

Washington's Health Workforce Sentinel Network

Findings Brief: K – 12 Schools

This Findings Brief highlights current workforce needs reported to the state's Health Workforce Sentinel Network by K – 12 schools and organizations that provide services within schools in Washington during April/May 2024, as well as trends over time. More findings from 2024 and earlier, as well as for other health care facilities, may be viewed at <https://www.wa.sentinelnetwork.org/findings>

Top occupations with exceptionally long vacancies*				
Rank	Spring 2019	Spring 2022	Fall 2023	Spring 2024
1	Registered nurse	Registered nurse	Registered nurse	Registered nurse
2	Licensed practical nurse	Licensed practical nurse	School psychologist	Mental health counselor
	School psychologist			Licensed practical nurse
3	Dental hygienist	Occupational therapist	Mental health counselor	School psychologist
	Nurse practitioner			Speech language therapist
	Speech language therapist	School psychologist		Speech language therapist
4	No additional occupations reported	Multiple occupations cited at the same frequency	Speech language therapist	Multiple occupations cited at the same frequency

← Most cited

*Occupations cited by the same number of responses share the same rank number. Findings prior to Spring 2019 not shown due to space constraints and a low number of responses. Fall 2019 to Fall 2021, Fall 2022, and Spring 2023 findings not shown due to low response numbers.

Reasons for prolonged vacancies reported by schools

Reasons for prolonged vacancies were frequently cited as having to do with salary, wage, and benefits issues and not enough qualified applicants for open positions.

- [Registered nurse] It is a hard-to-hire position. Many nurses do not consider school nursing when looking for a nurse position.
- [Registered nurse] Nursing shortages. There is no applicant pool. School nurses do not make as much, need competitive pay. No one knows about certificated school nurses, in general there isn't enough nurses. Very little support for new school nurses and terrible recruitment for school nursing.
- [Mental health counselor] We cannot find someone, I don't have a solution, hard to find a part time person, limited reimbursement? Unsure of solution.
- [School psychologist] No applicants. Have had remote school psychologists for two years now. It's working, but in person is still more desirable.
- [Occupational therapist] We do not pay our OT enough to compete with community rates, and in a rural community it is very hard to access OT.
- [Pediatrician] We have no pediatricians in our community, which leads to lack of access to care for the specific needs of our students and no source of reference when a consult is needed.

K – 12 Schools (Spring 2024)

Highlights of current workforce needs reported to the state's Health Workforce Sentinel Network by K – 12 schools during April/May 2024 (continued).

Reasons for worker retention/turnover problems reported by schools

The reason most cited for worker retention and turnover issues were salary/wage/benefits issues and workload/patient acuity issues.

- *[School psychologist] We've had the same remote School Psychologist for two years now and she's great, however there remain vacancies across the district and there have been other resignation because of the higher caseloads. Unsure of possible solutions - increased support and workload reduction? Higher pay?*
- *[Registered nurse] Clinical (hospital) nurses are unfamiliar and/or uncomfortable with difference responsibilities and scope of practice.*
- *[Licensed practical nurse] An extended maternity leave is stretching everyone to cover that school. There's no backup for leaves.*
- *[Para-educator] We've had agency hires to fill vacancies the last two years. Our union contract requires us to keep posting and interviewing candidates. Very few applicants and almost none are qualified. It is a low pay, physically demanding job. Unsure of solutions.*

Changes in schools' priorities regarding orientation/onboarding for new employees

Respondents indicated making changes to onboarding scheduling or content.

- *[Mental health counselor] [...] Since 2022 we have seen a significant increase in requests for mental health services from students. We have had to add additional training for new employees on how to handle their caseloads.*
- *[Registered nurse] We have made our onboarding process more robust. Many of our turnover concerns are nurses who find work in other states, with a higher wage, or their partners are in the [military] and are being transferred.*
- *[Multiple occupations] educating to total benefit package, training opportunities*

Changes in schools' priorities regarding training for existing/incumbent workers

- *[Mental health counselor] We have added additional training for all counselors in modalities such as CBT+ and EMDR.*
- *[Registered nurse] School nurses work duties have increased significantly in the last few years. They manage all health plans, Section 504 Plans, respond to intraday emergencies, provider extracurricular/fieldtrip support for students with medical needs, etc. which extends their workday and often without many other options as school districts are required to provide nursing support for students.*
- *[Licensed practical nurse] LPN's job duties have expanded from providing skilled nursing services in our district to include administrative duties as well.*

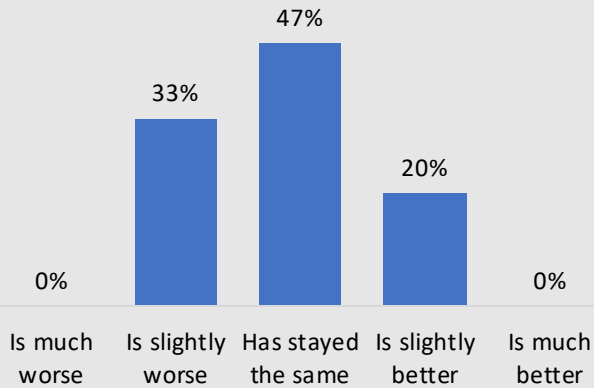
New healthcare occupations that were not previously employed

- *[Mental health counselors] This year we started a new school based mental health program due to a Dept Ed grant we received. [We'll need] mental health counselors for the next 5 years.*

Overarching Workforce Issues: Themes and Examples

Responses by schools to questions about current overarching workforce issues are summarized below. Earlier overarching and pandemic-related findings are at www.wa.sentinelnetwork.org/findings/covid-19/.

In the past six months, how has your organization's ability to staff your facility/facilities changed?



Comment examples

- *[Is slightly worse] The lack of funding is our challenge. Hiring more qualified staff is key to serving our community.*
- *[Has stayed the same] We always have staffing issues. Nurses come and go with mainly agency people. We lose counseling staff yearly, [...] It's usually a scramble to get a psychologist, often resorting to using telehealth psychologists. We have mental health substance abuse counselors that seem to come and go, hit or miss if we have one at any given time of year.*
- *[Has stayed the same] Our school is small and we have been able to manage staffing.*
- *[Is slightly better] With the implementation of our mentoring program 5 years ago we have seen a better retention rate of nursing staff. However, we are still seeing people leave because the wage is an issue in school nursing. People generally work in schools for the schedule.*

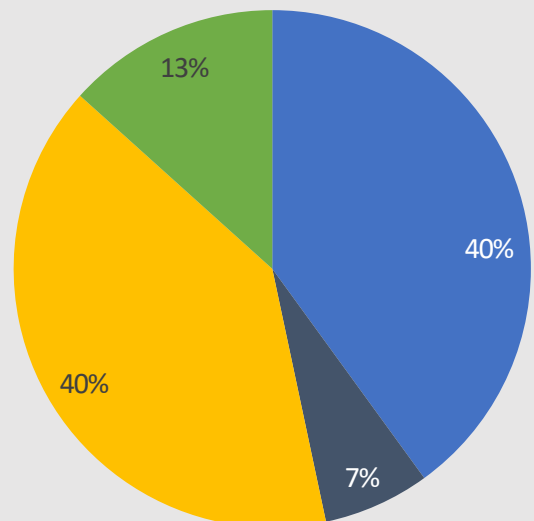
Describe any new retention strategies your organization has implemented in the past year and their impact on staff retention.

Respondents described implementing strategies ranging from increasing wages and improving onboarding processes to mentorship and flexible work schedules.

- *Flexible work schedules and 15-24% wage increase over the last 2 years for 65% of staff.*
- *Improved orientation and onboarding tools, increased "mentor" opportunities for new staff.*
- *5 years ago we created a new onboarding/mentoring program which is reviewed each year specifically with each new hire- "what could we have done better". This has been successful in maintaining staff.*
- *Team approach with a welcoming atmosphere. Relationship building and a feeling of belonging is a high priority for staff.*

How would you describe your facility's use of contract/travel workers now compared with your use a year ago?

- We did not use contract/travel workers a year ago and still do not now
- We've decreased the number of contract/travel workers
- We use about the same number of contract/travel workers
- We've increased the number of contract/travel workers



K – 12 Schools (Spring 2024)

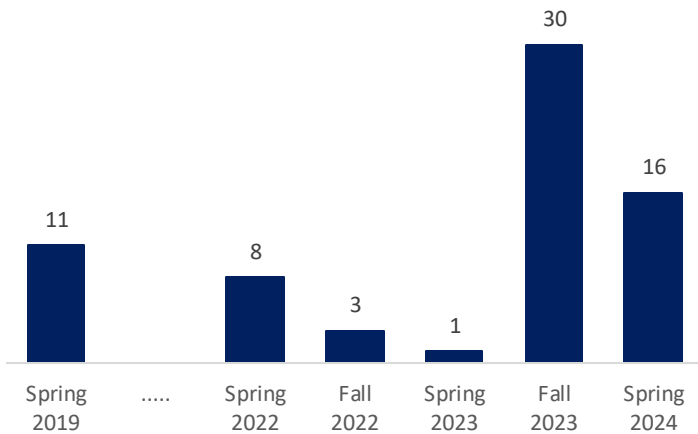
Overarching Workforce Issues: Themes and Examples (continued)

Has your facility adopted, or is it considering adopting, forms of artificial intelligence (AI) to help improve administrative workflows?

25% of respondents indicated they adopted AI to help improve administrative workflows. Below are examples of those that responded “yes:”

- *We recently had an equity training that included an opportunity to learn more about AI.*
- *I personally have started learning how to incorporate more AI into my daily life and have encouraged staff to learn with me. We need to adapt and change with technology and that can be difficult with regulations in the education sector.*

Number of Sentinel Network Responses from K – 12 Schools in WA by Data Collection Date*



*Findings prior to Spring 2019 not shown due to space constraints and a low number of responses. Fall 2019 to Fall 2021, Fall 2022, and Spring 2023 findings not shown due to low response numbers.

Number of K – 12 Schools Responses by Accountable Community of Health (ACH) (Spring 2024)



Note: Each facility may serve clients/patients in more than one county, which is why map totals may exceed total unique responses.

About the Washington Health Workforce Sentinel Network

The Sentinel Network links the healthcare sector with policymakers, workforce planners and educators to identify and respond to changing demand for healthcare workers. The Sentinel Network is an initiative of Washington’s Health Workforce Council, conducted collaboratively by Washington’s Workforce Board and the University of Washington Center for Health Workforce Studies. Funding to initiate the Sentinel Network came from the Healthier Washington initiative, with ongoing support from Governor Inslee’s office and the Washington State Legislature.

Why become a Sentinel? As a Sentinel, you can:

- Communicate your organization’s workforce needs to inform policy and planning responses.
- Have access to current and actionable information about emerging healthcare workforce needs.
- Compare your organization’s experience and emerging workforce demand trends with similar employer groups.

To view an interactive summary of findings and to provide information from your organization: www.wa.sentinelnetwork.org.

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