

Ethical Standards for School Counselors

ASCA's Ethical Standards for School Counselors were adopted by the ASCA Delegate Assembly, March 19, 1984, revised March 27, 1992, June 25, 1998 and June 26, 2004.

(Note: The comments marked “Bottom Line” are not part of the official ethical standards. They are summaries put together by past EDC 8014 students to make the document easier to break down into digestible sections.)

Preamble

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) is a professional organization whose members are certified/licensed in school counseling with unique qualifications and skills to address the academic, personal/social and career development needs of all students. Professional school counselors are advocates, leaders, collaborators and consultants who create opportunities for equity in access and success in educational opportunities by connecting their programs to the mission of schools and subscribing to the following tenets of professional responsibility:

- Each person has the right to be respected, be treated with dignity and have access to a comprehensive school counseling program that advocates for and affirms all students from diverse populations regardless of ethnic/racial status, age, economic status, special needs, English as a second language or other language group, immigration status, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity/expression, family type, religious/spiritual identity and appearance.

Bottom Line: ALL students have the right to respect, dignity, and a school counseling program that accounts for diverse needs.

- Each person has the right to receive the information and support needed to move toward self-direction and self-development and affirmation within one’s group identities, with special care being given to students who have historically not received adequate educational services: students of color, low socio-economic students, students with disabilities and students with non-dominant language backgrounds.

Bottom Line: Students who have historically been discriminated against have the right to special care and affirmation, but not “preferential treatment.”

- Each person has the right to understand the full magnitude and meaning of his/her educational choices and how those choices will affect future opportunities.

Bottom Line: Be sure to let students know about ALL of their educational choices, not just the most popular, seemingly obvious, or politically correct choices.

- Each person has the right to privacy and thereby the right to expect the counselor-student relationship to comply with all laws, policies and ethical standards pertaining to confidentiality in the school setting.

Bottom Line: Students have a right to privacy – know laws and policies.

In this document, ASCA specifies the principles of ethical behavior necessary to maintain the high standards

of integrity, leadership and professionalism among its members. The Ethical Standards for School Counselors were developed to clarify the nature of ethical responsibilities held in common by school counseling professionals. The purposes of this document are to:

- Serve as a guide for the ethical practices of all professional school counselors regardless of level, area, population served or membership in this professional association;
- Provide self-appraisal and peer evaluations regarding counselor responsibilities to students, parents/guardians, colleagues and professional associates, schools, communities and the counseling profession; and
- Inform those served by the school counselor of acceptable counselor practices and expected professional behavior.

A.1. Responsibilities to Students

The professional school counselor:

- a. Has a primary obligation to the student, who is to be treated with respect as a unique individual.

Bottom Line: Students and student needs always come first.

- b. Is concerned with the educational, academic, career, personal and social needs and encourages the maximum development of every student.

- c. Respects the student's values and beliefs and does not impose the counselor's personal values.

Bottom Line: Don't impose your personal values.

- d. Is knowledgeable of laws, regulations and policies relating to students and strives to protect and inform students regarding their rights.

Bottom Line: Know the laws and inform students of their rights.

A.2. Confidentiality

The professional school counselor:

- a. Informs students of the purposes, goals, techniques and rules of procedure under which they may receive counseling at or before the time when the counseling relationship is entered. Disclosure notice includes the limits of confidentiality such as the possible necessity for consulting with other professionals, privileged communication, and legal or authoritative restraints. The meaning and limits of confidentiality are defined in developmentally appropriate terms to students.

Bottom Line: Let students know confidentiality policies up front.

- b. Keeps information confidential unless disclosure is required to prevent clear and imminent danger to the student or others or when legal requirements demand that confidential information be revealed. Counselors will consult with appropriate professionals when in doubt as to the validity of an exception.

Bottom Line: Keep confidentiality according to laws unless there's imminent danger to self or others.

c. In absence of state legislation expressly forbidding disclosure, considers the ethical responsibility to provide information to an identified third party who, by his/her relationship with the student, is at a high risk of contracting a disease that is commonly known to be communicable and fatal. Disclosure requires satisfaction of all of the following conditions:

- Student identifies partner or the partner is highly identifiable
- Counselor recommends the student notify partner and refrain from further high-risk behavior
- Student refuses
- Counselor informs the student of the intent to notify the partner
- Counselor seeks legal consultation as to the legalities of informing the partner

Bottom Line: Inform those who may be at risk of AIDS or other potentially fatal diseases.

d. Requests of the court that disclosure not be required when the release of confidential information may potentially harm a student or the counseling relationship.

Bottom Line: Attempt to protect confidentiality, even in court.

e. Protects the confidentiality of students' records and releases personal data in accordance with prescribed laws and school policies. Student information stored and transmitted electronically is treated with the same care as traditional student records.

Bottom Line: Follow school policy about confidentiality of student records, on paper and computer.

f. Protects the confidentiality of information received in the counseling relationship as specified by federal and state laws, written policies and applicable ethical standards. Such information is only to be revealed to others with the informed consent of the student, consistent with the counselor's ethical obligation.

Bottom Line: Follow laws, policies, and ethical standards.

g. Recognizes his/her primary obligation for confidentiality is to the student but balances that obligation with an understanding of the legal and inherent rights of parents/guardians to be the guiding voice in their children's lives.

Bottom Line: Students come first, but consider parents too.

A.3. Counseling Plans

The professional school counselor:

a. Provides students with a comprehensive school counseling program that includes a strong emphasis on working jointly with all students to develop academic and career goals.

Bottom Line: Focus on academic and career goals.

b. Advocates for counseling plans supporting students right to choose from the wide array of options when they leave secondary education. Such plans will be regularly reviewed to update students regarding critical information they need to make informed decisions.

Bottom Line: Stay updated, and support students' right to choose.

A.4. Dual Relationships

The professional school counselor:

a. Avoids dual relationships that might impair his/her objectivity and increase the risk of harm to the student (e.g., counseling one's family members, close friends or associates). If a dual relationship is unavoidable, the counselor is responsible for taking action to eliminate or reduce the potential for harm. Such safeguards might include informed consent, consultation, supervision and documentation.

Bottom Line: Avoid dual relationships whenever possible.

b. Avoids dual relationships with school personnel that might infringe on the integrity of the counselor/student relationship

Bottom Line: Stay professional with colleagues and students.

A.5. Appropriate Referrals

The professional school counselor:

a. Makes referrals when necessary or appropriate to outside resources. Appropriate referrals may necessitate informing both parents/guardians and students of applicable resources and making proper plans for transitions with minimal interruption of services. Students retain the right to discontinue the counseling relationship at any time.

Bottom Line: Know when and where to refer.

A.6. Group Work

The professional school counselor:

a. Screens prospective group members and maintains an awareness of participants' needs and goals in relation to the goals of the group. The counselor takes reasonable precautions to protect members from physical and psychological harm resulting from interaction within the group.

Bottom Line: Facilitate groups safely and professionally.

b. Notifies parents/guardians and staff of group participation if the counselor deems it appropriate and if consistent with school board policy or practice.

Bottom Line: Notify parents and teachers about group participation. (Get parent permission!)

c. Establishes clear expectations in the group setting and clearly states that confidentiality in group counseling cannot be guaranteed. Given the developmental and chronological ages of minors in schools, the counselor recognizes the tenuous nature of confidentiality for minors renders some topics inappropriate for group work in a school setting.

Bottom Line: Clarify expectations and confidentiality guidelines in groups.

d. Follows up with group members and documents proceedings as appropriate.

Bottom Line: Follow up and document.

A.7. Danger to Self or Others

The professional school counselor:

a. Informs parents/guardians or appropriate authorities when the student's condition indicates a clear and imminent danger to the student or others. This is to be done after careful deliberation and, where possible, after consultation with other counseling professionals.

Bottom Line: Clear and imminent danger = report.

b. Will attempt to minimize threat to a student and may choose to 1) inform the student of actions to be taken, 2) involve the student in a three-way communication with parents/guardians when breaching confidentiality or 3) allow the student to have input as to how and to whom the breach will be made.

Bottom Line: Let students know before you call home, and include them whenever possible.

A.8. Student Records

The professional school counselor:

a. Maintains and secures records necessary for rendering professional services to the student as required by laws, regulations, institutional procedures and confidentiality guidelines.

Bottom Line: Document appropriately and lock your files.

b. Keeps sole-possession records separate from students' educational records in keeping with state laws.

Bottom Line: Keep your records separate.

c. Recognizes the limits of sole-possession records and understands these records are a memory aid for the creator and in absence of privilege communication may be subpoenaed and may become educational records when they 1) are shared with others in verbal or written form, 2) include information other than professional opinion or personal observations and/or 3) are made accessible to others.

Bottom Line: Don't share your notes.

d. Establishes a reasonable timeline for purging sole-possession records or case notes. Suggested guidelines include shredding sole possession records when the student transitions to the next level, transfers to another school or graduates. Careful discretion and deliberation should be applied before destroying sole-possession records that may be needed by a court of law such as notes on child abuse, suicide, sexual harassment or violence.

Bottom Line: Purge records when appropriate, but keep the controversial ones.

A.9. Evaluation, Assessment and Interpretation

The professional school counselor:

a. Adheres to all professional standards regarding selecting, administering and interpreting assessment measures and only utilizes assessment measures that are within the scope of practice for school counselors.

Bottom Line: Use valid and relevant assessments.

b. Seeks specialized training regarding the use of electronically based testing programs in administering, scoring and interpreting that may differ from that required in more traditional assessments.

Bottom Line: Get appropriate training regarding assessments.

c. Considers confidentiality issues when utilizing evaluative or assessment instruments and electronically based programs.

Bottom Line: Keep testing information confidential.

d. Provides interpretation of the nature, purposes, results and potential impact of assessment/evaluation measures in language the student(s) can understand.

Bottom Line: Use kid-friendly language.

e. Monitors the use of assessment results and interpretations, and takes reasonable steps to prevent others from misusing the information.

Bottom Line: Monitor and don't misuse test scores.

f. Uses caution when utilizing assessment techniques, making evaluations and interpreting the performance of populations not represented in the norm group on which an instrument is standardized.

Bottom Line: Be aware of test bias.

g. Assesses the effectiveness of his/her program in having an impact on students' academic, career and personal/social development through accountability measures especially examining efforts to close achievement, opportunity and attainment gaps.

Bottom Line: Try to close the educational gaps.

A.10. Technology

The professional school counselor:

a. Promotes the benefits of and clarifies the limitations of various appropriate technological applications. The counselor promotes technological applications (1) that are appropriate for the student's individual needs, (2) that the student understands how to use and (3) for which follow-up counseling assistance is provided.

Bottom Line: Use technology appropriately and wisely.

b. Advocates for equal access to technology for all students, especially those historically underserved.

Bottom Line: Equal technology access for all.

c. Takes appropriate and reasonable measures for maintaining confidentiality of student information and educational records stored or transmitted over electronic media including although not limited to fax, electronic mail and instant messaging.

Bottom Line: Keep e-mails and faxes confidential.

d. While working with students on a computer or similar technology, takes reasonable and appropriate measures to protect students from objectionable and/or harmful online material.

Bottom Line: Protect students from harm online.

e. Who is engaged in the delivery of services involving technologies such as the telephone, videoconferencing and the Internet takes responsible steps to protect students and others from harm.

Bottom Line: Protect students from all technology-related harm.

A.11. Student Peer Support Program

The professional school counselor:

Has unique responsibilities when working with student-assistance programs. The school counselor is responsible for the welfare of students participating in peer-to-peer programs under his/her direction.

Bottom Line: You are ultimately responsible for peer-to-peer programs.

B. Responsibilities to Parents/Guardians

B.1. Parent Rights and Responsibilities

The professional school counselor:

a. Respects the rights and responsibilities of parents/guardians for their children and endeavors to establish, as appropriate, a collaborative relationship with parents/guardians to facilitate the student's maximum development.

Bottom Line: Collaborate with parents whenever possible.

b. Adheres to laws, local guidelines and ethical standards of practice when assisting parents/guardians experiencing family difficulties that interfere with the student's effectiveness and welfare.

Bottom Line: Know and stick to ethical practices when dealing with parents.

c. Respects the confidentiality of parents/guardians.

d. Is sensitive to diversity among families and recognizes that all parents/guardians, custodial and noncustodial, are vested with certain rights and responsibilities for the welfare of their children by virtue of their role and according to law.

Bottom Line: Honor the rights of all parents and guardians.

B.2. Parents/Guardians and Confidentiality

The professional school counselor:

a. Informs parents/guardians of the counselor's role with emphasis on the confidential nature of the counseling relationship between the counselor and student.

Bottom Line: Inform parents of confidentiality up front.

b. Recognizes that working with minors in a school setting may require counselors to collaborate with students' parents/guardians.

Bottom Line: Don't ignore or exclude parents.

c. Provides parents/guardians with accurate, comprehensive and relevant information in an objective and caring manner, as is appropriate and consistent with ethical responsibilities to the student.

Bottom Line: Provide information to parents when appropriate.

d. Makes reasonable efforts to honor the wishes of parents/guardians concerning information regarding the student, and in cases of divorce or separation exercises a good-faith effort to keep both parents informed with regard to critical information with the exception of a court order.

Bottom Line: Honor parent wishes when you can. Don't take sides in divorce/custody cases.

C. Responsibilities to Colleagues and Professional Associates

C.1. Professional Relationships

The professional school counselor:

a. Establishes and maintains professional relationships with faculty, staff and administration to facilitate an optimum counseling program.

Bottom Line: Build rapport with your colleagues and staff.

b. Treats colleagues with professional respect, courtesy and fairness. The qualifications, views and findings of colleagues are represented to accurately reflect the image of competent professionals.

Bottom Line: Treat colleagues with professional respect.

c. Is aware of and utilizes related professionals, organizations and other resources to whom the student may be referred.

Bottom Line: Stay aware of resources and referrals.

C.2. Sharing Information with Other Professionals

The professional school counselor:

a. Promotes awareness and adherence to appropriate guidelines regarding confidentiality, the distinction between public and private information and staff consultation.

Bottom Line: Maintain confidentiality with colleagues. Don't gossip about students!

b. Provides professional personnel with accurate, objective, concise and meaningful data necessary to adequately evaluate, counsel and assist the student.

Bottom Line: Share information that can help the student.

c. If a student is receiving services from another counselor or other mental health professional, the counselor, with student and/or parent/guardian consent, will inform the other professional and develop clear agreements to avoid confusion and conflict for the student.

Bottom Line: Get permission and contact a student's outside counselor.

d. Is knowledgeable about release of information and parental rights in sharing information.

Bottom Line: Know what you can and can't share.

D. Responsibilities to the School and Community

D.1. Responsibilities to the School

The professional school counselor:

a. Supports and protects the educational program against any infringement not in students' best interest.

Bottom Line: Look out for students' best interests.

b. Informs appropriate officials in accordance with school policy of conditions that may be potentially disruptive or damaging to the school's mission, personnel and property while honoring the confidentiality between the student and counselor.

Bottom Line: Tell administration about potential threats.

c. Is knowledgeable and supportive of the school's mission and connects his/her program to the school's mission.

Bottom Line: Know and support your school's mission.

d. Delineates and promotes the counselor's role and function in meeting the needs of those served. Counselors will notify appropriate officials of conditions that may limit or curtail their effectiveness in providing programs and services.

Bottom Line: Promote your program and let administrators know what is and isn't working.

e. Accepts employment only for positions for which he/she is qualified by education, training, supervised experience, state and national professional credentials and appropriate professional experience.

Bottom Line: Only accept a job you're qualified for.

f. Advocates that administrators hire only qualified and competent individuals for professional counseling positions.

Bottom Line: Advocate for ethical hiring.

g. Assists in developing: (1) curricular and environmental conditions appropriate for the school and community, (2) educational procedures and programs to meet students' developmental needs and (3) a systematic evaluation process for comprehensive, developmental, standards-based school counseling programs, services and personnel. The counselor is guided by the findings of the evaluation data in planning programs and services.

Bottom Line: Develop good curriculum, programs, and evaluation processes, and use them.

D.2. Responsibility to the Community

The professional school counselor:

a. Collaborates with agencies, organizations and individuals in the community in the best interest of students and without regard to personal reward or remuneration.

Bottom Line: Collaborate with community members as part of your job, not for additional gain.

b. Extends his/her influence and opportunity to deliver a comprehensive school counseling program to all students by collaborating with community resources for student success.

Bottom Line: Connect with community resources.

E. Responsibilities to Self

E.1. Professional Competence

The professional school counselor:

a. Functions within the boundaries of individual professional competence and accepts responsibility for the consequences of his/her actions.

Bottom Line: Honor professional boundaries and take responsibility for your actions.

b. Monitors personal well-being and effectiveness and does not participate in any activity that may lead to inadequate professional services or harm to a student.

Bottom Line: Do self-care, and do no harm.

c. Strives through personal initiative to maintain professional competence including technological literacy and to keep abreast of professional information. Professional and personal growth are ongoing throughout the counselor's career.

Bottom Line: Maintain ongoing personal and professional growth.

E.2. Diversity

The professional school counselor:

a. Affirms the diversity of students, staff and families.

Bottom Line: Affirm diversity.

b. Expands and develops awareness of his/her own attitudes and beliefs affecting cultural values and biases and strives to attain cultural competence.

Bottom Line: Become culturally aware and competent.

c. Possesses knowledge and understanding about how oppression, racism, discrimination and stereotyping affects her/him personally and professionally.

Bottom Line: Understand how diversity impacts you personally and professionally.

d. Acquires educational, consultation and training experiences to improve awareness, knowledge, skills and effectiveness in working with diverse populations: ethnic/racial status, age, economic status, special needs, ESL or ELL, immigration status, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity/expression, family type, religious/spiritual identity and appearance.

Bottom Line: Learn more about a wide spectrum of diversity issues.

F. Responsibilities to the Profession

F.1. Professionalism

The professional school counselor:

a. Accepts the policies and procedures for handling ethical violations as a result of maintaining membership in the American School Counselor Association.

Bottom Line: Accept policies if you want to be a school counselor.

b. Conducts herself/himself in such a manner as to advance individual ethical practice and the profession.

Bottom Line: Behave ethically and professionally.

c. Conducts appropriate research and report findings in a manner consistent with acceptable educational and psychological research practices. The counselor advocates for the protection of the individual student's identity when using data for research or program planning.

Bottom Line: Protect student privacy when doing research.

d. Adheres to ethical standards of the profession, other official policy statements, such as ASCA's position statements, role statement and the ASCA National Model, and relevant statutes established by federal, state and local governments, and when these are in conflict works responsibly for change.

Bottom Line: Adhere to ethical standards and work responsibly for change.

e. Clearly distinguishes between statements and actions made as a private individual and those made as a representative of the school counseling profession.

Bottom Line: Be clear about your personal vs. professional actions.

f. Does not use his/her professional position to recruit or gain clients, consultees for his/her private practice or to seek and receive unjustified personal gains, unfair advantage, inappropriate relationships or unearned goods or services.

Bottom Line: Don't double dip – it's a conflict of interest.

F.2. Contribution to the Profession

The professional school counselor:

a. Actively participates in local, state and national associations fostering the development and improvement of school counseling.

b. Contributes to the development of the profession through the sharing of skills, ideas and expertise with colleagues.

c. Provides support and mentoring to novice professionals.

*Bottom Line for a, b, and c: **Stay current and be a good role model.***

G. Maintenance of Standards

Ethical behavior among professional school counselors, association members and nonmembers, is expected at all times. When there exists serious doubt as to the ethical behavior of colleagues or if counselors are forced to work in situations or abide by policies that do not reflect the standards as outlined in these Ethical Standards for School Counselors, the counselor is obligated to take appropriate action to rectify the condition. The following procedure may serve as a guide:

*Bottom Line: **Take action if you see an ethical problem.***

1. The counselor should consult confidentially with a professional colleague to discuss the nature of a complaint to see if the professional colleague views the situation as an ethical violation.

*Bottom Line: **Consult first when you see a problem.***

2. When feasible, the counselor should directly approach the colleague whose behavior is in question to discuss the complaint and seek resolution.

*Bottom Line: **Directly approach the colleague if you have an ethical concern.***

3. If resolution is not forthcoming at the personal level, the counselor shall utilize the channels established within the school, school district, the state school counseling association and ASCA's Ethics Committee.

*Bottom Line: **Use appropriate channels if the direct approach doesn't work.***

4. If the matter still remains unresolved, referral for review and appropriate action should be made to the Ethics Committees in the following sequence:

- state school counselor association
- American School Counselor Association

*Bottom Line: **As a last resort, contact the state or ASCA.***

5. The ASCA Ethics Committee is responsible for:

- educating and consulting with the membership regarding ethical standards
- periodically reviewing and recommending changes in code
- receiving and processing questions to clarify the application of such standards; Questions must be submitted in writing to the ASCA Ethics chair.
- handling complaints of alleged violations of the ethical standards. At the national level, complaints should be submitted in writing to the ASCA Ethics Committee, c/o the Executive Director, American School Counselor Association, 1101 King St., Suite 625, Alexandria, VA 22314.