

The School Counselor and Student Mental Health

(Adopted 2009, Revised 2015, 2020)

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) Position

School counselors recognize and respond to the need for mental health services that promote social/emotional wellness and development for all students. School counselors advocate for the mental health needs of all students by offering instruction that enhances awareness of mental health, appraisal and advisement addressing academic, career and social/emotional development; short-term counseling interventions; and referrals to community resources for long-term support.

The Rationale

Students' unmet mental health needs can be a significant obstacle to student academic, career and social/emotional development and even compromise school safety. Even so, most students in need do not receive adequate mental health supports (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2013). Research indicates 20% of students are in need of mental health services, yet only one out of five of these students receive the necessary services (Erford, 2019). 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, 2013) despite increased national attention to these inequities (Marrast, Himmelstein & Woolhandler, 2016).

Of school-age children who receive any behavioral and/or mental health services, 70%–80% receive them at school (Atkins et al., 2010). Preventive school-based mental health and behavioral services are essential. Without planned intervention for students exhibiting early-warning signs, setbacks in academic, career and social/emotional development can result during later school years and even adulthood.

The ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors (ASCA, 2014) identify and prioritize the specific attitudes, knowledge and skills students should be able to demonstrate as a result of a school counseling program. School counselors use the standards to assess student growth and development, guide the development of strategies and activities and create a program that helps students achieve to their highest potential. This includes offering instruction that enhances awareness of mental health and short-term counseling interventions designed to promote positive mental health and to remove barriers to success.

The School Counselor's Role

School counselors focus their efforts on designing and implementing school counseling programs that promote academic, career and social/emotional success for all students. School counselors acknowledge they may be the only counseling professional available to students and their families. Thus, school counselors:

- Deliver instruction that proactively enhances awareness of mental health; promotes positive, healthy behaviors; and seeks to remove the stigma associated with mental health issues
- Provide students with appraisal and advisement addressing their academic, career and social/emotional needs
- Recognize mental health warning signs including
 - changes in school performance and attendance
 - mood changes
 - complaints of illness before school
 - increased disciplinary problems at school
 - problems at home or with the family situation (e.g., stress, trauma, divorce, substance abuse, exposure to poverty conditions, domestic violence)
 - communication from teachers about problems at school
 - dealing with existing mental health concerns
- Provide short-term counseling and crisis intervention focused on mental health or situational concerns such as grief or difficult transitions
- Provide referrals to school and community resources that treat mental health issues (suicidal ideation, violence, abuse and depression) with the intent of removing barriers to learning and helping the student return to the classroom
- Educate teachers, administrators, families 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, and provide resources and information

- Advocate, collaborate and coordinate with school and community stakeholders to meet the needs of the whole child and to ensure students and their families have access to mental health services
- Recognize and address barriers to accessing mental health services and the associated stigma, including cultural beliefs and linguistic impediments
- Adhere to appropriate guidelines regarding confidentiality, the distinction between public and private information and consultation
- Help identify and address students' mental health issues while working within the:
 - ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counselors
 - ASCA Professional Standards & Competencies for School Counselors
 - National, state and local legislation, which guides school counselors' informed decision-making and standardizes professional practice to protect both the student and school counselor
- Seek to continually update their professional knowledge regarding the students' social/emotional needs, including best practices in universal screening for mental health risk
- Advocate for ethical use of valid and reliable universal screening instruments with concerns for cultural sensitivity and bias if state legislation or school board policy requires universal screening programs for mental health risk factors (ASCA, 2016)

Summary

Students' unmet mental health needs pose barriers to learning and development. Because of school counselors' training and position, they are uniquely qualified to provide instruction, appraisal and advisement and short-term counseling to students and referral services to students and their families. Although school counselors do not provide long-term mental health therapy in schools, they provide a school counseling program designed to meet the developmental needs of all students. As a component of this program, school counselors collaborate with other educators and community service providers to meet the needs of the whole child.

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