

Addressing the Growing Burden of Medication Management in Primary Schools: A Call for Urgent Systemic Intervention

Across Australia, primary schools are facing an escalating crisis - the growing burden of student medication management. A recent survey of primary leaders reveals the stark reality: educators and administrative staff are being thrust into medical roles they were never trained for, under conditions that are increasingly complex, high-risk, and unsustainable.

Schools Are Not Clinics: The Scope of the Problem

Every day, principals, teachers, and office staff are expected to administer medication to children with a vast range of medical needs, from tablets to life-sustaining insulin injections, and even high-risk Schedule 8 drugs. This is not what they were trained to do. And yet, they do it. Because the students need it. But at what cost?

The current model diverts precious time and resources away from teaching and learning. It places school staff under extraordinary pressure and exposes students and staff to safety risks. The job demands are growing, but the resources are not.

The Toll on Education Staff and Student Safety

The expectation that educators stop mid-lesson, mid-meeting, or mid-supervision to manage medication is unrealistic, unsustainable, and dangerous. These disruptions pull them away from their core mission: to educate, support, and lead learning. Goodwill and dedication cannot continue to be the invisible scaffolding that props up a failing system. It's burning people out, and, it's putting children at risk.

Staff with no formal medical training are expected to manage medications that require precision, timing, and deep understanding of individual health needs. Errors can have serious, even life-threatening consequences. The anxiety and liability concerns are real. And the lack of system-level support compounds the issue.

Medical Complexity Is Rising, Without a Matching Response

More students need medication during the school day than ever before. Their medical needs are more complex. Some require medications to be mixed, crushed, administered via syringe — tasks better suited to trained healthcare professionals. Special schools are under even greater strain. This is a medical system failure now playing out in classrooms and front offices.

Unrealistic Expectations and Administrative Overload

Schools are also dealing with non-compliance from families: missing documentation, late medications, changed dosages without notice, and are left to chase paperwork, clarify instructions, and manage the risks. Every one of these tasks takes educators further from teaching and learning and deeper into roles that should sit firmly within the health system.

Legal and Ethical Risks Demand Immediate Attention

The current arrangement exposes schools to significant legal, safety, and reputational risks, especially during excursions and camps, where secure storage and precise administration become even more complicated. Without health professionals on-site, schools are navigating a minefield, with students' health on the line.

A Clear and Necessary Solution

We must stop expecting schools to shoulder a responsibility that rightfully belongs to the health system. The solution is both clear and urgent:

- Fund and embed trained health professionals in schools, such as school nurses or Health Support Workers, to manage student medication safely and effectively.
- Ensure all school staff have access to funded, regular, and comprehensive training in first aid, CPR, and health-specific protocols. This should be included in work requirements not on top of.
- Streamline medical planning and communication between health providers, families, and schools, with standardised templates, clear expectations, and shared accountability.
- Support small and rural schools with tailored health solutions that reflect their unique contexts and challenges.
- Conduct a national inquiry into best-practice models of school-based medication management and scale what works.

This Is a Shared Responsibility

We call for a true partnership between policy makers in education and health, one where schools are not left alone to manage growing medical complexity without appropriate expertise and resources. The goal is simple: keep education as the focus, and health in the hands of health professionals.

The Time for Action Is Now

This is no longer a question of convenience. It is a matter of safety, equity, and sustainability. If we are serious about student wellbeing, about educational excellence, and about protecting the people who care for our children every day, then we must act.

Policymakers: the case is clear. The need is urgent. Don't let the goodwill of educators be the only thing holding the system together. Fund, support, and protect our schools, and our students, now.

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