



The Alleghany Foundation Funds Greater Alleghany School Health Project

After The Alleghany Foundation's inception in June, 1995, the board of directors prepared for the first grant cycle in September of 1996. Its members were faced with the challenge of prioritizing community needs and determining where funding would make the most impact. After much deliberation, the board decided that the growing health care needs of the community's youth — an issue which was becoming increasingly problematic, not just in the Highlands, but across the nation — was a top priority. The board decided to approach the Alleghany County and Covington City School Divisions to find out what the Foundation could do to make a positive impact on student health. As a result of this meeting, a consortium was created, and The Greater Alleghany School Health Project, a division-wide school nursing program, was born.



Photo Courtesy of Buck Rumpf, Virginian Review

Today, the project continues with two full-time and nine part-time registered nurses who manage about 40,000 student encounters a year, and approximately 9,000 phone calls to parents about student health issues. School nurses also provide Virginia mandated training to staff and bus drivers; they develop emergency plans for students with life-threatening conditions, advocate for students who don't have health insurance, and teach wellness and prevention classes — all thanks in part to the \$1.8 million The Alleghany Foundation has funded to date.

At the beginning, the consortium, which includes both school divisions, the Alleghany Health District, and Alleghany Highlands Community Services, applied to and received funding from the Foundation for a five-year grant, with the Foundation paying for 100% of the project for the first year. Subsequent years of this initial grant would see a decline in the Foundation's financial contribution to a 50% funding level. The Foundation continues to support the project with three-year grant awards at the 50% level. The most recent grant was made in August, 2008 in the amount of \$407,050.

Project coordinator and pediatric nurse practitioner Leslie Downer, MSN, RN, CPNP, who has been with the program since its inception, hopes that one day the Commonwealth of Virginia will fully fund school nurse programs. She is an active member of the Virginia School Nurses Association and an advocate for school nurse programs in all Virginia schools. "The Virginia Department of Education has school mandates, guidelines, and recommendations for health programs." She says they recognize the importance of school nurses, but the General Assembly has yet to make a funding commitment."

Fred Vaughn, director of Student Services, is a project representative for the Alleghany County School Division. He believes that school nurses make a big difference in the lives of students and their families. "We have seen a tremendous impact over the years and we have the statistics to prove it. And none of it would be possible without the help of The Alleghany Foundation."

"The benefits the school nurse program provides our school systems are invaluable," says Eddie Graham, superintendent of City of Covington Schools. "Students need to be healthy in order to focus and learn. They can't concentrate if they have a toothache or if they don't feel well because of a chronic disease." In the 39 years Graham has been in the school system, he's seen a significant change in student health, with increases in chronic asthma, allergies and diseases such as Type 2 diabetes and hypertension – both often symptoms of obesity.

Leslie Downer says that nurses monitor 29 students with diabetes, 15 of them with avoidable Type 2 diabetes. "Last year, a school nurse referred a diabetic student with elevated blood sugar and ketone readings; the student was hospitalized for ketoacidosis. It's a serious illness."

"We have seen a great impact on student health over the years," Downer adds. "A good example is the blood pressure screenings we initiated in 2005. Since then, a number of students have been diagnosed with high blood pressure." She estimates that 5% of students in the school system have this disease.

"We've also developed emergency plans for students who are insulin dependent or who have other serious problems like severe asthma or food and insect allergies," says Downer. "We train faculty, staff, and bus drivers to respond to medical emergencies, and we work with parents to review and approve individual plans."

One of the school nurse program objectives is to protect students and staff from the outbreak and spread of communicable diseases such as MRSA, a staph infection that is difficult to treat, and can be fatal. Downer says that last year, several students were referred for suspicious skin infections. Cultures revealed them to be MRSA and the students were quickly and successfully treated. "Program nurses are trained to recognize signs and symptoms of communicable diseases and to take action before it gets out of hand."

Eddie Graham says that of all the services the program provides, he believes student advocacy is high on the list. “Families shouldn’t have to choose between health care and putting food on the table.” Nurses work with families who don’t have health insurance or who are underinsured to make sure students are getting the health care they need, including vision and dental care. They help families find outside resources like Family Access to Medical Insurance Security Plan (FAMIS), a Virginia health care plan for children.

Melinda Johnson, director of Student Services for Covington City Schools has been in the school system for 32 years and says the program has taken the burden off of school personnel who had no choice but to make medical judgments. “The faculty spent an inordinate amount of time dealing with health problems, from handing out band aides and giving medications, to dealing with more serious illnesses and injuries.”

In addition to relieving faculty of student health responsibility, nurses also assumed Virginia mandated training of faculty and staff for diabetes education, blood borne pathogen, medication administration and vision screenings to students. “Without the school nurse program, schools would have to hire outside health care providers to conduct the training,” says Leslie Downer.

Nurses also provide wellness and prevention education for students and staff like tobacco prevention, nutrition classes and general classroom presentations. They work with Dabney S. Lancaster Community College to help train student nurses in pediatric physical assessments, and they maintain a liaison with health care providers, community health programs and agencies.

Downer says the consortium is grateful for The Alleghany Foundation’s continued support for this highly important and successful program. “Without the Foundation’s help, the schools would have difficulty identifying and remedying student medical problems . . . or keeping up with all the required and recommended facets of health education.”

“The health of our children impacts our community now and well into the future,” says Beth Webb, executive director of The Alleghany Foundation. “Funding this program has been truly rewarding for this board, as it has had a positive affect on so many of the residents of the Alleghany Highlands.”

Since its inception, the foundation has granted over \$27 million to the following 501(c)(3) non-profit organizations with the purpose of improving the quality of life in the Alleghany Highlands:

- Alleghany County
- Alleghany County Parks and Recreation
- Alleghany County Public Schools
- Alleghany County Sheriff's Office
- Alleghany County United Fire and Rescue Association
- Alleghany Health District
- Alleghany Highlands Arts & Crafts Center
- Alleghany Highlands Arts Council
- Alleghany Highlands Community Services Board
- Alleghany Highlands Economic Development Authority
- Alleghany Highlands Economic Development Corporation
- Alleghany Highlands Free Clinic
- Alleghany Highlands Genealogical Society
- Alleghany Highlands YMCA
- Alleghany Highlands Youth Soccer Association

Alleghany Historical Society
Alleghany Humane Society
Alleghany Mountain Radio
American Diabetes Association
American Red Cross
Appalfolks of America
Art Museum of Western Virginia
Bath County
Bath County Health Department
Bath County Historical Society
Bear Trust International
Blue Ridge Public Television
Boiling Springs Elementary School
Boiling Springs Fire Department
C.O.P.E.
C & O Historical Society
Callaghan Elementary School PTO
Charles P. Jones Memorial Library
City of Covington
Clifton Forge Little League
Clifton Forge Main Street
Clifton Forge Nursery School
Clifton Forge Public Library
Clifton Forge Volunteer Fire Department
Covington City Schools
Covington Fire Department
Covington Rescue Squad
Dabney S. Lancaster Community College
Diabetes Education Support Group
Falling Spring Elementary School PTO
Falling Spring Fire Department
Falling Spring Rescue Squad
Greater Alleghany Highlands School Health Consortium
Jackson River Enterprises
Jackson river Technical Center
Local Office on Aging Mill Mountain Theatre
Mountain Soil and Water Conservation District
Mountain View Elementary School PTO
Rockbridge Area Community Services Board
Safehome Systems
Science Museum of Western Virginia
Scott Hill Foundation, Inc.
Sharon Elementary School PTO
Sharon Volunteer Fire Department
Shenandoah Autism Center
Southwest Virginia AHEC
Southwest Virginia Second Harvest Foodbank
Special Olympics
Total Action Against Poverty
Town of Clifton Forge
Town of Iron Gate
Unified Human Services Transportation System (RADAR)
Virginia Hunters Who Care
West Virginia School of Osteopathic Medicine
Western Virginia Emergency Medical Service Council