From isolation to vaccination: School health staff pandemic experiences in Pima County, Arizona

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Background

- School health staff lead and provide primary health care for children and other staff in schools.
- As schools navigated this unfamiliar COVID crisis, school health staff have played a crucial role in managing student health and wellness.

Objective

- To qualitatively explore the challenges and experiences of school health staff during the pandemic in the Pima County, Arizona.

Methods

- We conducted focus group discussions (FGDs) in two randomly selected school districts in Pima County, Arizona.
- In January 2022, we conducted two focus group discussions (FGDs) among 50 school health staff for 90 minutes each.
- The study was conducted at the schools by two trained investigators in qualitative studies.
- A discussion guide consisting of ten open-ended questions was used to conduct the FDGs.

Results

- The thematic content analysis yielded six core themes related to the pandemic-related experiences.
- The pandemic has significantly challenged school health staff with new job tasks: managing isolation, vaccination, and developing/implementing new and evolving COVID-19 guidelines.
- School health staff also reported increased stress related to interactions with parents and school administration as well as frustrations with rapid changes to guidance from the health department and policy makers.
- A common issue was not having enough staff or resources to complete the job responsibilities and expectations.

Conclusion

The school health staff were underprepared and had difficulty in navigating the pandemic, which has resulted in physical burnout and mental distress. Pandemic preparation for schools is important to ensure adequate resources and plans of action that provide psychosocial support for school health staff in future pandemics.