

## **The School Counselor and Peer Support Programs**

(Adopted 1978; Revised 1984, 1993, 1999, 2002, 2008, 2015)

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

ASCA believes peer support programs are a means of helping students develop social/emotional competencies, define positive values including personal responsibility and learn pro-social behaviors (Varenhorst, 2004). Furthermore ASCA believes the effectiveness of school counseling programs is enhanced by the informed implementation of a peer support program, which can provide increased outreach and expansion of services.

### **The Rationale**

Research indicates students often communicate their problems to their peers rather than to parents, administrators or school counselors (Tanaka & Reid, 1997). School counselors facilitate this type of peer-to-peer interaction by implementing peer support programs in which individuals who are of approximately the same age take on a helping role assisting students who may share related values, experiences and lifestyles. Activities in peer support programs can include: one-to-one assistance, assistance in group settings, academic/educational assistance, assisting new students and other diverse activities of an interpersonal helping nature. In such programs school counselors select and train peer helpers in the areas of communication and helping skills.

Peer support programs enhance the effectiveness of the school counseling program while increasing outreach and raising student awareness of services. Through proper selection, training and supervision, peer support can be a positive influence within the school and community. Research indicates peer-support programs are helpful when focused on assisting students with social/emotional or academic problems (McGannon, Carey, & Dimmitt, 2005; Whiston & Sexton, 1998), and "...provide growth and learning opportunities for both mentors and mentees, resulting in a 'double impact...'" (Garringer & MacRae, 2008), (McGannon et al., 2005). Peer support programs can also help create a positive school culture and a connectedness to the school community to both mentors and mentees (Karcher, 2009 and Battistich, 2003).

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

The school counselor is responsible for determining the needs of the school population and for implementing a peer support program designed to meet those needs. School counselors:

- Have unique responsibilities when working with peer helper or student assistance programs and safeguard the welfare of students participating in peer-to-peer programs under their direction
- Are ultimately responsible for appropriate training and supervision for students serving as peer support individuals in their school counseling programs (ASCA, 2010) (Latham, 1997)
- Create a selection plan for peer helpers reflecting the diversity of the population to be served
- Develop a support system for the program that communicates the program's goals and purpose through positive public relations
- Monitors, evaluates and adjusts the program and training on a continual basis to meet the assessed needs of the school population the program serves
- Reports results to all school stakeholders (e.g., students, teachers, administrators, parents, community)

### **Summary**

School counselors are aware that students often communicate to peers more readily than adults. School counselors are aware of their unique responsibilities when peer support programs are implemented in addressing students' preferred communication and when working with peer support students and ensure these students are properly trained, supervised and supported in their role. School counselors are aware of and build upon the positive effects peer support programs have on students, the school climate and culture and the connectedness of the students involved.

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