

The School Counselor and Suicide Prevention, Intervention and Postvention

(Adopted 2018, Revised 2024)

American School Counselor Association (ASCA) Position

School counselors work to protect the health and well-being of all students by proactively enhancing awareness of mental health and ensuring policies and procedures are in place to intervene and respond to youth suicidal behavior. School counselors exercise reasonable care when a student poses a serious and foreseeable harm to self or others and informs parents/guardians, school administration and/or emergency services if necessary.

The Rationale

Suicide is the third leading cause of death for young people between the ages of 15 and 35 and the second leading cause of death for youth ages 10 to 14. Between 2000–2021, suicide rates for this age group increased 52.2% (CDC, 2023). Deaths are only a portion of the burden of suicidal behavior; suicide attempts and suicidal thoughts among youths exceed deaths among this group. In 2020, approximately 105,000 youths aged 14–18 years visited emergency rooms for self-harm injuries (Gaylor et. al, 2023).

The prevalence of suicidal behavior has varying impacts on subgroups. LGBTQ+ youth are at increased risk for suicidal thoughts and are statistically more likely to attempt suicide than their peers due to environmental and societal risk factors. In recent years, female students' rate of suicidal behavior has increased as well (Gaylor et. al, 2023).

Research indicates that universal school-based suicide prevention can prevent the development of suicidal thoughts and behaviors in adolescents and that youth suicide risk identification and prevention in schools is likely to help high-risk youth obtain needed treatment that they otherwise would not have received (Ayer & Colpe, 2023). School counselors' implementation of suicide prevention, intervention and postvention efforts are critical in reducing the threat of youth suicide and supporting student well-being.

The School Counselor's Role

School counselors have a legal and ethical responsibility to provide a holistic approach to student's social/emotional well-being and comprehensive suicide prevention policies including prevention, intervention and postvention components.

43 **Prevention Components**

44 **School counselors:**

- 45 • Advocate for comprehensive district policies around suicide prevention
- 46 • Educate staff to recognize risk factors, warning signs, protective factors,
47 response procedures, referrals, postvention and resources regarding youth
48 suicide prevention
- 49 • Provide developmentally appropriate student instruction on the importance of
50 safe and healthy choices and coping strategies focused in resiliency building,
51 and how to recognize risk factors and warning signs of mental health
52 conditions and suicide in oneself and others (American Foundation for Suicide
53 Prevention et al., 2019)
- 54 • Use data from universal screeners to proactively identify and address
55 students' academic, career and social/emotional needs while ensuring
56 appropriate supports are in place to respond to students' immediate needs
57 (ASCA, 2023).
- 58 • Participate in district and school crisis team planning and practices

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60 **Intervention Components**

61 **School counselors:**

- 62 • Inform parents/guardians and school administration when a student poses a
63 serious and foreseeable risk of harm to self or others. This notification is to be
64 done after careful deliberation and consultation with appropriate professionals
65 and/or an interdisciplinary crisis team. If school counselors are required to
66 use assessments, screenings or any type of instrument to determine the
67 suicide risk, they advocate for the use of an evidence-based tool and do not
68 negate the risk of students' potential harm to self even if the assessment
69 reveals a low risk. In addition, school counselors understand that risk
70 assessments are just one component of the assessment process and therefore
71 should be used with caution, and for the purpose of information-gathering
72 (ASCA, 2022). Parents/guardians are always contacted and notified of
73 anything learned through an investigation of potential suicide, or with any
74 instrument, that will guide parents/guardians in efforts to protect their child
75 (Stone, 2022). School counselors provide culturally responsive mental health
76 resources to parents/guardians and recommendations for next steps based on
77 perceived student need. School counselors follow state legislation and district
78 policy when responding to suicide risk.
- 79 • Collaborate with the student to develop a safety plan and explore coping
80 strategies (Stone, 2022). School counselors avoid no-harm contracts because
81 they can provide a false sense of safety and there is insufficient evidence
82 about their effectiveness. Instead, school counselors Discuss with
83 parent/guardian safety proofing of home and all environments that student
84 frequents to secure and remove all access to firearms and other lethal means
85 of suicide.
- 86 • Engage appropriate emergency response personnel. When a student is
87 actively suicidal and the immediate safety of the student or others is at-risk,
88 school staff should immediately contact appropriate emergency response
89 personnel per federal, state and local laws as well as school district policy

(i.e., administrators, 911 dispatcher, child protective services, law enforcement). If parent/guardian abuse or neglect is the expressed reason for the student's suicidal ideation, it is best practice for the school counselor to contact child protective services rather than the parents/guardians in an effort to protect the student and ensure their safety and well-being (ASCA, 2020).

Postvention Components

Following a suicidal crisis and/or a psychiatric hospitalization, school counselors, meet with the student's parent/guardian, other relevant staff and, if appropriate, include the student to discuss re-entry and address next steps needed to ensure the student's readiness for return to school and plan for the first day back. Recommended actions include:

- Coordinate with any outside health care providers
- Discuss and document any necessary accommodations (i.e. exempted work, adjusted deadlines, building safety plan)
- Identify school support person to periodically check-in with the student for ongoing support
- Notify teachers and other relevant staff that the student is returning after a medically-related absence and may need adjusted educational supports

Following a suicide loss, school counselors take the following steps to assist with the grief process, reduce the risk of contagion and provide needed support:

- Mobilize a crisis response team
- Contact the family of the deceased student
- Notify staff, students, parents
- Monitor student and community reactions (e.g. social media)
- Provide additional support resources if needed

Summary

Through the implementation of comprehensive suicide prevention policies including prevention, intervention and postvention components, school counselors prioritize the health and well-being of all students.

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