Chapter 12
Exploring the Role of School Counselors in Preventing and Addressing Educator Sexual Misconduct in K–12 School Systems

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ABSTRACT

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model for School Counseling highlights the role of professional school counselors in supporting the academic, personal social and career development of students. The ASCA Model further emphasizes the role of school counselors as leaders, advocates, consultants and collaborators for student development. The 2010 Ethical Standards for School Counselors further highlights students' rights to be treated with respect and dignity as well as their entitlement to a safe school environment that is free from abuse. This chapter explores the role of school counselors in working collaboratively to prevent and address sexual misconduct in schools. The author takes the position that the existence of sexual misconduct in any form hinders student development and directly undermines the efforts of educators to support their growth. The chapter emphasizes the importance collaboration, collective responsibility and the adoption of policies that effectively prevent and address sexual misconduct in schools.

INTRODUCTION

The protection of children from sexual abuse in the context of home, school and community is a significant social concern. The negative social, emotional and psychological impact of sexual misconduct necessitates preventing and addressing such acts against children (Barrett et al, 2011). The focus on educator sexual misconduct brings to focus the school environment as an area of scrutiny. Students spend several hours
at school and this raises the possibility of them being exposed to physical, verbal and sexual abuse from adults as well their peers. The term educator sexual misconduct, which is used throughout this chapter was first coined by Charol Shakeshaft (2013) in her efforts to describe, “...a range of inappropriate to criminal sexual behaviors and includes verbal, visual and physical misconduct” (p.10). Shakeshaft was careful to emphasize the unacceptability of all behaviors described as sexual misconduct and highlighted the critical importance of appropriate policies and procedures to prevent and address all incidents or potential incidents. The emphasis on the development and implementation of appropriate policies and procedures is consistent with a proactive and systemic approach to the problem of sexual misconduct.

This chapter explores the role of school counselors in addressing the issue of sexual misconduct in K-12 school settings. The unique role of school counselors within school systems as well as the nature of the school counseling profession will be examined in terms of their implications for sexual misconduct. This focus does not undermine the critical importance of collaboration and collective responsibility on the path of all educators in preventing and addressing sexual misconduct. The role of the school counselor is being explored given their unique position within school systems. The school counselor is uniquely placed within school systems to work collaboratively with key stakeholders for the protection of children (ASCA, 2015).

Definitions of sexual misconduct point to the potential of all school personnel, including school counselors, being potential offenders. While the overwhelming focus of this chapter will be on the school counselor’s role in preventing and addressing issues of sexual misconduct, a truly preventative and systemic focus require some attention to the counselor’s potential for engaging in behaviors that constitute sexual misconduct. Important background information related to the nature of sexual abuse in the wider society and specifically in the context of schools will be explored. Understanding the nature of sexual abuse of children in all social contexts will be critical to providing appropriate services and working as advocates for children (ASCA, 2015; Barrett et al, 2011).

The School Counseling Profession

An exploration of the role of school counselors in preventing and addressing educators’ sexual misconduct requires some reflection on important developments and challenges associated with the profession itself. The school counseling profession continues to change and evolve. One of the challenges involved with the school counseling profession is the lack of uniformity in what school counselors do (Lambie & Williamson, 2004; Myers et al, 2002). One school counseling practice may differ from another based on the state, school district or the specific dictates of a school principal. What a school counselor does may be determined by what a principal directs him or her to do. With this in mind any consideration of the roles and responsibility of school counselors on the issue of educators’ sexual misconduct should consider challenges associated with the profession.

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) Model for School Counseling Profession can be seen as an effort to bring uniformity and consistency to the work of school counselors. The ASCA Model serves as a guide to school counseling programs for developing comprehensive school counseling programs to address the academic, personal social and career development of students. Additionally, the 2010 Ethical Standards for School Counselors provided important guidelines regarding the roles and responsibilities of school counselors to students, family and educators within school systems. The school counseling profession is now characterized by a systemic, programmatic and comprehensive approach to student academic, personal social and career development. This approach also takes into consideration