

# Reading, writing and rural health

*Beaverton's Nina Fekaris, president of the National Association of School Nurses, talks about the complicated overlap of housing, health care and education, particularly in Oregon's rural communities*

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According to Oregon Health & Science University's Office of Rural Health, Oregon has 53 service areas in 24 counties where the population's health needs are not being met. That means that Oregonians in those areas are not getting adequate access to primary physical, mental and oral health care services.

Among those most affected are the youngest and most rural residents in the state.

Nina Fekaris has been a school nurse with the Beaverton School District for almost 30 years, and last summer was named president of the National Association of School Nurses. She believes that providing more school nurses to rural Oregon would have a deep impact on not only the health of rural Oregon communities, but also the

educational outcomes.

According to Fekaris, school nurses are much more than the person you go to when you're not feeling well and you need a note. Rather, school nurses are community educators who provide preventative health care that keeps kids in school and boosts graduation rates.

Fekaris talks about a school nurse in Chicago who discovered that students who were being expelled for bringing weapons to school were actually so afraid for their safety they brought them in to protect themselves from being attacked. Another school nurse in rural Tennessee organized Telehealth,

health care telecommunication technology, in order to get both students and families access to vital health care.

And for students in low-income families, students who are homeless, and especially students in rural areas with little access, sometimes the school nurse is the only health care option.

**Sarah Hansell:** *In a 2016 article, you said that the ideal school nurse to student ratio should be 1 to 750, but in Oregon the ratio is something like 1 to 3,000. It's estimated that 40 percent of school districts throughout the state don't have school nurses at all. So where are we now?*

**Nina Fekaris:** I do not think those statistics have really changed any. I haven't heard that districts are eliminating positions, so I don't think we're worse off, but I also don't think we're much better.

**S.H.:** *Could you tell me what some of the big impacts are of that vast ratio?*

**N.F.:** The (job) of the school nurse is to make sure that her students are healthy and that they're safe and that they can be in the building and ready to learn. We're looking at trying to build capacity, not only within our students, but we also support our families. When we have such high ratios, or even when districts don't have any school nurse services, we believe that there are unmet health needs that are going unnoticed or under-noticed. The number of children with chronic or acute health conditions has kind of skyrocketed over the past 10 years. The number of children with anaphylaxis, which is a life threatening allergic reaction, that has increased dramatically. Our number of children with Type 1 diabetes has increased dramatically.

And those are life-threatening health conditions, that unless school staff understand the signs and symptoms and know how to treat quickly, can result in a child's death. And so if there is no health care provider, and school nurses are oftentimes the first front line kind of health care providers that children have in school, if that service isn't available, then I believe we're putting children in Oregon at risk.

**S.H.:** *What are school nurses seeing these days that they weren't seeing in the past? Essentially, what's the experience of the 21st century school nurse in Oregon?*

**N.F.:** The dramatic increase of children with life-threatening allergies and Type 1 diabetes: These medical conditions significantly impact the amount of time and planning and preparation that a school needs to have in place to keep those students safe. The other huge issue that we're seeing is mental health. Mental and behavioral health concerns have also skyrocketed, and that has been within the last five years that we've really seen that huge increase.

It's children coming to school with severe anxiety; early, early diagnoses of kids with potential eating disorders; children that are experiencing such kind of traumas or adverse childhood events in their life outside of school that coming to school is kind of their safe haven.

**S.H.:** *How much would you say housing insecurity and homelessness affects students' health and school performance?*

**N.F.:** It's a dramatic effect. There have been studies that have shown that homeless

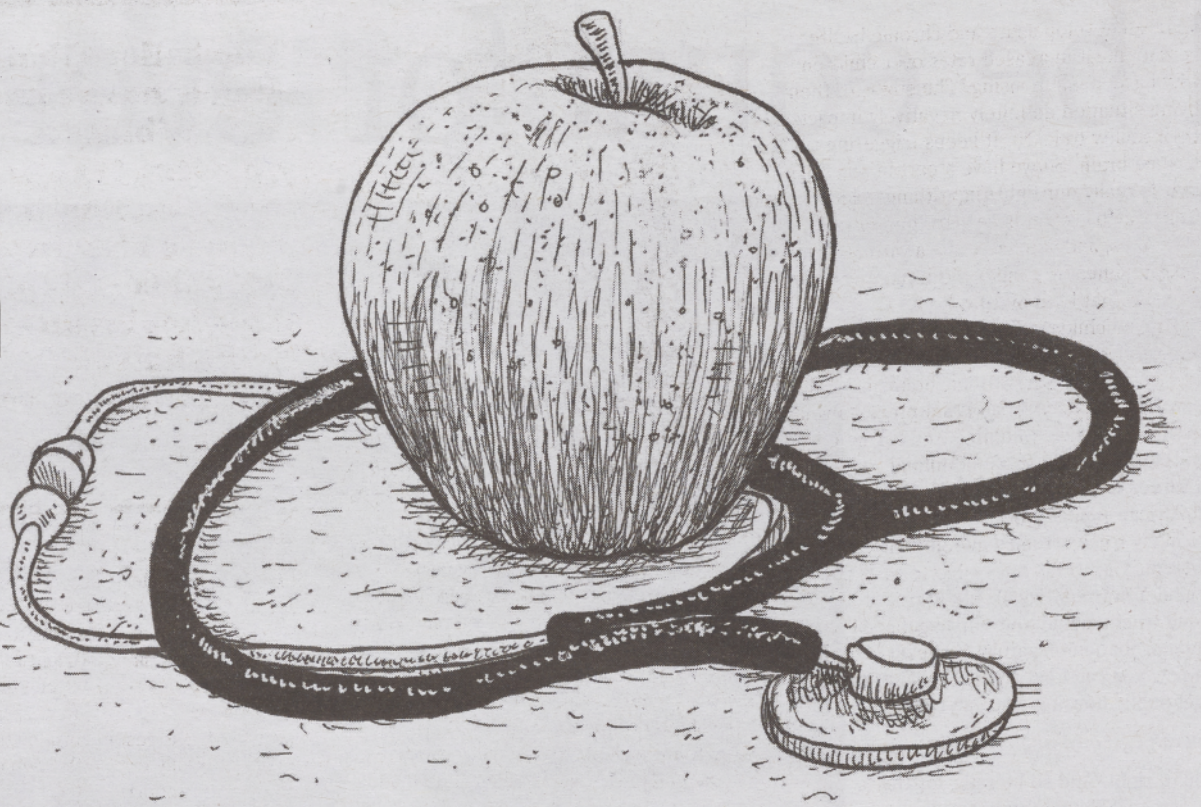


ILLUSTRATION BY ELIZABETH CONSIDINE

## Housing Rural Oregon

This article is part of Street Roots' Housing Rural Oregon series. The goal is to broaden our views around housing and housing-related policy to promote better understanding of the issues communities face across the state.

See **NURSES**, page 11