

# Lee County school nurses want new lice rules

## District sends kids with bug eggs home

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FRANCESCA DONLAN

[fdonlan@news-press.com](mailto:fdonlan@news-press.com)

Students at Lee County public schools can't go to school if they have lice or nits — lice eggs — in their hair.

Some health professionals say it's time to revisit the nit-picking.

Dr. Andrew Oakes-Lottridge, a family physician, and other health workers want to change the policy to a “no live bug or live lice” policy and allow children with nits to attend school.

The “no-nit policy” has forced too many kids to miss too much class time, said Oakes-Lottridge, who writes a medical column for The News-Press and was involved in the debate Thursday at the district's School Health Advisory Committee meeting. He was joined by 18 school nurses and others who showed up to address the district's lice policy.

“I've never seen so many school nurses in my entire life,” said Dr. Eleanor Blitzer, a retired Fort Myers pediatrician. “Obviously this is a big deal because so many parents and teachers must be giving you grief.”

Both the National Association of School Nurses and American Academy of Pediatrics say students shouldn't miss class because of lice or nits.

"Children found with live head lice should remain in class, but be discouraged from close, direct head contact with others," is the recommendation of the school nurses group.

Collier County public schools allow students to return to school after the lice are treated, with a schools spokeswoman saying the district does not have a no-nit policy.

"This is purely an emotional and social problem," Oakes-Lottridge said. "We need to bring the policy out of the dark ages. We have to balance a scientific, medical approach with social issues."

But it's not going to be easy to convince parents, said Beth Wipf, a Lee County school nurse.

School nurses need a careful and considerate plan before kids with nits step into classrooms, Wipf said.

Tracey Gore, parent of a student at Fort Myers Beach Elementary School and a former PTO president, gets nervous when she thinks about her daughter going to school with classmates who have nits in their hair.

“They share hats and lean on each other,” Gore said. “You should treat it completely so you don’t keep another kid out of school.”

The lice policy change won’t be discussed again until the advisory committee meets again in September, which troubles Dr. Judith Hartner, director of the Lee County Health Department.

“We’re denying kids an education,” Hartner said at the meeting. “Their literacy determines their health more than anything, including race, gender or BMI. What are we doing when we keep kids out of school?”

## **Know your vermin**

Head lice are tiny, wingless insects found on the head and scalp, often behind the ears or ear the nape of the neck.

Nits are the eggs that are laid by adult lice. They attach firmly to the hair shaft and can be mistaken for dandruff or hair spray. Lice hatch from the eggs in 7 to 10 days if not treated.

“It walks,” said Kathleen Rose, a school nurse for 27 years at Lee County Public Schools. “They don’t jump. They don’t fly. They walk fast.”

The only way to get lice is to have head to head contact, she said.

“Lice prefers clean heads to dirty heads,” she said. “They don’t carry disease. Flies in your home carry disease.”