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The School Counselor and Student Sexual Wellness

Formerly The School Counselor and Prevention of Sexually Transmitted Diseases
(Adopted 1988; revised 1993, 1999, 2001, 2006, 2012, 2018, 2024)

American School Counselor Association (ASCA) Position

School counselors promote the health and wellness of all pre-K–12 students through the advocacy and support of comprehensive, developmentally appropriate educational efforts related to sexual wellness. Using culturally competent best practices, school counselors collaborate with key school and community partners (e.g., health and physical education instructors, school nurses, community healthcare specialists) in these efforts, while recognizing the importance of student/family confidentiality. Because of the connection between student sexual wellness and social/emotional well-being, school counselors provide support, counseling and referral services to students and their families regarding all aspects of sexual wellness, including consent, disease prevention, contraception, sexual and gender diversity and interpersonal violence.

The Rationale

Sexual wellness is a holistic and positive approach to sexuality and sexual health that embraces the idea that sexuality is a fundamental part of human life. To address sexual wellness comprehensively, the physical, emotional, psychological and social aspects related to human development must be considered. In schools, comprehensive sexual education furthers this approach by maintaining open and healthy communication about sexuality in society, including raising awareness about issues related to consent, disease prevention, contraception, sexual and gender diversity, and interpersonal violence (Lara, 2023). School counselors recognize the “connection between comprehensive sex education and social/emotional learning (SEL), with empathy, respect for others and emotional regulation as key outcomes” (Joe, et al., 2023, p. 2).

Sexual wellness is a complex topic due to factors including state laws, school and district policies and procedures, political ideologies and individual opinions. However, due to the interconnectedness of SEL and comprehensive sexual education, school counselors act within their scope of practice by collaborating with key personnel and supporting advocacy efforts, prevention and interventions related to student sexual wellness. The ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counselors (2022) guide school counselor’s work in these areas by focusing on adherence to laws and school/district policies and procedures, confidentiality limits and the importance of collaborating with students, school faculty/staff and parents/guardians when students need assistance.

44 **The School Counselor's Role**

45 As part of a school counseling program, school counselors advocate for
46 developmentally appropriate educational efforts related to youth sexual wellness
47 including:

- 48 • consent
- 49 • disease prevention
- 50 • contraception
- 51 • sexual and gender diversity
- 52 • interpersonal violence

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54 School counselors collaborate with key education and community partners to
55 provide advocacy, prevention and intervention support related to sexual wellness
56 for students and families while complying with local, state and federal laws
57 (including HIPAA and FERPA); district policy; and the ASCA Ethical Standards for
58 School Counselors (2022). Through professional development, school counselors
59 strive to maintain a current understanding of evidence-based best practices and
60 recommendations and resources regarding sexual wellness. Additionally, to
61 ethically promote healthy living and positive decision-making, school counselors
62 have a responsibility to examine and address any implicit biases they may hold
63 regarding sexual wellness (ASCA, 2022).

64

65 **Advocating for Sexual Wellness**

66 As systemic change agents, school counselors possess the ability to examine and
67 navigate many systems within a school (Milner & Upton, 2016). Through this role,
68 school counselors collaborate with key school staff and community partners and
69 serve as a voice for developing positive sexual wellness policies. Advocacy efforts
70 may include:

- 71 • Advocating for more equitable school policies around sexual wellness,
72 especially when such district guidelines create barriers and marginalize
73 students
- 74 • Aiding in the identification and addition of appropriate and culturally
75 competent evidence-based sexual wellness curriculum
- 76 • Identifying supportive community resources and referrals for students and
77 families (Milner & Upton, 2016)

78

79 **Prevention**

80 School counselors provide preventive strategies to students through the direct
81 student services of instruction, appraisal and advisement, and the indirect student
82 services of collaborating and consulting with families to promote sexual wellness.
83 School counselors may advocate for a particular focus on prevention with
84 populations less likely to receive adequate sexual wellness education, such as males
85 (Donaldson et al., 2013), LGBTQ+ students (Gowen & Wings-Yanez, 2014) and
86 those residing in rural areas (Lindberg et al., 2016). Preventive education may
87 include:

- 88 • Collaborating with school health personnel on prevention measures to reduce
89 stigma and increase awareness of sexual wellness.

- Facilitating classroom lessons on healthy decision-making, self-esteem, positive interpersonal skills and peer relations, setting boundaries, and respect for self and body.
- Family engagement and parent/guardian education of sexual wellness and developmentally appropriate conversations with their children.

Intervention

In the event students disclose concerns relating to sexual wellness, school counselors are in a position to act as a liaison to provide support and intervention services. These interventions represent key opportunities that can help shape or influence students' health and behaviors by referring students to programs and services and engaging parent/guardian and community partners (Wilkins et al., 2022). Intervention support services may include:

- Providing short-term counseling to students and families to help navigate the social/emotional impact of topics such as teen pregnancy, teen dating violence and sexually transmitted infections on sexual wellness
- Serving as a liaison between the school and community health care partners to link students and families to further resources
- Collaborating with school and community health professionals on any potential accommodations a student may need to be academically successful

Summary

School counselors have a primary role in advocating for and enhancing students' social/emotional well-being, which includes their sexual well-being. School counselors collaborate with key school staff and community partners to support awareness in educational efforts related to sexual wellness, while providing resources, prevention and intervention support to students and families following federal, state and local laws, evidence-based best practices and current recommendations.

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Resources

Center for Disease Control and Prevention: Division of Adolescent and School Health (DASH) http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/about/hivstd_prevention.htm

Family Educational Rights & Privacy Act (FERPA): <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/reg/ferpa/index.html>

Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN): <https://www.glsen.org/article/call-action-youth-parents-community-members-educators-and-policymakers>

Guttmacher Institute State Laws and Policies: <https://www.guttmacher.org/state-policy/laws-policies>

Health Insurance Portability & Accountability Act (HIPAA) Privacy Rule: <http://www.hhs.gov/ocr/privacy/hipaa/administrative/privacyrule/index.html>

National Coalition of STD Directors Promoting Sex Healthy through STD Prevention Adolescent Sexual Health: <http://www.ncsddc.org/resources/>

Sexually Transmitted Diseases – Prevention <https://www.cdc.gov/std/prevention/default.htm>