

School Health Advisory Board Recommendations to the School Board 12/2015

Student Mental Related to Homework and Academic Load

Due to concerns about the deleterious health effects of stress on students related to burdensome homework loads, the board appreciates the support and effort of Dr. Haas who convened a panel to review the current state of practice and issue revised guidelines using the evidence-based recommendations of education academicians. The board looks forward to reviewing the new guidelines and supports efforts to enforce compliance.

Active Seating

Acknowledging the evidence that flexible seating has demonstrable educational benefits, the board was asked if they could recommend such seating for health benefits. Clear health benefits of stand-up desks and active seating are documented in the literature for adults and it is assumed it could be extrapolated to children and adolescents; there is some evidence that children burn more calories when using standing desks, particularly children who are obese, which is a health benefit. Based on the somewhat limited evidence, active seating could be recommended with the caveat of the current limited evidence supporting the health benefits to children.

Banning Scented Products Such as Plug-ins and Sprays

For the health and safety of student and staff, environmental health experts recommend that schools consider measures to control air quality in buildings including refraining from the use of scented products. The issue of the use of air fresheners is of particular concern as asthma and migraine triggers, but also because these products contain phthalates and synthetic musks, both of which have been found to be endocrine disruptors – compounds that may cause adverse hormonal effects. Due to these concerns plus the reported untoward effects on people with scent sensitivity (reported by employees), the board recommends that ACPS ban the use of scented aerosol products (plug-ins and sprays) in school buildings.

Staffing School Clinics: Phasing in of Full-Time Nurses

Please see the attached report on the numbers of students with chronic health conditions. Trends noted from the data include increases in the diagnoses of seizure disorders, severe food allergies, and celiac disease as well as students who require tube feedings and medications.

The school clinics remain busy reporting 169,933 clinic visits last year or an average 965.5 division-wide clinic visits per day.

The board appreciates the increase in nurse hours at the 5 largest elementary schools this year and recommends consideration of eventually expanding the hours of the part-time nurses in the other elementary schools.

Updated Recommendations on Lice Management

At the behest of the American Academy of Pediatrics, the Centers for Disease Control and the National Association of School Nurses, ACPS has adopted updated practice guidelines regarding lice management in schools.

The former practice, which was pretty standard, was that a child discovered to have lice was immediately excluded from school and not permitted to return until an inspection by the nurse revealed no sign of lice or nits/eggs. Then the rest of the students in the class were screened and letters were sent home to parents of classmates. This had unfortunate consequences such as extensive absences, overuse of pesticides, unnecessary trips to the doctor, missed work, involvement of health department and social services, and ostracized students.

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, lice are not dangerous, do not pose health risks, and are not easily transmitted in the school setting – they are much more likely to be transmitted in homes through siblings and sleepovers, etc. They hold that since a child who is discovered to have lice has probably had it for many weeks, there is little risk of any further transmission, so the student does not need to be immediately excluded from school. Parents can be informed to treat the child at the end of the school day. According to the school health experts, school or class screenings are not productive, cost effective or merited, nor are they an accurate way of assessing or predicting which children are or will become infested, and have not been proven to have a significant effect on the incidence of lice in a school. Finally, alert letters to parents are discouraged since there is no evidence these letters prevent head lice transmission, may cause unjustified panic and parents to treat prophylactically, and may perpetuate the myth that lice are easily transmitted in schools.

Parents need to understand that head lice is endemic among school-aged children at the rate of up to 10% at any given time in the US; head lice are not easily transmitted at school since they do not fly, jump or live on any surface other than the human head for very long; eggs and nits are not contagious; and parents should not treat prophylactically.

The new ACPS procedure is that students discovered to have lice may stay in school until dismissal and are permitted to return after treatment as long as no live lice are present. Children with nits or eggs may stay in school since they are not contagious. In deference to parental request, the board agreed that the perceived benefit of alert letters is strong enough that schools may send such letters despite the discouragement of professional organizations and lack of evidence that this reduces the incidence of lice.

The board recommends a concerted effort to educate parents about the prevalence, symptoms and treatment of head lice.