

## **The School Counselor and Working with Students Experiencing Issues Surrounding Undocumented Status**

(Adopted 2017; revised 2019)

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

School counselors promote equal opportunity, a safe and nurturing environment and respect for all individuals regardless of citizenship status, including undocumented students and students with undocumented family members, understanding that this population faces a unique set of stressors. School counselors work to eliminate barriers that impede student development and achievement and are committed to the academic, career and social/emotional development of all students. “School counselors demonstrate their belief that all students have the ability to learn by advocating for an education system that provides optimal learning environments for all students” (ASCA, 2016, p. 1).

### **The Rationale**

The 1982 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Plyler v. Doe* (1982) prohibits states from denying undocumented children a public K–12 education. In ruling the court stated that to deny these students an education would create a “lifetime of hardship” for the student, and it would create a “permanent underclass” (Eusebio & Mendoza, 2015).

Educators are on the front lines of implementing Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). Because of their unique position within a school, school counselors are able to support undocumented students by assisting these students in gathering documentation for DACA requests, advising them on the many academic, career and social/emotional opportunities made possible by DACA (Avila & Zellner, 2015).

A school counseling program is an integral component of the school’s academic mission. Comprehensive school counseling programs, informed by student data and based on standards in academic, career and social/emotional development, promote and enhance the learning process for all students. The ASCA National Model ensures equitable access to a rigorous education for all students. Undocumented students and students with undocumented family members deserve the same services as all other students but face social, financial and legal barriers. These students need support to feel safe, in addition to needing assistance to find funding for any postsecondary educational goals, due to lack of Title IV federal financial aid that is not available to undocumented student in the form of grants, student loans or work-study.

Many students experience stressors due to:

- separation from family
- cultural differences
- language barriers and interpretation for families
- anxiety, fear, grief and loss regarding family members’ detention and deportation
- caretaker roles for family members
- concerns about their futures
- understanding how to navigate college access and availability to them
- marginalization due to mixed cultures
- PTSD due to traumatic immigration events
- re-traumatization

Connecting with a school counselor will alleviate many of these stressors and fears, especially when individual counseling addresses the students’ concerns. Having access to a qualified school counselor builds a support system needed at any age and will enable students to develop goals for their futures and feel safe and connected to their communities. School counselors recognize these stressors can be alleviated by intervention from a school counselor.

### **The School Counselor’s Role**

School counselors focus their skills, time and energy on direct and indirect services to all students, regardless of their citizenship, national origin, race, color, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status or any other demographics. School counselors participate as members of the educational team and use the skills of leadership, advocacy and collaboration to

promote systemic change as appropriate. Supporting all students with a variety of needs may include a diverse skill set, including knowledge about many legal factors affecting students.

“Undocumented youth, in particular, can experience high levels of acculturative stress from immigration-related issues such as separation from family and academic difficulties. The psychological costs of family separation, associated with the migration process and with U.S. immigration procedures such as detention and deportation, are well documented and, among children, may include symptoms of depression and anxiety” (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

The role of the school counselor includes:

- Advocating for the rights of all students, including undocumented students, by ensuring students are not barred from education based on foreign birth certificates, lack of a Social Security number or a home language other than English
- Working with other district personnel so any information collected is uniformly applied to all students and not used to discriminate or bar certain students’ access to education
- Supporting undocumented students by helping them gain access to an equitable education that meets their needs and prepares them for postsecondary access, if necessary (e.g., referrals for ELL services, special education services and medical treatment)
- Working with school and district personnel to promote awareness and to educate school counselors and school and district personnel, students, parents and the community on policy, procedures and rights of the students and their families and to eliminate discriminatory language and actions regarding these students and their families
- Supporting the family with information about educational access and rights
- Assisting students with seeking postsecondary goals, navigating college access and finding funding for their goals
- Working with community partners and leveraging resources to provide support in keeping families intact, if possible, while supporting students who are separated from a parent due to deportation
- Ensuring schools are a safe haven for undocumented students and will not divulge confidential information to any outside agencies without proper legal documentation
- Providing counseling intervention and social/emotional support for students affected by immigration stressors, including assessment of possible trauma that they may have experienced
- Keeping abreast of current policies and practices of postsecondary institutions regarding access for undocumented students
- Advocating against the practice of separating children from their families at U.S. borders (ASCA, 2018)
- Maintaining a database of community resources to support referrals in assisting families with various challenges related to issues surrounding undocumented status, including recovery associated with trauma resulting from separation

### Summary

School counselors understand undocumented students face additional legal, financial and social stressors and need additional support with these barriers as well as assistance with postsecondary goals. School counselors have a responsibility to provide services to all students regardless of their citizenship status, to advocate for their access to services and to prevent discrimination against students by removing barriers impeding student development and achievement.

### References

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**Resources**

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