

The Professional School Counselor and Student Mental Health

(Adopted 2009)

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) Position

Students' unmet mental health needs can be a significant barrier to student academic, personal-social and career development; and even compromise school safety. Professional school counselors do not provide long-term therapy in schools to address psychological disorders; however, they must be prepared to recognize and respond to student mental health crises and needs, and to address these barriers to student success by offering education, prevention, and crisis and short-term intervention until the student is connected with available community resources.

The Rationale

Schools are often one of the first places where mental health crises and needs of students are recognized and initially addressed (Froeschle & Meyers, 2004). Research indicates that 20% of students are in need of mental health services, yet only one out of five of these students receive the necessary services (Kaffenberger & Seligman, 2007). Furthermore, students of color and those from families with low income are at greater risk for mental health needs, but are even less likely to receive the appropriate services (Panigua, 2005; Vera, Buhin, & Shin, 2006). Students with untreated mental health issues can develop significant barriers to learning, with nearly half of these students eventually dropping out of school (Erford, Newsome, & Rock, 2007). Although professional school counselors are knowledgeable and skilled in counseling, school counselors have a responsibility to ensure the academic, career and personal/social development of all students and to provide a comprehensive school counseling program to meet the developmental needs of all students in the school. Therefore, professional school counselors must focus their efforts on designing and implementing programs that promote educational success for all students, while acknowledging they may be the only counseling professional available to students and their families to help identify and address students' mental health issues. Professional school counselors must also recognize and respond to students' mental health while working within the ASCA's *Ethical Standards for School Counselors* and state and national legislation such as the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, which affords parents' or legal guardians' privacy rights for their children.

The School Counselor's Role

Professional school counselors are knowledgeable and skilled in working with students who are struggling with developmental or mental health issues, and must provide a comprehensive school counseling program in an effort to promote academic, career and personal/social development and success for all students. Consistent with the ASCA National Model (2005), professional school counselors develop and deliver a comprehensive school counseling program that promotes positive development which includes offering education, prevention and short-term intervention services designed to promote positive mental health and to remove any barriers to student success.

Comprehensive school counseling programs span the continuum of care provided to students and their families, and are consistent with professional school counselors' commitment to student success. Professional school counselors should:

- Provide responsive services including internal and external referral procedures, short-term counseling or crisis intervention focused on mental health or situational (e.g. grief, difficult transitions) concerns with the intent of helping the student return to the classroom and removing barriers to learning;
- Deliver the guidance curriculum which enhances awareness of mental health; promotes positive, healthy behaviors; and seeks to remove the stigma associated with mental health issues.
- Provide individual planning with students that addresses their academic, career and personal-social (including mental health) needs;
- Educate teachers, administrators, parents/guardians, and community stakeholders about the mental health concerns of students, including recognition of the role environmental factors have in causing or exacerbating mental health issues;
- Advocate and collaborate with school and community stakeholders to ensure that students and their families have access to mental health services.

Professional school counselors should regularly participate in professional development to increase their ability to recognize and respond to student mental health crises and concerns.

Summary

Students' unmet mental health needs pose barriers to learning and development. Because of professional school counselors' training and position, they are uniquely qualified to provide education, prevention, intervention and referral services to students and their families. Although professional school counselors do not provide long-term therapy in schools, they provide a comprehensive school counseling program designed to meet the developmental needs of all students. As a component of this program, professional school counselors collaborate with other educational professionals and community service providers to assist with the mediation of student mental health issues and to promote healthy lifestyle choices

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