One NASN State Affiliate’s Perspective of Legislative Advocacy
How the California School Nurses Organization Successfully Guided AJR 24 Into Law

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At the end of the 2011 legislative session in California, the California School Nurses Organization (CSNO), a state affiliate of NASN, was looking for a new way that school nurses could garner legislative support, in a visible and positive manner, as strong advocates for pupil health. When California State Assembly Member Susan Bonilla (who currently represents the 14th Assembly District) offered to sponsor a state bill to help improve the student-to-school nurse ratio in California’s public schools (which several sources between 2007 and 2011 estimated as being between 1:2,187 and 1:4,000), the CSNO’s Government Relations Committee (GRC) sprung into action. The committee reviewed NASN’s list of strategic plans for legislative advocacy for guidance. Upon learning that one of NASN’s legislative priorities was the passage of H.R. 2229 (C. McCarthy), the Student-to-School Nurse Ratio Improvement Act of 2011, the GRC crafted and subsequently worked to successfully pass a California resolution bill, Assembly Joint Resolution No. 24, in support. Such legislative advocacy efforts may well be viewed as a model for other NASN state affiliate organizations.

Keywords: advocacy; legislation; Government Relations Committee; resolution bill; Student-to-School Nurse Ratio Improvement Act

In October 2011, a legislative aide from the office of California State Assembly Member Susan Bonilla (D-Concord), who currently represents California’s 14th Assembly District, approached the California School Nurses Organization (CSNO) and offered to sponsor a bill during the 2012 California legislative session to increase public awareness of school nursing practice and to improve the student-to-school nurse ratio in California’s public schools.

California school nurses were still reeling from a stinging 2011 legislative defeat in Sacramento, in which a bill (Senate Bill 161) was signed into law (Official California Legislative Information, 2012b) allowing unlicensed school personnel to administer FDA-approved emergency anti-seizure medication (at the time of this writing only rectal Diastat). With the passage of SB 161, many school nurses now strongly believe that granting unlicensed individuals the permission to perform nursing functions in the school setting is an erosion of the California Nurse Practice Act.
Thus, the CSNO was looking for a way that school nurses could garner legislative support, in a visible and positive manner, as strong advocates for pupil health. Because California was (and still is) struggling with a huge budget deficit, the CSNO’s legislative advocate reminded the Government Relations Committee (GRC) that any legislation that would place a financial burden on the state would have no chance of becoming law. With that in mind, the CSNO’s GRC brainstormed some ideas to increase nursing support in the schools with minimal cost.

The CSNO is a strong state affiliate of NASN, so the GRC first reviewed NASN’s strategic plan for legislative advocacy (NASN, 2013). The committee noted that one of NASN’s main legislative priorities for 2012 was to promote the passage of H.R. 2229 (C. McCarthy), the Student-to-School Nurse Ratio Improvement Act of 2011. This piece of federal legislation fits exactly with what Assembly Member Bonilla wanted to introduce in California!

On November 10, 2011, the GRC shared information about H.R. 2229 during a conference call with one of Ms. Bonilla’s legislative aides, who agreed that a resolution bill in support of the federal legislation might be the best course of action to take. The aide promised to take the committee’s information directly to Assembly Member Bonilla.

The GRC then researched both school nurse-to-student ratios and numbers of students with health care needs in school districts throughout California. The committee reached out to CSNO members to supply as much current data from their individual districts as possible. The committee subsequently shared the pertinent information it had collected with Assembly Member Bonilla’s office in order to assist in writing the language necessary for a resolution bill. The CSNO’s legislative advocate was instrumental in guiding the GRC and interfacing with Ms. Bonilla’s office on the CSNO’s behalf.

In January 2012, the GRC received confirmation that the Legislative Counsel had completed the formal bill language draft. On January 24, 2012, Assembly Member Bonilla introduced Assembly Joint Resolution No. 24 (AJR 24). The next day, the committee received a copy of the official new bill. Since the CSNO would become the official sponsor of the bill, the committee quickly shared the draft of the bill with the CSNO’s executive committee in order to obtain board approval. The GRC then shared this exciting news with NASN.

Immediately, the GRC wrote a sponsor support letter (with the CSNO’s executive committee’s approval) for Assembly Member Bonilla to use in conjunction with her formal submission of AJR 24 to the California Legislature. The committee also gave a similar support letter to the CSNO’s legislative advocate for use with each legislative committee and when visiting legislators on the CSNO’s behalf.

The next job for the GRC was to work with Assembly Member Bonilla’s office to create an informational packet containing an AJR 24 factsheet (Figure 1) and sample support letters to use...
with legislators, school employees, parents, and coalition organizations, including the California State Parent Teacher Association (CAPTA), in order to garner additional support for AJR 24. The CSNO has enjoyed a strong long-standing collaboration with CAPTA, working toward a common goal of safe care for all California students while in school; therefore, the committee was very pleased when CAPTA became one of several coalition groups that registered official support of AJR 24.

Factual, accurate information was important, and the committee worked hard to verify the information in these handouts. The GRCs fact-checking efforts detected several small bill language errors, which subsequently required minor amendments to the bill. In the informational packet, the GRC additionally included the bill language of H.R. 2229 (McCarthy), the Student-to-School Nurse Ratio Improvement Act, and its federal companion bill S. 2047 (Schumer). Also included was NASN’s 2010 State School Nurse-to-Student Ratio Ruler, showing California in a dismal 45th place.

Creating letters of support for the CSNO to send to both Representative McCarthy and Senator Schumer was important for the GRC. These two members of Congress introduced the two federal bills, and the GRC wanted to inform them of the CSNO’s supportive legislative efforts under way in California. Another essential task for the GRC was writing a formal letter from the CSNO to NASN in support of NASN’s strategic plan for legislative advocacy.

Once AJR 24 began to be heard in various legislative venues, the GRC needed a representative to be present in order to give testimony for the CSNO. This became a challenge for school nurses, due to the difficulties of missing work and traveling long distances to Sacramento where bill testimony was heard. Fortunately, several school nurses, including the CSNO’s president-elect, as well as the CSNO’s legislative advocate were able to be present at most of the committee hearings—not a simple feat.

Throughout this advocacy process, the GRC updated its legislative information on the CSNO’s website (www.csno.org) and sent email blasts to its members. The committee believed in the importance of keeping California school nurses informed about the status of AJR 24, as well as soliciting help in contacting their individual legislators in a timely manner. Since AJR 24 was not a controversial bill, the committee feared there might be difficulty motivating CSNO members with a call to action. Therefore, the GRC undertook a structured plan to encourage membership interest and support at the grassroots level by having the section GRC chairpersons present information at local section meetings, as well as by encouraging the section presidents to contact their individual section members by email. The GRC strongly believes that personal contact quite often makes a difference in legislative campaigns.

AJR 24 successfully first passed through the California Assembly Education Committee on March 28th. The bill next passed through the full Assembly on April 12th, then subsequently through the California Senate on June 14th. AJR 24 was chaptered into law very shortly thereafter on June 18th! The CSNO enthusiastically shared this exciting news with school nurses from all over the country one week later at NASN’s annual conference in San Francisco (Official California Legislative Information, 2012a) (Figure 2).

The final tasks for the CSNO’s GRC included sending Assembly Member Bonilla a letter of thanks for her effort of support for school nurses. The CSNO plans to honor Ms. Bonilla for her...
RESOLUTION CHAPTER 55

Assembly Joint Resolution No. 24—Relative to the proposed federal Student-to-School Nurse Ratio Improvement Acts of 2011 and 2012.

[Filed Secretary of State June 18, 2012.]

LEGISLATIVE COUNSEL’S DIGEST

AJR 24, Bonilla. Proposed federal Student-to-School Nurse Ratio Improvement Acts of 2011 and 2012. This measure would urge the members of California’s congressional delegation to sign on as cosponsors of, and request that the Congress and the President of the United States enact, the proposed federal Student-to-School Nurse Ratio Improvement Act of 2011 or the proposed federal Student-to-School Nurse Ratio Improvement Act of 2012.

WHEREAS, The American Academy of Pediatrics emphasizes the crucial role school nurses have in the seamless provision of comprehensive health services to children and youth, as well as in the development of a coordinated school health program; and

WHEREAS, The school nurse functions as a leader and the coordinator of the school health services team, facilitating access to a medical home for each child and supporting school achievement; and

WHEREAS, The school nurse is often the only health care provider that a child has and can ensure that basic health needs are met; and

WHEREAS, Recent national data indicates 45 percent of public schools have a school nurse all day, every day, while another 30 percent of schools have a school nurse who works part time in one or more schools; and

WHEREAS, There is just one school nurse for every 2,172 pupils in California, which is well below the national standard of one nurse for every 750 pupils. There are no school nurses at all in 15 California counties; and

WHEREAS, The dearth of nurses has left many schools struggling to cope with rising rates of childhood illnesses such as asthma, food allergies, diabetes, and seizure disorders; and

WHEREAS, The American Nurses Association has reported that, when there is no registered nurse on the school premises, the responsibility to administer the necessary medications and treatments, and to carry out appropriate monitoring of the children, falls on the shoulders of administrators, educators, and staff, who are ill-prepared to perform these tasks; and

WHEREAS, Statistics from the National Center for Education Statistics indicate that, of the 52,000,000 children who currently spend their day in schools, 16 percent have chronic physical, emotional, or other health problems; and

WHEREAS, A recent study indicated that from 2002 to 2008, inclusive, the percentage of children in special education with health impairments, due to chronic or acute health problems, increased 60 percent. Within this group the rate of autism has doubled since 2002; and
strong support of school nurses and the children of California at its next annual conference in Sacramento in 2014.

Lastly, the committee created letters for the CSNO to send to Representative McCarthy and Senator Schumer to inform them of the passage of AJR 24. A finalized version of the bill (Figure 3) was included for them. The committee created sample letters for school nurses to use to urge their individual members of Congress to support the two federal student-to-school nurse ratio improvement bills. Additionally, the GRC posted the exciting news about the passage of AJR 24 on the CSNO website (CSNO, 2012) along with a link to NASN’s information (GovTrack.us, 2013) about the two federal bills and the sample letters.

In retrospect, as AJR 24 moved through the legislative process, it was a great learning experience for both the California School Nurses Organization and especially its Government Relations
Committee. Enjoying an important legislative success like AJR was very encouraging to the committee members! Although it was stressful at times working with many short deadlines, amendments, and uncertainties, the reward was great. The committee found it interesting to see that there is widespread recognition of both a shortage of school nurses and an increasing number of children with complex health care needs in school settings. However, it was disconcerting to the committee that legislative concern centered primarily on the financial cost to the state for more school nurses, rather than on the safety and welfare of students. Not surprisingly, most of the legislative votes taken were primarily along party lines. One negative aspect of this campaign was seeing our professional school nursing organization viewed inaccurately and portrayed as a union.

By the end of this legislative experience, the CSNO’s Government Relations Committee learned that, for a variety of reasons, there is currently very little Congressional support toward improving student-to-school nurse ratios. Thus, it is crucial for school nurses in California and nationwide to continue to step up their state and federal level advocacy efforts.

On May 7, 2013, Rep. Carolyn McCarthy (D-NY4) re-introduced student-to-school nurse ratio improvement legislation into the 113th Congress with a new bill, H.R. 1857 (*The Student to School Nurse Ratio Improvement Act of 2013*). For more information about this bill, please visit NASN’s website: https://www.nasn.org/PolicyAdvocacy/StudenttoSchoolNurseRatioImprovementAct

Additional links to legislative information on both AJR 24 and SB 161 can be found on the California State Legislature website (http://www.leginfo.ca.gov) and also on the California School Nurses Organization website (www.csno.org).

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