

**School Counselor and School Nurse Collaboration:**

**Partnering for K-12 Student Success**

Malti Tuttle, Morgan Yordy, Brandee Appling, and Erika Hanley  
Auburn University

### **Abstract**

School counselors and school nurses strive to support the well-being of students in K-12 school settings. Both professionals often overlap and interact with the same students prompting the need for effective collaboration. The purpose of this article is to introduce a collaboration model to assist school counselors and school nurses in forming a partnership to support students in K-12 school settings in attaining positive mental and physical health, thereby increasing overall school success.

*Keywords:* school counselors, school nurses, collaboration

## **School Counselor and School Nurse Collaboration: Partnering for K-12 Student Success**

School counselors and school nurses advocate and support students within the K-12 school setting (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2012; National Association of School Nurses [NASN], 2017a). Both professions provide students with the skills to promote success within the school in areas such as academics, career development, and social-emotional domains (ASCA, 2012) as well as maintaining healthy dispositions (NASN, 2017a). Therefore, collaboration between these specialty areas is deemed vital as students often experience overlapping needs which can be addressed tandemly by the school counselor or school nurse. This overlap of professional roles, recognized as interprofessional collaboration between the school counselor and school nurse provides opportunities for both helping professions to work together in support of K-12 students (Parse, 2015).

School counselors and school nurses are tasked to ensure the welfare of K-12 students, therefore, it is imperative to examine the possible needs each specialty area may consider partnering with through collaboration. School counselors serve students in the capacity to identify and remove barriers to student success (ASCA, 2012). School nurses focus on the health of the student in order to achieve a high quality of life within the school setting (NASN, 2017a). Through this endeavor, school counselors and school nurses recognize the need to advocate, collaborate, consult, and deliver interventions to support student success (ASCA, 2012; NASN, 2017a). School counselors who recognize the importance of the role of the school nurse and the services they provide leverage on building a productive collaborative relationship.

The aim of this article is to outline each profession's roles and develop a collaboration model for use in the school system to optimize the talents of each profession to enhance student success and well-being. Currently, limited literature exists on the intersectionality between the roles of school counseling and school nursing and the benefits of these collaborations. Bohnenkamp, Stephan, & Bobo (2015) reported school nurses approximately spend 33% of their time addressing "student mental health issues" (p. 714); however, nurses have not been considered a vital entity of the student mental health team. School counselors and school nurses are both often privy to sensitive and confidential information regarding students' personal situations that may impact their physical, emotional, and/or mental well-being which in turn affect their success in school (Grubbs, Muro, & Clements, 2016). Working together, a school counselor and school nurse can provide a safe and non-judgmental environment in which students can receive necessary support, intervention, and find assistance (Grubbs et al., 2016). Therefore, it would behoove each professional to work alongside one another collaboratively to ensure they are meeting the needs of the students they serve. However, because of the differing roles of school counselors and school nurses offering a focused and intentional methodological approach to this collaboration is the charge of the authors.

### **School Counselors and School Nurses**

While a school's mission is to ensure students are academically successful, the opportunity to promote positive physical and mental health is available within a school setting. There is a link between health and education as those students who may have mental and physical health concerns are at risk for poorer school performances

(Bohnenkamp et al., 2015). Once the mental, physical, and social-emotional needs are met students are better able to focus on their academic needs and school performance (ASCA, 2012).

School counselors provide teachers with core curriculum lessons that are beneficial in meeting the needs of students both personally and socially (ASCA, 2012; Atici, 2014). Additionally, school counselors collaborate with teachers to provide strategies and support when working with students with behavioral problems, academic concerns, as well as preparing Individualized Education Programs (IEP) and individual accommodation plans for those students receiving special accommodations (Atici, 2014). Effective collaboration in schools is necessary to support the academic, social/emotional, and health needs of students in K-12.

School nurses are not always recognized as being a part of the school mental health team despite their ability to be beneficial collaborators with education and mental health professionals (Bohnenkamp et al., 2015). School nurses reported that their primary role involved the transition of students back to school after medically related absences (Finch, Finch, McIntosh, Thomas, & Maughan, 2015). However, school nurses play an important and necessary role during the school day to ensure that students maintain consistent attendance by providing minimal medical services at school to help students avoid leaving school and traveling to an offsite medical practice for such services (Biag, Srivastava, Landau, & Rodriguez, 2015; Gifford, Bai, Troop, Miller, & Babinski, 2010). In addition, school nurses ensure that school personnel are trained on how to keep medically fragile students safe at school and also collaborate with and train teachers and other school personnel how a student's medical condition

may affect their academic success (Biag et.al, 2015; Gifford, et.al, 2010). For example, collaboration between school nurses and other school professionals such as school counselors is necessary when developing and implementing Individualized Education Programs and Individual Health Plans (McIntosh & Thomas, 2015).

In addition, school nurses or school counselors may be the first point of contact for students that experience sensitive medical crises such as pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, or sexual assault. Furthermore, school counselors may assist students with chronic illnesses during the back to school transition process (Kaffenberger, 2006) which would provide opportunities to work alongside a school nurse. Therefore, both professionals may need to rely on the professional expertise of the other in terms of finding and attaining resources for the student and their families (Grubbs et al., 2016).

Collaboration among school nurses, school counselors, mental health professionals, and school personnel provides for the opportunity for each profession to offer their individual skills to the benefit of the student (Bohnenkamp et al., 2015). Within the framework of this collaboration, the school nurse may help build a support network for students experiencing a medical crisis, chronic illness, or any other medical issue which should include the school counselor to assist with providing emotional support and fostering a connection between the parent/student, and school (Grubbs et al., 2016). This partnership may potentially decrease fragmentation of services, improve the utilization of resources, and establish care that promotes mental and physical health awareness and understanding.

## **Role of School Counselor**

The role of the school counselor is unique and ever evolving (ASCA, 2012). In 2003, as a response to this evolution, as well as the growing need for equity, access, and collaboration in K-12 schools, the Education Trust through its Transforming School Counseling Initiative defined school counseling as, “a profession that focuses on the relations and interactions between students and their school environment to reduce the effects of environmental and institutional barriers that impede student academic success” (TSCI; Education Trust, 2003). Influenced by the Transforming School Counseling Initiative, the ASCA characterized the role of the school counselor as addressing the developmental needs of all students through a comprehensive school counseling program addressing the academic, career and personal/social development of all students that promotes and enhances student success (ASCA, 2012). In their effort to guide the development, implementation, and enhancement of comprehensive school counseling programs, ASCA developed the *ASCA National Model*, which outlines the key components of a comprehensive school counseling program. Just as school counselors are an integral component of the school’s educational leadership team, the comprehensive school counseling program is a vital component of promoting the schools’ academic mission. School counselors design and deliver effective school counseling programs that center on collaboration among school counselors, students, parents, and other school personnel to foster an environment that enhances the educational experience for all students by promoting equity, access, and student success to increase overall student achievement (ASCA, 2012; Lapan, Gysbers, & Kayson, 2007; Stone & Dahir, 2006). School Counselors do not work in isolation but are

an integral part of every student's educational team and although the roles of school counselors may vary at each level, they are an invaluable resource in ensuring that all students have their personal/social, academic, and career needs met.

Comprehensive school counseling programs are developmental in nature and provide prevention and intervention services along with providing education. Each of these aspects are integrated into all facets of children's lives. Trained as professional educators with a mental health perspective (ASCA, 2012), school counselors are uniquely positioned to support the academic, career, and personal/social development of school-age children. School counselors provide direct services such as core curriculum lessons, small groups, parenting workshops, and individual or group counseling that focus on the diverse developmental needs of elementary school students (Schmidt, 2013). However, it is imperative that school counselors engage and collaborate with other school stakeholders in the delivery of counseling programs and services to effectively prepare students for the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Epstein & Voorhis, 2010). Through early prevention, identification, and intervention school counselors in collaboration with teachers, administrators, school nurses, parents, community, and other school personnel promote academic achievement, personal/social success, and career awareness which serve as the foundation for future success (Epstein & Voorhis, 2010).

### **Role of School Nurse**

School nurses provide an important role within the school system dating back to the early 1900's. The first school nurse, Lina Rogers, set out to determine if a nurse within the school system could improve health and attendance for those within the New



York City school system (Dock, 1902). Her efforts were highly successful even while attending to a large student load. Because of the positive efforts, other school systems within New York began noticing improvements in the health of students, and began employing more school nurses. Soon, other cities across America followed suit and brought nursing into other school systems (Zaiger, 2000).

According to the National Association of School Nurses (2017b), “all students will be healthy, safe, and ready to learn.” The vision of NASN demonstrates the important role of the school nurse by directly and indirectly affecting the academic, health, and emotional outcomes of children and adolescents within the communities and counties served by assuming the roles of advocate, health educator, general practitioner, mentor, and resource coordinator. The different roles of the school nurse stretch across the entire academic spectrum (elementary, middle, high school) to provide a much-needed source of support for children and their families, and the other employees within the school. This role changes to meet the needs of the population served, and with an interdisciplinary effort and the coordination of care, the needs of the students can be met and managed to enhance student success (Krause-Parello & Samms, 2010).

**School nurse training and accreditation.** School nurse responsibilities have evolved from the earlier starts; in the beginning school nurses identified and isolated students with communicable diseases, and now, school nurses have a large spectrum of duties and responsibilities to include interdisciplinary collaboration (Innerbody, n.d.). Because of the wide expansion of responsibilities of a school nurse and the great impact on student health, the National Association of School Nurses recommends school nurses hold a bachelor degree or higher in nursing (2017b). School nurse

certification is also gaining in popularity as certification represents a standard in high quality care (National Board for Certification of School Nurses, 2015). Even with the recommendations from NASN, many states only require a school nurse to hold a licensed practical nurse (LPN) degree and they are not required to have specific professional development relating to school nursing (National Association of State Boards of Education, n.d.).

**General practitioner.** The role of general practitioner is one found at all levels of primary academics. There are a high percentage of students with chronic health conditions and these students with chronic conditions and disabilities are attending general and special education schools across the nation (Krause-Parello & Samms, 2010; McClanahan & Weismuller, 2015). Resources are available for such students to receive comparable educations as their healthy peers (Lineberry & Ickes, 2015); therefore, one role of the school nurse is to manage patients with chronic and acute conditions so that the student can continue in the school system. Prominent conditions, such as chronic illnesses, observed in the school setting are allergies, especially food allergies, asthma, diabetes, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) among other health conditions (Kaffenberger, 2006; Lineberry & Ickes, 2015) requiring medication and symptom management by the school nurse. As more conditions present themselves to the school setting, school nurses must be able to familiarize themselves with the changing protocols and medications to manage the care as well as understand the broad range of health conditions previously unseen in the school environment (Chau, 2013; Krause-Parello & Samms, 2010; Biag et al., 2015). As a general

practitioner with a broad range of health condition knowledge, the school nurse is an integral part of the student's care plan.

**Resource coordinator.** A school nurse can link community resources to the student and family. Due to the increasing number of students entering the school system with chronic illnesses (Krause-Parello & Samms, 2010; McClanahan & Weismuller, 2015), the school nurse has an important role in the school system to coordinate resources for the students and their families. Student health affects learning and poor health is directly linked to struggles in school (Biag et al., 2015; Gifford et al., 2010). The school nurse can merge resources for health and education goals (Beck & Reilly, 2017). Resources may range from sending food home with students to dental health services for students, eye glasses to counseling. By linking the community to the student, the student has a better chance to excel in school.

School nurses screen patients for various health concerns affecting education delivery. Many types of screens, such as hearing and vision, take place in the elementary setting. Other screens, such as scoliosis, may take place in middle school. As the only discipline with a medical background in the school setting, a school nurse can work with families and the communities to link services, especially for the less privileged students, and to obtain the needed devices for optimal student success in the classroom (Biag et al., 2015). Devices derived from screenings, such as eye glasses, positively affect learning outcomes.

**Health educator.** The school nurse is often the only healthcare provider in the school setting and because of the strong health background, is able to develop health promotion initiatives for children and adolescents. Health promotion initiatives are

geared to the age and level of the student and as such, the school nurse must be versed in common health and mental health trends seen in the variety of the student population served. One health initiative spanning all three levels include education focusing on the clinic services; when there is knowledge and use of the school health clinics, students report greater health satisfaction and better health due to health promotion and wellness activities (Harper, Liddon, Dunville, & Habel, 2016). The school nurse also develops wellness initiatives to improve student health by incorporating technology and engaging students in health initiatives affecting them in order to enhance buy-in by students, especially the adolescent student (Beck & Reilly, 2017; Wysocki, 2015). Lastly, the school nurse assists in educating vulnerable populations. With the population of poor and immigrant children increasing since 2000, school nurses must be creative with their education delivery in order to be accessible by the vulnerable populations (Duff, 2014). School nurses can help fill in the health care gaps by fostering behaviors that promote and protect health (Biag, et al., 2015; Pavletic, 2011). The educator role is an important aspect of the school nurse position.

**Advocate and mentor.** The school nurse plays an important role as advocate and mentor to students with reproductive health concerns, although this is often an overlooked and missed opportunity in the school health clinic (Harper et al., 2016). The relationship between a nurse and student in the case of reproductive health, to include teen pregnancy, is an important relationship built on trust and collaboration. The nurse may be the first person the student confides in when faced with pregnancy (Grubbs et al., 2016). Because of the trusting relationship regarding sexual health a role of the school nurse is the ability to identify victims of sexual abuse. Young people state that

they feel school nurses are someone to confide in and have increased comfort when around the school nurse (Keogh, 2013). By assisting students during the difficult time, the nurse advocates for outside resources needed to assist the student (Keogh, 2013). The mentoring and relationship built on trust is an important role of the school nurse, especially involving the reproductive health and well-being of the students served.

### **Benefits of School Counselor and School Nurse Collaboration**

School counselors and school nurses who work together can seek services to support K-12 students (Grubbs et al., 2016). Examples of how the roles of the school counselor and school nurse overlap include: assisting students in circumstances of child abuse (Keogh, 2013), chronic clinic visits (Chau, 2013), pregnancy and other medical crises (Grubb, Muro & Clements, 2016), anxiety, hygiene, neglect, attendance, reentry into the school setting, educational planning (e.g., hospital homebound services, 504 accommodations), and bullying (Kaffenberger, 2006) which further reiterate the importance of interprofessional collaboration (Parse, 2015). Furthermore, school counselors and school nurses build rapport with students which facilitates the opportunity to examine a larger perspective of what students may be facing both inside and outside of the school setting.(Grubbs et al., 2016).

While there is only limited research on collaboration between the school counseling and school nursing professions; however, one timely research study proposed collaborative practices between the disciplines working with pregnant teenagers. Grubbs et al. (2016) recognized the critical need for school counselors to maintain a safe, confidential, and trusting relationship with their students in crisis, such as those that are pregnant, while also respecting and upholding the rights of their

parents to information about their children. The researchers suggested that school counselors working with school nurses facilitate communication with parents and provide access to beneficial resources that may maintain a safe and trusting relationship with the student (Grubbs et al., 2016). Their research study, along with several collaboration models for each profession, influences the development of the proposed model of collaboration in this article.

Friend and Cook (2013) established a collaboration framework for professionals in the schools which has been incorporated by other school counseling professionals (Gibbons, Diambra, & Buchanan, 2010; Moran & Bodenhorn, 2015). Additionally, Friend and Cook voiced the need for professionals in the school setting to work together and demonstrate skills and knowledge to function in this capacity (2013). Furthermore, they recognized collaboration as communication between two or more individuals on an equal plain who work together towards the same objective (2013). The components of the Friend and Cook (2013) collaborative framework include voluntary collaboration, equal power distribution among collaborators, common goals, shared responsibility for participation and decision making, shared resources, and shared accountability for outcomes.

The ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2012) infuses collaboration as a major role of school counseling. School counselors collaborate with all stakeholders within the school setting, including school nurses. Furthermore, as mentioned previously, school counselors and school nurses inherently advocate, collaborate, and consult to seek best outcomes for their students' well-being (ASCA, 2012; NASN, 2017a). Therefore, the collaboration framework by Friend and Cook seamlessly guides the mutual goal

oriented collaboration between school counselors and school nurses, due to the intended outcome as student success and well-being (2013).

The care coordination in schools model (Baker, Anderson, & Johnson, 2017) intersects with Friend and Cooks' collaboration framework (2013) in that communication is a vital component to support students facing barriers and challenges. The care coordination framework calls for nurses to collaborate and lead in building relationships within the school and outside health care providers (Baker et al., 2017). This framework seeks for collaboration to include communication, understanding of terminology, establishing guidelines, monitoring services, and continuous evaluation to ensure collaborative measures have been effective (Baker et al., 2017).

### **School Counselor and School Nurse Collaboration Model**

School counseling and school nursing are both part of the helping profession, which lends itself to a vital platform for collaborating to best serve all students. This collaborative relationship between school counselors and school nurses positively impacts student mental and physical health. Furthermore, each profession provides services and interventions for all K-12 students to facilitate and maintain positive mental and physical health (ASCA, 2012; NASN, 2017a). The author's proposed collaboration model was established to enhance and initiate the effective communication between school counselors and school nurses to support student well-being and welfare.

Bemak (2000) recognized the role of the school counselor as a leader in collaboration to support educational goals based on the societal trends impacting students. Since then the ASCA National Model emphasizes school counselors work in the areas of leadership and collaboration (ASCA, 2012). Therefore, this model was

established based on the Friend and Cook (2013) collaborative framework and the care coordination in schools model (Baker et al., 2017).

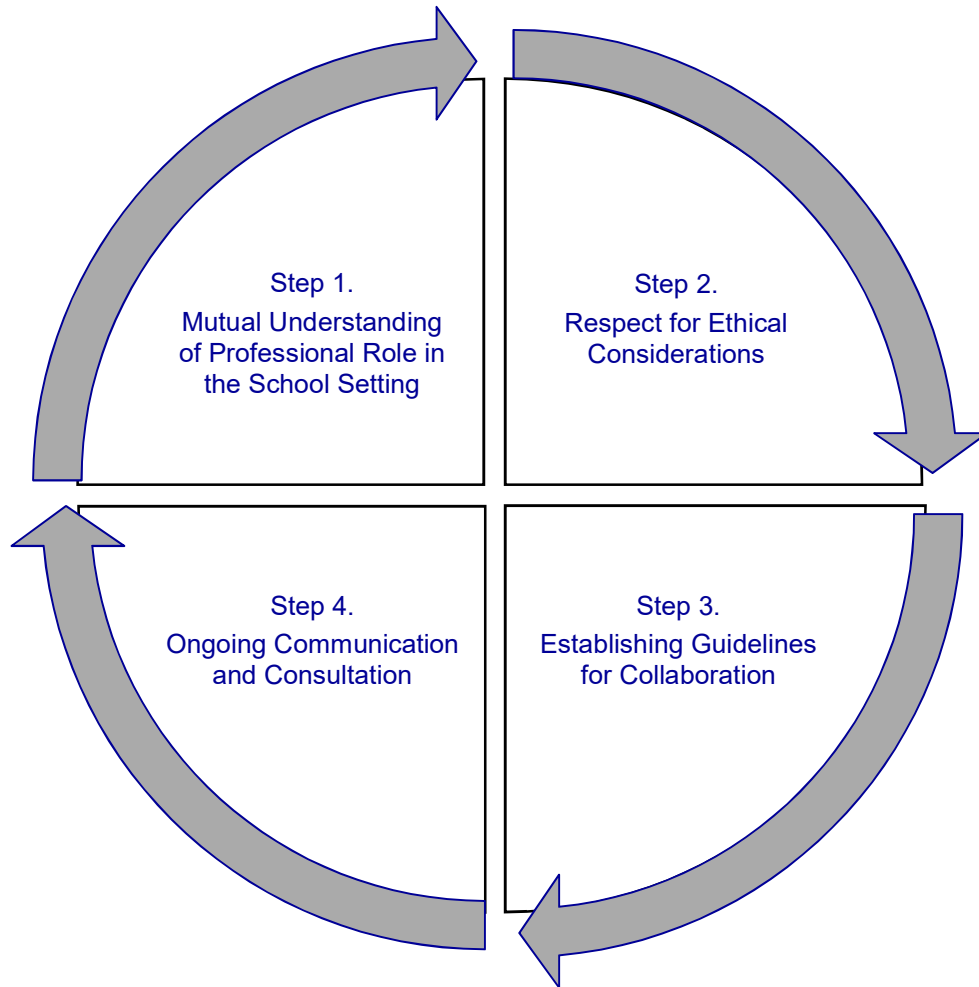
### **Step 1. Mutual Understanding of Professional Role in the School Setting**

The first step to collaboration involves school counselors and school nurses recognizing each profession receives different training and preparation specific to their profession. Therefore, it is imperative for both professionals to not assume what the other is trained to do or what the job role is for each practitioner. This first step can be established by scheduling an initial meeting to discuss professional training, job roles and parameters, and areas to provide support to the school, staff, and students. Additionally, school counselors and school nurses may use this opportunity to discuss how their roles intersect such as ethical practices, educational planning, support for student well-being, mandated reporting, and identifying areas for collaboration.

### **Step 2. Respect for Ethical Considerations**

The second step involves the discussion about each specialty area's ethical guidelines while taking into consideration the limitations of what can be shared during collaboration based on the ASCA ethical standards (ASCA, 2016) and NASN code of ethics (2016). It is imperative to examine and review each position's ethical standards and codes to ensure mutual understanding and respect are formed based on the school counselors and school nurse's parameters to maintain confidentiality and scope of practice.





*Figure 1.* A visual representation of collaboration model. This figure illustrates the cyclical steps in an effective collaboration between school counselors and school nurses.

### **Step 3. Establishing Guidelines for Collaboration**

The third step further expands the discussion of the roles of each specialty area by identifying how the school counselor and school nurse can work together to best support all students. This process involves several components including reviewing the school calendar to know when vision and hearing screenings will take place, identifying community resources to support needs of students (e.g., assistance with glasses, medicines), and recognizing when the needs presented by students may be more effectively supported or required intervention by the other professional. Respecting

professional attributes and limitations of each profession will further enhance the guidelines for collaboration and distinguish between each role in certain situations.

#### **Step 4. Ongoing Communication and Consultation**

The final step in our suggested model for collaboration between school nurses and school counselors is ongoing communication and consultation. This step is essential in developing an effective collaboration between the two school professionals to ensure continuity of care for the students they will serve through their collaborative efforts. To maintain continuity of care ongoing communication between the two is necessary to assess progress over time, maintain professional boundaries, and prevent disruption of services to the student. It is imperative that each professional knows what types of services the other is providing so that they can supplement each other when needed. In addition, case consultation between the school nurse and school counselor will allow for adequate follow-up and support for each individual student to enhance the opportunities for positive outcome and overall student success. To make this step most beneficial to the collaboration experience the school counselor and school nurse should create an intentional plan for ongoing communication and consultation at the beginning of the collaboration process that will extend through the duration of their work with the student and include an action plan for follow-up.

The framework presented here provides specific steps to initiate an ongoing supportive partnership to establish and maintain student well-being. A condensed version of the outlined collaboration model is provided to demonstrate collaborative continuity between school counselors and school nurses. School counselors can utilize the diagram to enhance understanding of the collaborative model (see Figure 1).

## **Practical Applications for School Counselors**

School counselors who forge partnerships with school nurses recognize collaboration as an integral component in the role of the school counselor (ASCA, 2012). These collaborative partnerships allow the opportunity for both professionals to leverage on their training to maximize interventions towards student welfare and well-being (ASCA, 2012; NASN, 2017a). The outcome from collaboration spurs optimal follow through leading students to ideal situations, thereby, enhancing opportunities for academic, career, and social and emotional success (ASCA, 2012). Furthermore, school counselors who do not currently seek consultation and collaboration opportunities with school nurses may begin the process by scheduling a time to meet with the school nurse. During this meeting, key points of discussion focusing on the role of each profession, ethical codes and standards, common goals and responsibilities, and how to implement the collaboration model (Baker et al., 2017; Friend & Cook, 2013; Grubbs et al., 2016). In addition, school counselors might consider scheduling weekly check-ins with the nurse to discuss students who have been identified as needing additional supports. The weekly meetings would provide for a platform to gauge student referrals, visits, and questionable incidents.

The collaboration process may include regularly scheduled meetings between the school counselor and school nurse to discuss upcoming screenings, students identified in need of financial support (e.g., medication assistance, glasses assistance, need of clothing, or medical supplies), cases involving medical neglect, chronic illness, transition back to school, and frequent flyers who seek the attention regarding potential psychosomatic concerns (Finch et al., 2015; Kaffenberger, 2006; Keogh, 2013). School

nurses who recognize the student may not have the essentials (medicine, clean clothes, medical supplies, hygiene products) would reach out to the school counselor to discuss these concerns. The school counselor would be able to follow up with the student to identify what additional factors might be impacting and effecting the student.

Furthermore, from this collaboration process, types of services and supports would be identified and then initiated such as parental contact, outside agency referrals, and school-wide interventions (Bryan & Henry, 2011). The benefits from this ongoing collaboration would result in positive outcomes for the students as the school counselor and school nurse are able to work together.

### **Conclusion**

Currently, limited research and literature on school counselor and school nurse collaboration is available. Future research associated to the collaborative partnerships between school counselors and school nurses would provide additional data and findings related to its efficacy in supporting students in the K-12 school setting. It is evident that both professions essential components in schools and collaboration between the two school professionals will improve both mental and physical health which will further enhance the success of K-12 students and increase their overall well-being.

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## **Biographical Statements**

Dr. Malti Tuttle is an assistant professor in counselor education at Auburn University in the Department of Special Education, Rehabilitation, and Counseling. Her research interests lie in school counseling, Latinx student advocacy, English language learners, gifted students, and school counseling collaboration. Prior to her position as an assistant professor, she was a school counselor for 13 years.

Dr. Morgan Yordy is an assistant professor in the School of Nursing at Auburn University. Her primary teaching role is within the undergraduate baccalaureate program of study. Dr. Yordy's research interests include animal-assisted therapy, student success, health promotion initiatives, health disparities, and interdisciplinary collaboration. Prior to her position as an assistant professor, she worked in staff development as a clinical nurse specialist in the hospital setting.

Dr. Brandee Appling is an assistant professor in counselor education at Auburn University in the Department of Special Education, Rehabilitation, and Counseling. Her research interests lie in school counseling, African American motherhood, Latinx student advocacy, the underrepresentation and experiences of gifted African American adolescent male students, and school counseling collaboration. Prior to her position as an assistant professor, she was a school counselor for 11 years.

Erika Hanley is a doctoral student in Counseling Psychology at Auburn University in the Department of Special Education, Rehabilitation, and Counseling. Her research interests include racial, ethnic, and gender identity development, coping and resiliency of LGBTQ+ populations, diversity education, and media representation of minority populations in popular culture.