



Terry Hillen, R.N., C.S.N., Outside Education, makes a presentation on wellness to a fourth-grade class at Emerson Elementary School.

A Day in the Life of a School Nurse

Terry Hillen, R.N., C.S.N., Outside Education

WRITTEN BY CASSANDRA SURA

“When I began working as a school nurse for the Elmhurst School District, I thought I would be putting on band-aids and taking temperatures. I didn’t realize how much was involved in the job and how many students had health needs,” said Terry Hillen, R.N., C.S.N.



Hillen is one of nine Elmhurst Memorial Healthcare (EMHC) nurses who are contracted with Elmhurst Community Unit School District 205. She is part of EMHC’s outside education department, but her office is in the school district building. Hillen is responsible for Emerson Elementary School, Hawthorne Elementary School and Sandburg Middle School, along with overseeing half of the district’s K-12 schools as well as several of the nurses.

“Each school has a unique personality,” Hillen said. “The day never goes according to my planner, and the job never gets boring.”



“This is one of the most rewarding jobs there could be because I am able to touch lives and work with children.”

—Terry Hillen, R.N., C.S.N., Outside Education, shown here with Emerson fourth-grade teacher Jennice Fritz.

Each day of the week, Hillen tries to schedule herself at one of the three schools that she is responsible for. A “typical” day for Hillen might begin at Emerson with a team meeting where she meets with school staff, social workers and administrators to discuss a possible case study or individual care plan for a child with special needs.

“It takes a team approach to promote learning and develop health plans for students with specific needs,” Hillen said. The number of students with exceptional needs is growing all the time. About 60 percent of Hillen’s time is spent coordinating care for these children. The school nurses work with parents and physicians to develop action plans for students who have special needs, including tracheal tubes, diabetes management, seizure protocol or asthma monitoring.

After a couple of hours at Emerson, Hillen may get paged to observe a student at Sandburg or fill in for one of the nurses. Some students have exceptional medical or physical needs that require one-on-one care throughout the entire school day. Nurses not only care for them, but also help them communicate with teachers and peers.

After lunch, Hillen may go to Hawthorne where she makes phone calls to parents to follow-up on the results of hearing or vision screenings. Parents are contacted when a child needs glasses or additional exams from a physician. Hillen and the other school nurses ensure that the schools meet state health regulations such as mandated immunizations and vaccines.

While in the health office at Hawthorne, a few children may stop in with stomachaches or playground injuries. A full-time health aide is on staff at each school to help with these needs throughout the day. Health aides make sure parents are alerted when necessary and that incidents are recorded.

To finish the day, Hillen may make a presentation on wellness to a fourth-grade class. Promoting healthy eating choices and addressing childhood obesity concerns are priorities in Elmhurst schools. Hillen teaches classes about nutrition and making healthy lifestyle choices. Other common presentations include teaching kindergartners about germs and hand washing, teaching elementary students about hygiene or first aid and teaching middle school students about sexually transmitted diseases. Teacher-education is part of Hillen’s job as well. In case a nurse is not on duty at the school, a teacher may need to know how to react in an emergency.

Hillen is always on call and will stop whatever she is doing to go help a child at one of the schools. If a child gets injured on the playground or needs immediate medical attention, Hillen can be there in five to 10 minutes due to the close proximity of the Elmhurst schools. If an ambulance is needed, Hillen will ride with the child to the Hospital and communicate the situation to the parents and emergency department staff.

Hillen said, “This is one of the most rewarding jobs there could be because I am able to touch lives and work with children.”

Community Partnerships

The relationship between Elmhurst Memorial Healthcare (EMHC) and the Elmhurst Community Unit School District 205 results in many benefits for students, parents, district employees and the community.

- Expertise of certified nurses**
 Although the state does not currently require school nurses to be certified, most EMHC nurses working with the school district are certified school nurses and registered nurses.
- Access to flu shots**
 Each year, EMHC provides its school nurses with flu shots, which they can administer to school district employees to prevent the spread of sickness in schools during the flu season.
- CPR training**
 School nurses annually assist in teaching CPR to district staff members at an EMHC site where mannequins, supplies and additional instructors are available.
- Community education**
 EMHC offers a variety of health and wellness classes to the community free or at a reduced cost. Community members, including parents and school staff, can talk with the school nurses about their needs and receive information on programs.
- Health concerns**
 Parents and school staff often have questions about their own or their child’s health needs. School nurses are available to personally address these concerns or provide educational materials.
- Access to resources**
 School nurses have access to educational materials and equipment at all of EMHC’s resource centers, including the Hospital, Center for Health, Health Education Center in Villa Park and Lombard Health Center.

Credits: Emerson Elementary School, Elmhurst, Illinois; Emerson fourth-grade teacher Jennice Fritz; and Emerson fourth-grade students: Will Conroy, Jennifer Edwards, Kyle Haukland, Keeley McManus, Melissa Sciabica and Hannah Wahlgren.