The School Counselor and Student Sexual Wellness
Formerly The School Counselor and Prevention of Sexually Transmitted Diseases

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.
The School Counselor’s Role

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

- consent
- disease prevention
- contraception
- sexual and gender diversity
- interpersonal violence

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

Advocating for Sexual Wellness

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

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

Prevention

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

- Collaborating with school health personnel on prevention measures to reduce 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.

**References**


**Resources**

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


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


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