The School Counselor and Prevention of School-Related Gun Violence
(Adopted 2018; revised 2019)

American School Counselor Association (ASCA) Position
School counselors collaborate with school staff and the community to ensure students attend schools where the environment is conducive to teaching and learning. To support the work of school counselors and school staff, schools and communities should be free from gun violence and threats. School counselors support safe schools and are responsive in crises as emphasized in the *Safe Schools and Crisis Response* (2019) position statement.

The Rationale
Gun violence is the leading cause of premature death in the United States. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2018) reported that an average of seven children and teens are killed with guns in the United States every day. The Interdisciplinary Group on Preventing School and Community Violence in a Call for Action to Prevent Gun Violence in the United States of America (2018) outlined three levels of prevention. Those recommendations related to school counseling include:
- **Level 1.** Universal approaches promoting safety and well-being, including requirement for all schools to assess school climate and maintain physically and emotionally safe conditions and positive school environments that protect all students and adults from bullying, discrimination, harassment, and assault (e.g., Donohue, Goodman-Scott, & Betters-Bubon, 2015).
- **Level 2.** Practices for reducing risk and promoting protective factors for persons experiencing difficulties, including adequate staffing of school counselors, psychologists, and social workers to provide coordinated school- and community-based mental health services for individuals with risk factors for violence, recognizing violence is not intrinsically a product of mental illness (e.g., Levine & Tamburrino, 2014); and reformation of school discipline policies to reduce exclusionary practices and foster positive social, behavioral, emotional and academic success for students (e.g., Goodman-Scott, Betters-Bubon & Donohue, 2015).
- **Level 3.** Interventions for individuals where violence is present or appears imminent, including training and maintaining school- and community-based threat assessment teams that include mental health and law enforcement partners with channels of communication for persons to report potential threats as well as interventions to resolve conflicts and assist troubled individuals (e.g., Helgeson & Schneider, 2015).

Research has shown that positive school climate is tied to high or improving attendance rates, test scores, promotion rates and graduation rates. Conversely, negative school climate can harm students and raise liability issues for schools and districts. Negative school climate is linked to lower student achievement and graduation rates, and it creates opportunities for violence, bullying and even suicide (NCSSL, 2018). Research on the increasing trend calling for armed school personnel has demonstrated that armed personnel may create a negative school climate (Rajan & Branas, 2018; Swartz, Osborne, Dawson-Edwards, & Higgins, 2016; Weiler & Armenta, 2014).

The School Counselor's Role
School counselors are educational leaders and advocates of safe-school initiatives and are a vital resource in the creation, development and implementation of best-practice strategies designed to improve school climate fostering engagement, support, and acceptance of all students (MacNeil, Prater & Busch, 2009). Consequently, school counselors should advocate for comprehensive school counseling programs fostering all students' social/emotional and academic well-being. According to Cowan, Vaillancourt, Rossen and Pollitt (2013), school counselors support a comprehensive approach to safe schools by:
- supporting proactive principal leadership
- allowing school leaders to deploy human and financial resources in a manner that best meets school and community needs
- providing a team-based framework to facilitate effective coordination of services and interventions
- balancing the needs for physical and psychological safety
- employing the necessary and appropriately trained school-employed mental health and safety personnel
- providing relevant and ongoing professional development for all staff
- integrating a continuum of mental health supports within a multitiered systems of support
- engaging families and community providers as meaningful partners
- remaining grounded in teaching and learning (the mission and purpose of schools)

ASCA joins more than 75 national education, medical, health, public health and research organizations in a call to action to address the epidemic of gun violence in our communities. All school counselors are encouraged to advocate for recommendations adopted by other national organizations representing education stakeholders and the safety of all students. Additionally, school counselors are encouraged to advocate for implementation of the following recommendations at the federal level rather than state-by-state in an effort to prevent interstate gun sales and transport:

- Support a ban on military-style weapons, high-capacity ammunition clips and products that modify semi-automatic firearms to enable them to function like automatic firearms
- Support closing loopholes for gun purchases at gun shows and online
- Support requirements for thorough background checks for all gun purchases and strengthen background check criteria to prevent purchases by high-risk individuals
- Oppose any efforts to arm educators (including teachers, school counselors and administrators)

Summary

Through the implementation of a comprehensive school counseling program, school counselors promote school safety through advocacy efforts. Advocating for schools that are free from gun violence and threats can assist school counselors in supporting safe schools.

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