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## [Sexual Health and HIV Prevention for Youth: A Survey of School Counselors' Beliefs, Attitudes, and Professional Behaviors](#)

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**PURPOSE OF THE STUDY** The purpose of this study was to explore the attitudes, beliefs and professional behaviors of school counselors with respect to HIV prevention in schools. HIV remains prevalent among youth and young adults in the United States, making sexual health and HIV prevention critical for these students. ASCA has maintained a position statement regarding HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs), indicating that school counselors play a critical role in HIV prevention, sexual health education, advocacy, and collaboration with colleagues and families. This study explored the extent to which school counselors' beliefs aligned with the ASCA position statement on HIV/AIDS/STIs as well as sexual health rights outlined by a national youth advocacy group. Additionally, the study explored their comfort and frequency engaging in various professional behaviors associated with HIV prevention.

**HOW THE RESEARCH ADVANCES THE PROFESSION** Findings revealed that school counselors support sexual health rights of youth, including HIV education and testing. They also agreed with the ASCA position statement regarding equitable treatment of students and families affected by HIV and the role of school counselors as collaborators with their colleagues to provide services to students and families. However, school counselors reported little to no engagement in professional behaviors to prevent HIV among the youth in their schools, despite reporting comfort with such behaviors. These findings indicate that systemic factors might be preventing school counselors from addressing HIV and other STIs at their schools. Such factors likely include limited training in school counselor preparation programs and a lack of supervision post-graduation, both of which could assist school counselors in developing methods of fulfilling their role in HIV and STI prevention as outlined by ASCA. Additionally, state legislation and district policies that limit comprehensive sexual health education or prohibit discussions of gender and sexuality in schools might leave school counselors unsure of what they are able to do to advance sexual health in their schools.

**GUIDANCE FOR PRACTICING SCHOOL COUNSELORS** School counselors committed to fulfilling their role in preventing HIV and other STIs can first engage in professional development to increase their awareness, knowledge and skills in discussing sexual health and STIs with students and families. Professional development might include an online course on HIV prevention and testing available through reputable sources. School counselors might also pursue certification as a sexual health educator so they can fully collaborate with other health educators to provide HIV and sexual health services. To best support students and families affected by HIV, school counselors should not only be knowledgeable of the illness and its psychosocial effects, but they should also be aware of resources and services in their local community so that they are able to provide the necessary linkage to care. Finally, given legislative and policy restraints that might affect their ability to fulfill their role in promoting sexual health and HIV prevention, school counselors must advocate for themselves as well as for their students and families in need of comprehensive sexual health and HIV prevention services.

**EQUITY DIMENSIONS** Given that HIV disproportionately affects students of color and students who identify as LGBTQ+, this research is rooted in social justice and equity. Legislation in multiple states across the country not only limits sexual health education, but also targets gender and sexual minority students. Such students who are also from communities of color are doubly targeted. This socio-political climate makes access to sexual health information and prevention methods difficult for youth, increasing their risk for HIV and other STIs. This study highlights these concerns and underscores the importance of school counselors as advocates for youth's sexual health rights in schools.