An Ethics Quiz for School Counselors

All practicing counselors, including those in schools, are encouraged to review the contents of the professional codes of ethics that apply to them and to consult ethical standards documents when ethical dilemmas arise (Corey, Corey, & Callanan, 1998; Cottone & Tarvydas, 1998; Gladding, Remley, & Huber, 2001; Herlihy & Corey, 1996; Huey & Remley, 1988; Madden, 1998; Remley & Herlihy, 2001). School counselors who know their codes of ethics are in a much better position to conduct themselves in an ethical manner.

The language in codes of ethics is aspirational in nature and quite often is broad in order to cover many possible situations. However, the words, phrases, and sentences in ethical standards documents can be helpful to counselors and are an excellent beginning point of reference when a school counselor is trying to decide a course of action in a difficult situation. The law of malpractice requires a school counselor to act as a reasonable counselor would in a similar situation (Remley & Herlihy, 2001). Legal standards represent the minimum behavior society will tolerate of a professional. On the other hand, best practice in school counseling would include a purposeful adherence to professional ethical standards. As a result, school counselors who practice ethically seldom lose a counseling malpractice law suit and are able to defend any of their actions that might be questioned.

School counselors could possibly have a number of ethics documents with which they have agreed to comply. For example, a school counselor who is a member of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) and the American Counseling Association (ACA), who is certified by the National Board of Certified Counselors (NBCC), and who is licensed by his or her state counseling licensure board has agreed to abide by four separate sets of ethical standards. Fortunately there are few conflicts among the many codes of ethics that have been promulgated by counseling groups, and most codes cover the same basic, counseling-related issues. However, there are some variations in
the different counseling ethical standards documents as the quiz in this article demonstrates.

It is impossible to review all codes of ethics to which school counselors might subscribe. As a result, we have chosen to apply the Ethical Standards of School Counselors (American School Counselor Association, 1998) and the Code of Ethics (American Counseling Association, 1995) to situations often faced by school counselors. The ACA code was created to cover counseling that takes place in all settings. Therefore, the ACA standards do not address in a detailed manner some of the issues important to school counselors such as counseling minors; consulting with parents, guardians, teachers, and administrators; and working within a school environment. The ASCA standards were developed by school counselors for school counselors to help them address issues that may be unique to the school setting. Both standards would most likely be referenced in the event a school counselor was accused of wrong doing, so it is important for school counselors to be knowledgeable of both the ASCA and ACA ethical documents.

This quiz is intended to stimulate school counselors to evaluate their own knowledge of codes of ethics to which they should adhere and to test their ability to apply the codes' sections to actual practice. Counselor educators who prepare school counselors and those who instruct practicing school counselors in the area of ethics are invited to use the quiz in this article as a teaching tool.

For this quiz, we chose real situations that are experienced by school counselors on a daily basis, many of which have been explored in recent counseling literature. Counselors who wish to explore the situations presented in more depth may wish to read the recent articles and books referenced that explore each of the difficult issues in detail. The situations in this quiz address the following familiar challenges faced by school counselors:

• Providing confidentiality for minor student clients (Davis & Garrett, 1998; Isaacs & Stone, 1999; Jackson & White, 2000)

• Assessing student clients who are possibly suicidal (King, Price, Telljohann, & Wahl, 2000; Paulson & Worth, 2002; Popenhagen & Qualley, 1998)

• Counseling in a rural school (Morrissette, 2000)

• Counseling students who may be violent (Hazier & Carney, 2000; Riley & McDaniel, 2000)

• Properly using test results (Walsh & Betz, 1995)

• Using the Internet for counseling (Wilson, Jencius, & Duncan, 1997)

• Managing child custody issues when parents separate or divorce (Richardson
& Rosén, 1999; Wilcoxon & Magnuson, 1999)

• Counseling students to enhance their self-esteem (Miller & Neese, 1997)

• Coordinating with mental health professionals outside the school setting (Osborne & Collison, 1998; Ponec, Poggi, & Dickel, 1998)

• Coping with school policies that hinder the counseling process (Daniels, 2001)

• Being culturally sensitive (Constantine & Yeh, 2001; Fontes, 2002; Lee, 2001; Yeh, 2001)

• Opening a private practice while still a school counselor (Richards, 1990)

• Dealing with the behavior of a colleague who is perceived to be unethical (Herlihy & Corey 1997)

• Supervising graduate student counseling interns (Agnew, Vaught, Getz, & Fortune, 2000; Crutchfield et al., 1997; Kahn, 2000; Nelson & Johnson, 1999; Page, Pietrzak, & Sutton, 2001; Peace & Sprinthall, 1998).

Twenty situations that have ethical components are presented and readers are asked to decide whether they agree or disagree with the counselor's action in each case. Relevant code sections that relate to each situation presented from both the ASCA and ACA ethics documents are cited. Our answers to the quiz and our positions on the dilemmas are revealed in the short discussion of each situation that follows the quiz. For most ethical dilemmas, there is rarely a right or wrong answer. Ethical principles must be applied, and all situations are different from one another. The cases described do not have substantial detail, so it is possible that there may be valid arguments in opposition to our answers to the 20 quiz items.

Before you begin the quiz, please take note of the following wording issues: (1) the designations of the ethics documents, code of ethics and ethical standards, are used interchangeably. The ASCA document is entitled, "ethical standards," while the ACA document is entitled a "code of ethics"; and (2) the words counselee, which is used in the ASCA document, client, which is used in the ACA document, and student are used to refer to student clients of school counselors.

**Ethics Quiz**

Directions: Mark each situation with an "A" if you agree with the school counselor's action, or with a "D" if you disagree with the school counselor's action.

( ) 1. A counselor in a new high school was trying to decide how she should
inform all students of the meaning of confidentiality in counseling situations and give them information regarding the limits of confidentiality. She considered informing the students by including a section on the topic in the student handbook given to all students as they enrolled in the school. However, she decided that putting the information in the handbook was not a good idea because few students would actually read it, and that making an announcement at an assembly at the beginning of each academic year would be the best approach.

2. An elementary counselor received a subpoena to appear at a child custody hearing related to a child in his school that he had been counseling. The counselor conferred with his principal who arranged for the counselor to meet with the school board attorney. The attorney advised the counselor that because one of the child's parents had caused the subpoena to be issued, the parent had waived any privacy rights related to the counseling and that the counselor had a legal obligation to attend the hearing and to answer any factual questions posed to him regarding his counseling sessions with the student. The attorney further cautioned the counselor not to answer any questions related to his opinion regarding the competency of either parent or regarding which parent should be awarded custody. The counselor told the attorney that he would not attend the hearing and would not answer any questions because the Ethical Standards for School Counselors (American School Counselor Association, 1998) required him to keep all counseling sessions confidential.

3. A school counselor is counseling a client who has exhibited some indicators associated with individuals who may be suicidal. However, the counselor is unsure of whether the student's behavior rises to the point that the student should be considered potentially at risk for suicide and whether to inform the student's parents. The counselor decides to confer with another counselor at her school, one of her former university counselor educators, and the school district's guidance director regarding the situation. Her plan is to follow the consensus of her peers regarding how she should handle the situation, if they all agree, even if she still has doubts herself.

4. A school counselor is on the witness stand at a trial. An attorney asks the counselor to repeat statements made to the counselor by a student in a confidential counseling session. The school counselor is not licensed by the state as a "professional counselor" and there is no statute in the state granting privilege to communications between student clients and school counselors. The counselor replies to the attorney that he does not believe he should reveal the information because it was communicated in a counseling session in which the student expected that he would have privacy and believed that the counselor would keep the information confidential. After the attorneys argue with each other regarding whether the counselor should be required to reveal the information as a matter of law, the judge explains to the counselor that he must answer the questions. In an effort to get the judge to change his mind, the counselor then asks the judge if he could explain the importance of keeping counseling sessions confidential.
5. A high school counselor in a small rural school is the only counselor in the building. The counselor's nephew is a sophomore in the school and is experiencing emotional distress because he has been the victim of some recent bullying incidents. The principal asks the counselor to counsel the student on a weekly basis. Although the counselor recognizes the problems inherent in counseling a close relative, she decides to counsel her nephew because she is convinced he needs help, she suspects he will not receive counseling if she does not provide it, and she believes she can assist him in an objective manner. She informs her nephew's parents that she will be counseling him, consults with a counselor in another school on a monthly basis regarding her work with her nephew, and documents in her case notes the content of the sessions.

6. A high school English teacher gives a counselor a paper written by a student in which the student says that he has thought about "ending it all and taking my tormenters with me." The counselor talks to the student and decides that he could be at risk for committing violent acts. Through consultations, the counselor's decision is affirmed by two of her counselor colleagues in the school. The counselor informs the principal of the details of the situation immediately and waits for the principal to take action directly with the student and his parents.

7. A high school offers a senior calculus class that cannot accommodate all the students who wish to take it. A counselor observes the teacher of the class reviewing the records of all students who are juniors who have expressed an interest in taking the class the next academic year. When the counselor asks the teacher what he is doing, the teacher explains that he selects the students who will be allowed to take the class based on their math score on an aptitude test all students take at the beginning of their junior year. He explains that in the past he had also tried to consider grades, motivation, diversity, and other factors in selecting students, but that the process has become too time consuming, so now he selects students based only on their math aptitude scores. He insists that he gets the best students in the class through using the test scores as the only criterion for admission. The counselor explains that the Educational Testing Service has taken a strong stand that aptitude scores should not be the sole criterion for entry into academic programs, but the teacher insists he does not have time to review other factors. The counselor wonders whether the matter should be brought to the attention of the principal, but decides that she does not want to upset the math teacher, so she decides that oversight of the math teacher's selection process is not her responsibility.

8. A high school counselor secures permission from his principal to conduct group counseling sessions one night a week in an Internet chat room for students whose parents are going through a divorce. The principal asks the counselor to provide her with professional guidelines for counseling in this manner and to demonstrate how the procedures the counselor has developed comply with the professional standards. The counselor replies that since Internet counseling is so new, standards have not yet been adopted, but he assures the principal he will conduct the group sessions in a professional manner.
9. The mother of an enrolling elementary school student tells the counselor that if the child's father requests information from the counselor regarding their daughter, the counselor must not give him any information because the mother has custody of the child. The counselor explains that, unless the father's legal rights have been terminated (which is more than a custody order), the school has a policy of providing the same information to noncustodial parents as is given to custodial parents. When the mother offers a copy of the custody order to the counselor as proof that the father is not entitled to any information, the counselor asks the mother to see the principal regarding the matter.

10. A school counselor places the following statement in a parent handbook given to all parents as they enroll their child in the school: "If you are interested in any counseling relationship I might have with your child, please contact me. I respect the rights of parents, encourage parental involvement in their child's life, and am always willing to provide you with information."

11. A middle school counselor receives a call from the mother of a student the counselor has been seeing recently related to the student's reluctance to participate in group activities. The student has been talking to the counselor about his shyness, anxiety around peers, negative self-concept, and interest in developing more self-confidence. The mother tells the counselor that her son has told her he is seeing the counselor. The mother thanks the counselor for talking to her son, asks what her son has been talking about in the counseling sessions, and inquires as to whether there is any way in which she can be helpful. The counselor thanks the mother for her call and explains that the counseling relationship is confidential and that she cannot disclose what the student has been talking to her about. She tells the mother she will contact her if there is anything she needs to know.

12. A middle school counselor is seeing a sixth grader regularly because her parents are going through a contentious divorce and the process is very upsetting to the student. The student's English teacher approaches the counselor and asks whether anything is wrong with the student because she appears distracted in class, her grades have declined, and she is quieter than usual. The counselor explains that counseling relationships with students are confidential and that the counselor cannot disclose private information regarding the student.

13. A high school counselor has been seeing a student who is a senior on a regular basis after the student was referred for counseling after being disciplined several times for fighting with other students. At the third counseling session, the student informs the counselor that she sees a licensed professional counselor (LPC) in private practice weekly and has been in counseling with the LPC for about 6 months. The counselor asks the student if the counselor may contact the LPC and discuss the student's situation with her and the student agrees. The counselor has the student sign a form giving permission for the exchange of information and asks the student to have her mother or father sign the form as well. After the form has been signed by the student and a parent, the counselor
calls the LPC, summarizes her counseling interventions with the student, and asks the LPC to consult with her regarding their work with the student. The LPC and the counselor agree regarding goals for the student and interventions they will use in the future.

( ) 14. A high school student tells a counselor that she has heard students talking about parties they have attended at which alcohol is served that are being held at a history teacher's home, and the teacher is identified. The student says she has never participated in the parties, but believes the other students' stories. The counselor questions the student about details and is satisfied that the parties may be occurring. The student gives the counselor the names of four students who have said they have attended the parties, but insists that the counselor not tell anyone that she told the counselor. The counselor agrees to keep the identity of the student confidential, if possible, and informs the student he will report the information, the history teacher's name, and the four students' names to the principal. The counselor gives the principal the information and the principal asks which student gave the details to the counselor. The counselor tells the principal that she would rather not identify the student unless it becomes necessary.

( ) 15. An elementary school counselor is frustrated because his principal insists that the counselor obtain written permission from a student's parent or guardian before having a counseling session with the student. In his school the counselor has found that the students who need counseling the most have parents or guardians who do not return permission forms that are sent home. Even after obtaining oral permission on the telephone from parents or guardians, the counselor has found that they fail to follow up by signing and returning the permission form. The school board attorney has advised all principals that written permission from parents is not legally required because parents know that counseling services are offered in the schools and would expect that their children would be counseled from time to time. Despite the attorney's position on the matter, the principal states that she "does not want any parents to ever be upset" by discovering that their child is being counseled. After several attempts by the counselor to convince the principal to change her mind and stop requiring written permission from parents, the counselor asks the principal if she would be willing to discuss this matter with the counselor and the school system's guidance coordinator (who the counselor knows is also opposed to requiring written permission from parents).

( ) 16. An African-American counselor accepts a position in a middle school that includes a majority of Asian-American students, many of whom are recent immigrants. The counselor finds it difficult to accept in career development classroom guidance sessions the insistence of her students that their parents will make their choices for them regarding their career futures. In an effort to better understand the situation, the counselor invites three sets of parents to come to the school to talk to her about their perspectives on the career choices of their children.
17. A high school counselor has recently become licensed as a professional counselor by her state and has decided to open a part-time private counseling practice. Very few counselors in her community have the background to counsel adolescent clients, and she believes there is a market for her services. She talks with the school district guidance coordinator, and they both agree that the high school counselors in her district do no personal counseling because their days are filled with administrative duties, testing, scheduling students, and classroom career development activities. The counselor and the guidance director agree that it would be appropriate for the counselor to accept students as clients in her private practice from the school where the counselor works because she would not be able to provide them with personal counseling at the school and some of them need personal counseling.

18. A school counselor (counselor #1) is consulted by a counselor (counselor #2) at a different school regarding the activities of a third counselor (counselor #3) in their school district. Counselor #2 says that counselor #3 is a single parent and regularly hires female students in his high school who are assigned to him for counseling to baby sit for him (sometimes overnight at his home), and even takes the student baby sitters on vacation with him and his children on some occasions. Counselor #1 agrees that counselor #3’s behavior is inappropriate, and perhaps even unethical. Counselor #1 advises counselor #2 to confront counselor #3 with her concerns and urge him to discontinue his practices. Counselor #2 says that she is anxious about talking to counselor #3 about the issue because she is afraid he will react negatively and will be angry at her. Counselor #2 says that she would rather just tell his principal or file an ethics complaint with ASCA. Counselor #1 insists that counselor #2 talk with counselor #3 and try to convince him to change his behavior before taking any other action regarding the situation.

19. A male counselor in a high school accepted an intern from a local university, and she began her internship under his supervision at the beginning of the academic year. The intern was about the same age as the counselor (early 30s), neither had ever been married, and they discovered that they had many mutual interests. The counselor asked the intern to attend some evening and weekend social activities with him. The counselor asked his principal whether it would be acceptable for him to date his intern, and the principal told the counselor that since they were both adults, she saw no problem with them dating. The principal pointed out that several members of the faculty dated and some were married to each other.

20. An intern from a local university has begun his internship in a middle school under the supervision of the counselor. From the first day of the internship, and continuing for 3 weeks, the intern has been resistant to following the directions of the counselor, challenges many of the school policies and procedures, has had disagreements with two or three of the teachers regarding his counseling relationships with the teachers’ students, and continues to wear clothing to school that the counselor believes is too casual for a professional. The intern appears to have good counseling skills, but in some instances has
seemed to be too friendly or informal with his student clients. The counselor has had three formal meetings with the intern during the three-week period, has pointed out specific behaviors of the intern that the counselor considers inappropriate, and has insisted that the intern improve his behavior. At the end of the third week, the counselor informs the intern that she will be asking the university to find another internship site for him and will be giving him an unsatisfactory evaluation for the time he has been under her supervision.

**Recommendations**

Hopefully, school counselors will find that they are able to apply the ASCA and ACA ethical standards to challenges found in schools on a routine basis and will have high scores on this quiz. If school counselors score less on this ethics quiz than they would have liked, it is suggested that they read the ASCA and ACA ethics documents carefully and reflect upon how items are related to their practice as counselors within a school. There are a number of books (Corey et al., 1998; Cottone & Tarvydas, 1998; Huey & Remley 1988; Madden, 1998; Remley & Herlihy, 2001) and continuing education opportunities in ethics available to school counselors as well, and they are encouraged to take advantage of those.

This ethics quiz for school counselors might be used by workshop leaders or counselor educators as a stimulus for discussion before ASCA and ACA codes are reviewed in detail. Allowing workshop participants or graduate students to discuss the situations in small groups before providing them with the quiz answers might heighten their interest in ethical issues and increase their understanding of the ethical responsibilities of school counselors.

**References**


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