

Maximizing Nursing Education in A Post-Pandemic World To Meet California's Looming Nurse Shortage: An Issues Paper

The purpose of this paper is to summarize the ongoing challenges impacting and constraining nursing education in California. While these challenges have existed for many years, the COVID pandemic has exacerbated their impact on the ability to adequately prepare nurses to meet existing and future healthcare needs in the State. The UCSF Health Workforce Research Center is estimating that California is facing a nurse shortage of over 40,000 Registered Nurses. The extension of the Sunset Review of the California Board of Registered Nursing (BRN) permits the opportunity for meaningful legislative action to bring resolution to these issues and offer the regulatory relief necessary for more optimally addressing California's looming nurse shortage.

The COVID pandemic has impacted the State of California and its citizens in ways that few could have imagined two years ago. Even as California has now moved forward with an endemic approach to dealing with the virus, the impact of the pandemic will be felt for many years to come. Nurses, who represent the largest segment of the healthcare workforce, have been particularly hard hit. California nurses have heroically stepped up to the many pandemic-related challenges in providing needed care and have led the "front line" interface with the healthcare system. However, their dedicated commitment has taken its toll in terms of personal hardship, fear for family, sacrifice and exhaustion. This level of unprecedented personal costs has resulted in many nurses questioning their desire to continue in their current practice role or to even continue to practice nursing at all.

In a recent American Association of Critical Care Nurses study, 92% of the nationwide respondents indicated that the pandemic had depleted the number of nurses at their hospitals and 66% reported that their experience with the pandemic had resulted in their considering leaving the nursing profession altogether. Approximately 37% of California's Registered Nurses are over the age of 50² and 26% of nurses between the age of 55 and 64 have indicated that that they plan to leave the profession in the next two years.³

Clearly, there is a need for rapidly increasing the number of Registered Nurses in California to meet current and future healthcare demands. To accomplish this, it is vital that California's nursing education programs function at optimal capacity and have the flexibility required to produce more superbly qualified Registered Nurses. Long before the pandemic, nursing education programs were voicing ongoing concerns about burdensome and unnecessary State-based regulations and oversight that inhibited their ability to efficiently conduct their nursing education programs, hire needed faculty, engage in the latest instructional methodologies and negotiate appropriate clinical placement sites for students. For California's schools of nursing to flourish and function in a manner that optimizes available resources while maintaining and increasing enrollments, it is essential that, as the Sunset Review proceeds, legislation needs to be enacted to **remove regulations** that:

- Restrict the use of simulation and other evidence-based non-direct care methodologies for developing needed student clinical skills

- Require BRN approval of faculty hired by schools of nursing
- Place restrictions on the number of students that can be enrolled by nursing programs
- Require BRN approval of clinical placement sites for students

These needed changes to regulations are consistent with the practice in most other states throughout the nation. For example 80% of other state Boards of Nursing does not require any approval of clinical placement sites and 90% require no pre-employment faculty approval.

In addition to removing regulatory barriers which inhibit schools of nursing from achieving optimal effectiveness and efficiency, other changes need to be addressed to forge a more collaborative and productive relationship between the BRN, nurses beginning and continuing practice in the State and schools of nursing:

- Reduce the exorbitant fees now charged for nurses to obtain authority to practice in the State and/or renew their licensure. There are ongoing anecdotal reports of students completing their nursing education programs and delaying entry into practice because they cannot afford the fees charged for taking the NCLEX exam and paying for their licenses.
- Reduce excessive costs for curricular revisions that impede current program updates and improvements and are an onerous expenditure for many colleges and universities.
- Discontinue the 5-year BRN approval visit and replace with documentation of program quality through accreditation documents for nationally-accredited programs.
- Assure that the BRN board member appointed to represent nursing education is a seasoned nursing education administrator that has prior experience as a Dean or Director of a California-based school of nursing
- Re-establish a “Nursing Education Advisory Committee” as a permanent committee to the BRN that engages Deans and Directors from California nursing schools that offer Associate, Baccalaureate, Masters and Doctoral degrees in Nursing
- Seek federal and State funding sources to increase the salaries of nurse faculty in schools of nursing.
- Ensure consistency between Nurse Education Consultants.
- Eliminate the onerous burden of proof for need of waivers for direct patient care hours and provide timely approvals for waivers.

While attention to the legislative, regulatory and other changes and actions identified above will not resolve all issues relating to the provision of adequate numbers of qualified nurses to meet California healthcare needs, addressing these issues will have a tremendously positive impact in advancing that goal. The attached article from the Journal of Professional Nursing, *Building coalitions: A statewide nursing organization’s role in changing nursing education regulation during the COVID-19 pandemic* provides additional information on each of these issues that may be useful as legislative relief is considered.