

## **The Professional School Counselor and Crisis/Critical Incident Response in the Schools** (Adopted 2000; revised 2007)

### **American School Counselor Association (ASCA) Position**

The professional school counselor is a leader in the successful development and implementation of a response plan with respect to the needs of both students and staff during any school- or student-related incident and serves primarily as an advocate for students' safety and well-being. The professional school counselor is a pivotal member of a school's/school district's crisis/critical incident response team collaborating with other school staff members to implement a comprehensive response to any such incident.

### **The Rationale**

ASCA promotes and supports a safe, violence-free learning environment in the schools. Traumatic events may have many negative emotional, social, cognitive and physical effects on students, which may lead to profound short-term and long-term effects (Carr, 2004; Stallard & Salter, 2003). Professional school counselors are critical to the following emergency prevention/preparedness response activities:

- direct student counseling services
- student suicide prevention and intervention
- crisis response
- drug and alcohol interventions
- student safety advocacy
- parent, faculty and staff education programs
- response team planning and drill practices

It is imperative for school districts to develop district-level and building-level emergency preparedness and response plans (i.e., Incident Command System) for on-scene response. Accurate and immediate implementation of a crisis/critical incident response plan can significantly protect and ensure students' safety during a critical event and mitigate the long-term effects following the event. Professional school counselors may screen students for inappropriate, unhealthy or unsafe coping responses to current or past tragedies and make appropriate referrals. Professional school counselors should be trained in a variety of crisis intervention models to help with the mitigation of stressors in students. Such training may include, but is not limited to, training held by the American Red Cross, the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation or the Crisis Management Institute.

### **The Professional School Counselor's Role**

Professional school counselors support and actively engage themselves in critical incident response situations in schools. Literature on crisis/critical incident response suggests several important practices (Carr, 2004; Heath & Sheen, 2005; Stallard & Salter, 2003). The professional school counselor is a leader and an integral part of the prevention, intervention and post-incident support of school crisis/critical incident responses in both planning and implementation. As a member of the district and school critical incident response team, the professional school counselor is familiar with the school community, including students, parents and school staff, and community members. The professional school counselor is knowledgeable about the roles of first responders such as law enforcement officials or emergency medical responders and community counseling service providers.

The professional school counselor's primary role is to facilitate planning, coordinate response to and advocate for the emotional needs of all persons affected by the crisis/critical incident by providing direct counseling service during and after the incident. The professional school counselor recognizes and facilitates a continuum of support for students, school staff and victims involved in the incident. The professional school counselor is skilled in networking with community resources including first responders and is able to provide effective planning and referral for victims of a critical incident.

**Summary**

The professional school counselor is a leader and a crucial member of a district and school crisis/critical incident response team. The development and implementation of a coordinated district and school crisis/critical incident response plan should include input from the professional school counselor. Professional school counselors are student advocates and facilitators of communication with students, staff, parents and community members and assist in securing outside services when needed. The school counselor's expertise should not be replaced by less-qualified personnel in crisis/critical incident response planning and implementation. The professional school counselor should help coordinate crisis/critical incident stress debriefing after the incident for students, staff, members of the school counseling department and self care for the school counselor and other mental health professionals directly involved in the incident response.

**References**

Carr, A., (2004). Interventions for post-traumatic stress disorder in children and adolescents. *Pediatric Rehabilitation, 7*, 231-244.

Heath, M., & Sheen, D. (2005). *School-based crisis intervention: Preparing all personnel to assist*. Guilford Press: New York.

Stallard, P., & Salter, E. (2003). Psychological debriefing with children and young people following traumatic events. *Clinical Psychology Review, 22*, 163-188.