



Identification and Treatment of Students with Mental Health Issues

Student Assistance Teams

Research indicates that between 14-20% of children and adolescents experience a mental, emotional, or behavioral disorder each year (National Academy of Sciences, 2009). Despite this need for care, a majority of these children do not receive treatment, and without treatment may experience serious outcomes such as substance use, risky behaviors, violence and mental health difficulties. Research also tells us that the most effective interventions are those that target the ecology or natural environments of the child, and are well-integrated into the learning environment (Rones & Hoagwood, 2000).

Mental health services in schools can provide a comprehensive approach in helping children and families in crisis by addressing emotional, behavioral and developmental needs. In addition, school mental health policies and programs can benefit all youth as they promote social, emotional and behavioral health, build positive school climate, and work to prevent school violence.

Therefore, our associations strongly support the consideration of establishing Student Assistance Teams funded by a continuing grant from the State.

While the composition of a Student Assistance Teams should be determined individually for each school, a team is typically comprised of administrators, deans of students, teachers, guidance counselors, school psychologists, social workers, nurses and/or other staff. The team coordinates a defined intervention program available to all students and families. The team accepts referrals from the school community and parents about students who are exhibiting behaviors that are interfering with their education or detrimental to the well-being of themselves or others. These behaviors may stem from academic, behavioral, social or emotional difficulties; mental health issues, and alcohol or other drug involvement.

Upon receiving a referral, the team typically gathers information and develops a plan involving the student and family, and, as appropriate, other important people in the student's life who can provide support. The plan identifies the student's strengths and offers strategies that build on these strengths to help get him or her back on track. The plan may include referrals to appropriate resources outside of the school environment.

Many Student Assistance Teams' models include a training component and numerous documents supporting the team processes. Staff candidates complete the training prior to their service on the school team; school staff members participate in regular orientations regarding the referral process and the significance of the intervention plans

Central to the success of a school's attempt to identify and support students with behavioral issues is the consideration of the positions of a Dean of Students and a School Resource Officer (SRO).

Dean of Students Position

The position of Dean of Students, which exists in some Connecticut schools already, can address a number of significant needs for schools. Typically, a Dean of Students plays an administrative role, overseeing the general "student life" in the school. They are generally charged with student attendance and behavioral management, oversight of school activities, and providing valuable input at a range of meetings involving individual student situations.

Because the Dean of Students has a strong presence among the students, he/she can offer important insight at a range of meetings regarding a student's relationships with peers, behavior and specific events. Additionally, he/she supports the teaching staff by developing classroom management programs, identifying students with attendance issues or disciplinary problems and addressing those issues with parents to create a positive outcome. Without a Dean of Students, school principals and assistant principals must handle all details of student life, from small scale attendance and behavioral issues to large scale crisis. This affords principals and assistant principals very little time to serve as instructional leaders and evaluators of staff- two responsibilities which, next to student safety, are arguably the most important for school leaders.

School Resource Officers (SROs)

SROs are law enforcement professionals trained to educate, counsel and protect our school communities. They are not merely armed guards, or regular officers or state troopers. They have completed a specific training program that prepares them to operate within the context of a school environment. The majority of their duties as SROs involve providing an active and engaging presence in many areas of school life, including but not limited to, instructional settings, hallway and cafeteria activities, and co-curricular events. SROs serve as friends, advisers, and even guest educators.

SRO programs are collaborative efforts between law enforcement agencies, schools, students, parents and communities at large. They have become an integral component of our collective duty to protect children on our school campuses. Since the inception of SRO programs nationwide, school associated deaths, victimizations, theft, and crime are down, and juvenile arrests on school campuses have decreased 50%.

Typically SROs operate under memorandums of understanding with school districts. Consequently, they perform law enforcement duties only in collaboration with school officials unless a significant emergency situation arises.

SROs' law enforcement knowledge and skills combined with specific training about culture, programs and issues in the educational setting gives them a unique ability to protect the campus and community while supporting the mission of a school. Unfortunately, despite the presence of successful SRO programs in Connecticut's schools, the overall number of programs is woefully few due to fiscal constraints, and existing programs are under constant threat of elimination should funding be discontinued.

Critical Considerations

Student Assistance Teams can be an effective tool for the identification and treatment of people with behavioral issues. For the teams to be effective however, the following must be in place:

- A collective will among school and community members to support intervention efforts that keep our kids safe, and afford them the best supports for their learning and growth.
- A substantial and continuing financial commitment from the State.
- Serious consideration of the societal issues surrounding the requirement of treatment for people with behavioral issues.