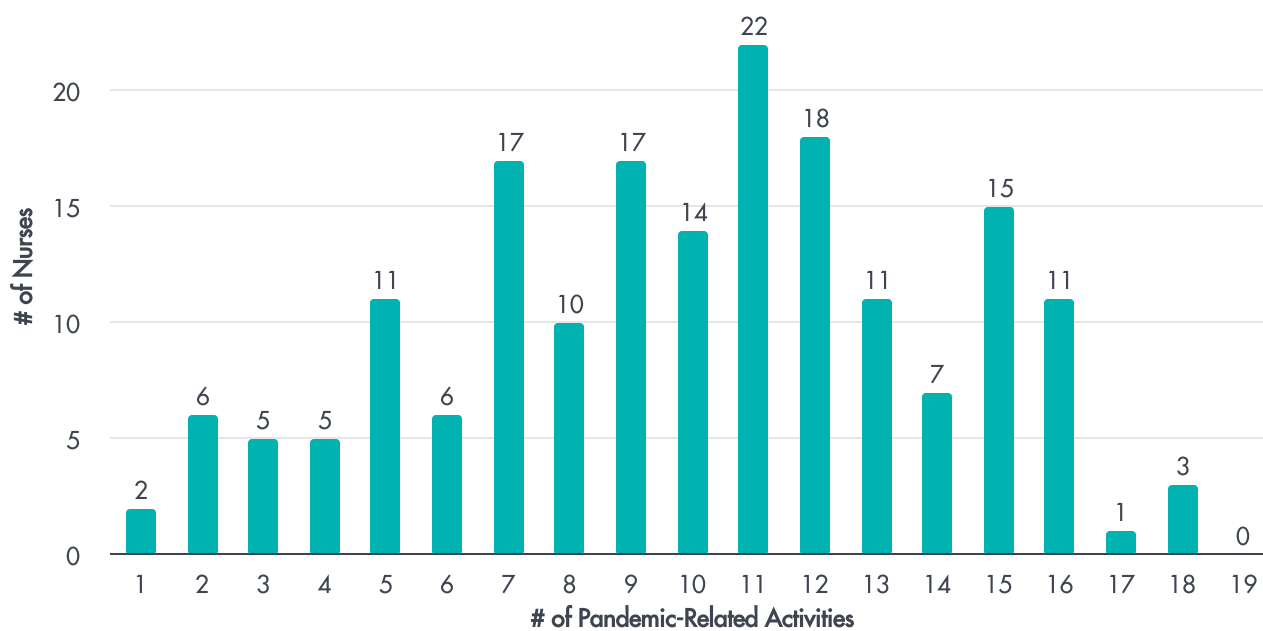
Results

There were 361 people on the School Nurse Listserv at the time, and 147 responded, yielding a 41% response rate. Of the 147 survey respondents, 89% (N=131) were registered nurses (RNs), 10% (N=15) were licensed practical nurses (LPNs), and one was an advanced practice registered nurse (APRN). There were 101 unique zip codes reported, which demonstrated that the survey had good geographical reach across Nebraska. However, further analysis of the data revealed that zip codes were absent from a certain geographical area. A second identical survey was sent out to that targeted area in September 2022 to secure better statewide coverage. The second survey yielded an additional 36 responses and 13 more unique zip codes, for a total of 183 responses from 114 zip codes.

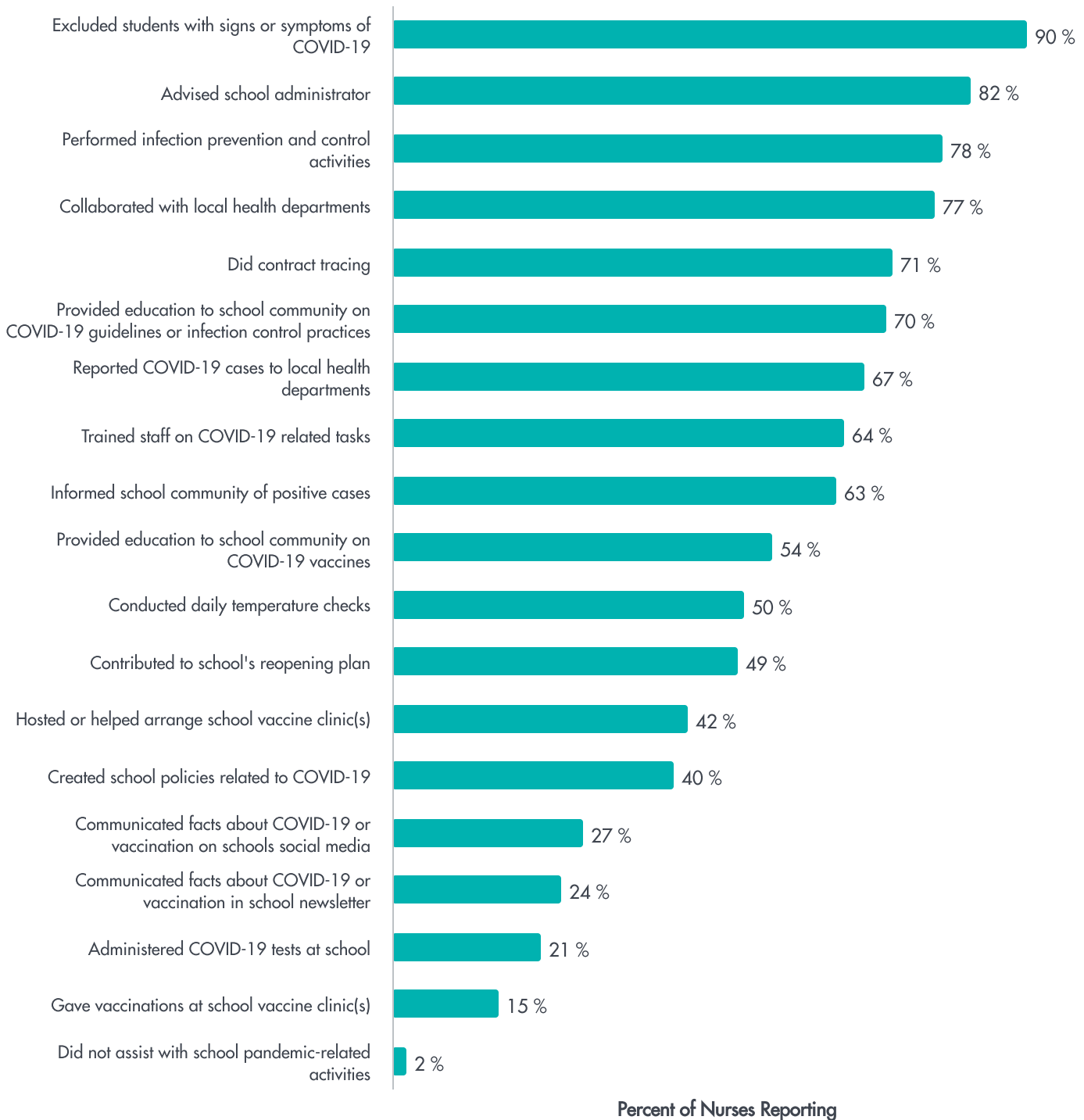
Pandemic-Related Activities:

School Nurses took on many additional pandemic-related activities on top of their usual duties, with an average of 10 new tasks per nurse. The activities that the most nurses participated in were excluding students with signs or symptoms of COVID-19 (90%), advising school administrators (82%), and performing infection control and prevention activities (78%). The activity with the least amount of school nurse participation was administering COVID-19 vaccinations at a school vaccine clinic school, with only 15% of nurses performing this activity.

Number of Pandemic-Related Activities Completed by School Nurses (n=183)
2021-2022 School Year



School Nurse Pandemic-Related Activities 2021-2022 School Year



Nurses were also given the opportunity to enter in other activities they assisted with that were not listed. Some activities included were: determined quarantine and masking requirements for students, families and contacts; communicated with families regarding student COVID-19 cases; set up and maintained isolation/care room for symptomatic students; liaised for schools in the district and the health department; and taught staff how to properly use PPE.

Discussion

This study provides the first record of how school nurses across Nebraska assisted their schools in COVID-19 pandemic mitigation activities during the 2021-2022 school year. While not every activity nurses do could be listed as an option, we sought to capture the pandemic-related responsibilities by providing a list of 18 choices of activities. From this study, we can see that in addition to their normal work responsibilities as a school nurse, 98% of nurses assisted in pandemic-related activities. A closer look at the data showed us that the nurses took on an average of 10 additional activities, with the minimum number of new tasks being 1 (4 nurses) and the maximum of all 18 activities (3 very busy nurses). The top 10 activities had over half of respondents participating and the least performed activity (giving vaccinations at a school clinic) still had 15% of nurses surveyed assisting with it. This demonstrates that the activities listed were common for the 2021-2022 school year and all had significant participation by Nebraska school nurses.

We grouped these data into five categories to further understand the types of new activities the school nurses took on, which expanded their role and responsibilities significantly. These categories included infection prevention, advising and training staff, communicating and educating school community, collaborating with public health, and providing direct patient care in new and old ways.

Infection prevention:

This category included the activities most frequently engaged in by school nurses, and those that comprised the day-to-day activities required of school nurses in a pandemic. The survey shows that 90% of school nurses were involved in excluding students with signs and symptoms of COVID-19 and 78% performed infection prevention activities. The large majority (71%) did contact tracing, which is a very time-intensive activity. In addition, half of school nurses conducted daily temperature checks of all of their students during this 2021-2022 school year.



"When we started contact tracing, families were grateful for the guidance and health information, but as the pandemic lingered on, they became impatient and argumentative. It was disheartening to have these negative responses when we were working so hard to protect students and families so we could keep students in schools. The most surprising negative response was the mask mandate. A simple, inexpensive effort to protect students and staff created controversy I never expected."

Julie Frederick, Lincoln Public Schools, Lincoln, Neb.

Advising and Training Staff:

School nurses were health leaders of their schools, with 82% of them advising school administrators. Another 64% trained their school staff on COVID-19-related tasks. However, slightly less than half (49%) contributed to their school's reopening plans and only 40% created school policies related to COVID-19.

Communicating with and Educating School Community:

In addition to being an advisor and trainer for staff, school nurses were influential in educating their school community. 70% provided the school community education on COVID-19 guidelines or infection control practices. School nurses were also in charge of informing the school when there was a positive case, with 63% of nurses having taken on that task. In the 2021-2022 school year, misinformation was ever present, but 54% of school nurses bravely educated their communities on COVID-19 vaccines. Also, 27% communicated facts about COVID-19 on their school's social media, and 24% communicated these in their school newsletters.

"Good communication with our students, staff and families has been extremely important to maintaining a healthy school this year!"

Carol Reha, Schuyler Community Schools, Schuyler, Neb.



Collaborating with Public Health:

Bridges were built with local health departments (LHDs) as 67% of school nurses were reporting cases to and 77% collaborating with their LHDs. Furthermore, 15% of school nurse gave vaccinations at school vaccine clinics, and 42% hosted or helped arrange school vaccine clinics. The relationships built between schools and public health entities were strengthened and we hope to see those continue for the future benefit of school health in Nebraska.

Direct Patient Care:

This last category entails pandemic-related care activities, such as administering COVID-19 tests to students in school. During the 2021-2022 school year, 21% of school nurses were testing students and 15% gave students vaccines. Nurses also spent time giving care to the numerous students who were seen due to concerns for COVID-19 as well as seeing students for mental health reasons related to the pandemic. Although we did not quantify such care, these were all new challenges for the school nurse.



"I got my vaccine for myself, my family, my friends and for the students and staff I work with daily. This is why I have also worn a mask for over a year. Together, we can beat this."

Kay Duncan, Lincoln Public Schools, Lincoln, Neb.

School Nurse Wellbeing

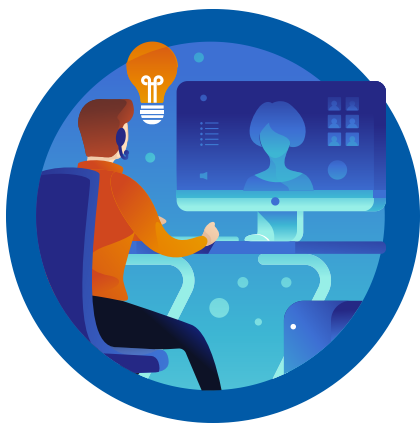
These data give us insight into the extra demands placed on school nurses during the pandemic. The authors note that these findings should not be viewed in a vacuum, but rather be viewed in the wider context of how the extra responsibilities also impacted the mental wellbeing of the people who performed them. In March 2022, only weeks before our survey was conducted, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), in partnership with the National Association of School Nurses (NASN), conducted a survey showing that 48% of school nurses felt bullied, threatened or harassed since the pandemic was declared[1]. Furthermore, 45% reported symptoms of at least one adverse mental health condition in the two weeks prior to completing the survey. The CDC states that, “Overall, work-related stressors and COVID-19-related job duties were significantly associated with poor mental health symptoms among the school nurses who responded to the survey.” While we did not measure the mental health of school nurses in Nebraska in our study, we can reasonably surmise from the CDC/NASN study that increased workload paired with a turbulent social environment took a toll on school nurses mental health.

“Being a school nurse during the pandemic was mentally, physically and emotionally exhausting — several months of lunchless days and sleepless nights. The one thing I learned most from going through this pandemic is you think you know people until you have to quarantine their kids for 14 days then their true colors come out.”

Tara Urkoski, Twin River Public Schools, Genoa, Neb.



While the vast majority (82%) of school nurses advised school administrators, only 49% contributed to their schools' reopening plans and 40% were involved in creating school policies related to COVID-19. This may be interpreted as a gap in utilizing school nurses to contribute to school plans and policies. This may also be a source of workplace stress for the school nurse. In the CDC/NASN study quoted above, the first recommendation for improving school nurse's mental health is for school leaders to “include school nurses in decision making about school health, especially during public health crises.” The authors of this report echo this recommendation as a matter of improving both the mental health of nurses and the health of children in schools.



Improving school nurse mental health is essential to creating safe environments for young people in our nation's schools. Supportive policies and practices that can be put in place for school nurses can include providing adequate staffing, training, and support, especially for COVID-19 or future public health emergencies.

School leaders can:

- *Include school nurses in decision making about school health, especially during public health crises.*

Source: [CDC School Nurses Mental Health Study](#)



"My favorite quote for the year, sent to me from a parent: 'Most of the important things in the world have been accomplished by people who have kept on trying when there seemed to be no hope at all'. - Dale Carnegie."

Katie Thomson, Creighton Prep High School, Omaha, Neb.

Although the school year was especially difficult, some positive things came from it. From these data emerged the significance of the role of the school nurse as a crucial part of the state's public health system. All over the nation, the COVID-19 pandemic tested public health systems and school nurses valiantly rose to the challenge. In addition to being a great extension of the public health workforce, school nurses also served as trusted communicators and advisors to school communities. School nurses provided evidence-based information on COVID-19 and vaccination at a time when misinformation was rampant, and their positive influence extended far outside of the walls of their health offices.

The authors of this report would like to conclude by acknowledging that school nurses took on extra responsibilities to keep Nebraska schools open and students and staff safe during the COVID-19 pandemic, and that doing so was not easy. We now have a record of what those duties were during the 2021-2022 school year and thoughts from nurses who persevered through the pandemic. Although the activities were important, school leaders must pay special attention to staff mental health when workloads are high and social environments are volatile, as research has shown the negative tolls such pressures have taken on school nurse mental health. Thank you to all of the school nurses who participated in this survey, shared their thoughts, and worked tirelessly to keep students safe and healthy while in school. Nebraska owes school nurses a debt of gratitude for their work during the pandemic. We agree that education is a better and safer world with school nurses in it.

"Congratulations to us for all the adaptations, the education, the reassurance and the success we initiated this year! Education is truly a better and safer world with school nurses in it!"

Dawn Sudgen, Lincoln Public Schools, Lincoln, Neb.



References:

1. Merkle SL, Welton M, van Zyl A, et al. Symptoms of Depression, Anxiety, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and Suicidal Ideation Among School Nurses in Prekindergarten through Grade 12 Schools — United States, March 2022. The Journal of School Nursing. 2022;0(0). doi:10.1177/10598405221131048

What did Nebraska School Nurses Do During the Pandemic?



Infection Prevention

- Excluding students with s/s of COVID-19 (90%)
- Performing Infection Prevention Activities (78%)
- Did contact tracing (71%)
- Conducted daily temperature checks (50%)

Advised and Trained Staff

- Advised school administrators (82%)
- Trained staff on COVID-v19-related tasks (64%)
- Contributed to school's reopening plan (49%)
- Created school policies related to COVID-19 (40%)



Communicated with and Educated School Community

- Provided education to school community on COVID-19 guidelines or infection control practices (70%)
- Informed school community of positive cases (63%)
- Provided education to school community on COVID-19 vaccines (54%)
- Communicated facts about COVID-19 or vaccination on schools social media (27%)
- Communicated facts about COVID-19 or vaccination in school newsletter (24%)



Collaborated with Public Health

- Collaborated with Local Health Departments (77%)
- Reported COVID-19 cases to Local Health Departments (67%)
- Hosted or helped arrange a school vaccine clinic (42%)



Provided Direct Care for Students

- Administered COVID-19 tests at school (21%)
- Gave vaccinations at school vaccine clinics (15%)
- Provided compassionate care to all sick children in their Health Offices





Key Takeaways:

- School nurses took on many extra responsibilities in addition to their routine tasks to keep students safe in school.
- School nurses were a crucial part of the public health system, giving vaccinations, doing contact tracing, excluding students and collaborating with local health departments.
- School nurses were a trusted source of information for their schools, with many communicating through school newsletters or social media channels and providing school communities quality information on COVID-19 guidelines and infection control practices.
- Increased workload coupled with turbulent environment may have negatively impacted the mental health of school nurses.
- School nurses advised their administrators during the pandemic, but fewer than half of those who advised administrators were able to create school policies related to COVID-19. Involving school nurses in decision making can improve school nurse mental health and most likely benefit student health as well.
- This report will serve as a historical account of school nurses' service to the state of Nebraska during the 2021-2022 school year.

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- Julie Frederick BSN, RN, NCSN. Health Services Coordinator for Lincoln Public Schools and National Association of School Nurses (NASN) Data Coordinator for Nebraska
- Felicia Martin RN, ESU 4 Health Services Director
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- Kim McClintick, MSN, RN, School Health Coordinator, Children's Community Health & Advocacy
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