

February 18, 2018

In the aftermath of the recent school shooting in Parkland, Florida, we are compelled to inform the public about Pennsylvania's Student Assistance Program (SAP), which was first developed in Pennsylvania in 1984-85.

SAP is a mandated kindergarten-grade 12 program for all Pennsylvania schools as per Act 211 of 1990 and Chapter 12 of the Pennsylvania School Code.

Oversight of SAP in Pennsylvania is provided by the PA Network for Student Assistance Services (PNSAS) Interagency and Regional Coordinators' team; comprised of representation from the PA Departments of Education (Safe Schools Office), Drug and Alcohol Programs (Division of Prevention and Intervention) and Human Services (Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services).

The Pennsylvania Student Assistance Program (SAP) is a systematic team process used to mobilize school resources to remove barriers to learning. SAP is designed to assist school personnel in identifying issues including the use of alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs, mental health related concerns, or other issues that pose a barrier to a student's learning and/or school and life success. The behaviors that might indicate a problem are often seen in school and they may not mimic behaviors seen outside the school. The primary goal of SAP is to help students overcome these barriers in order that they may achieve, remain in school, and advance.

While Student Assistance Programs exist in other areas of the country, the structure and operation of the program in Pennsylvania is a unique and integrated model serving the needs of Pennsylvania families and students.

SAP team members are trained to identify concerns, gather data, and make recommendations to assist the student and the parent(s). It is a support program, not disciplinary or punitive. The core of the program is a professionally-trained team. Team members include school administrators, school staff, and liaisons from community agencies.

When the problem lies beyond the scope of the school, the SAP team will assist the parent(s) and student so they may access services within the community. The Student Assistance Program team members do not diagnose, treat, or refer to treatment; but they may refer a student to a liaison who may screen or assess for further community based services and support.

The importance of this established school-wide team approach to identifying at-risk behaviors cannot be emphasized enough. It is imperative that school boards and administration assure implementation of the SAP team process with fidelity to include regular education of all staff and students related to the program, importance of making appropriate and timely referrals, sufficient time for team planning, and encouraging planning for prevention, intervention, and follow-up to assist in the activation of these needed supports. SAP should be the gatekeeper for students dealing with at-risk issues impacting school performance/success.

The ultimate goal of the SAP team is to reduce the possibility of a student falling between the cracks and potentially causing harm to self or others.

SAP is voluntary and, in accordance with laws of confidentiality, requires written permission to participate. Involvement of parents in all phases of the Student Assistance Program underscores the parents' role and responsibility in the decision-making process affecting their child's education and is key to the successful intervention and possible resolution of concerns.

A Student Assistance Program (SAP) can be a significant resource for parents and students and, when properly implemented, could possibly save the life of a troubled student and others.

We encourage you to contact your local school administrators to learn more about their SAP Program.

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