

Association  
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ASAP-NJ



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## The Role of the Student Assistance Coordinator (SAC) When A Student Is Suspected Of Being Under The Influence of Alcohol and Other Drugs

Pursuant to N.J.S.A. 18A:40A (1 – 18) and N.J.A.C. 6A:16 (3 – 7), school districts are responsible for developing policies to respond to students who are suspected of being under the influence of alcohol and other drugs. It is the position of the Bergen County Association of Student Assistance Professionals (BCASAP) that school districts should clarify the role of the Student Assistance Coordinator (SAC) when students are suspected of being under the influence of mood-altering substances, and that a lack of clarification—or utilization of the SAC in inappropriate ways—could potentially undermine interventions with students and interfere with the school district’s ability to effectively enforce related policies.

A student who is suspected of being *currently* under the influence of substances should be considered a potential medical emergency and potentially in violation of school policies. Therefore, a school district’s response needs to be coordinated by medical and administrative personnel. The direct involvement of the SAC at this particular moment could be destructive for the student, family, school and SAC for the following reasons:

1. Confusion over the role of the staff when addressing potential substance abuse reflects a larger societal issue: whether a substance abuser has done something *wrong* (requiring punishment) or has a *problem* (requiring help). The most effective responses contain both consequences and assistance. Schools can effectively provide both, but only by clearly delineating the consequences from the counseling.
2. Students and their families who erroneously view the SAC as a member of the administrative/disciplinary structure of the school might experience decreased comfort and willingness to share information, thus undermining the therapeutic relationship between students/families and the SAC (both present and future).

3. The involvement of the SAC in medical/administrative interventions confuses students and families regarding issues of confidentiality
4. Students are by nature quite guarded regarding the disclosure of drug/alcohol use to adults. Despite the fact that information previously shared with the SAC remains protected, the direct involvement of the SAC during medical/administrative interventions might be *perceived* by the student as a potential risk to the confidentiality of that information.<sup>1</sup>
5. If substance use is confirmed by a physician, a student will require on-going evaluations and possible referrals. Protecting the relationship between the SAC and the student will increase the likelihood of honest self-disclosure in counseling sessions (which is essential for effective assessments/evaluations) and reduce resistance to recommendations and further treatment.
6. The presence of the SAC in these situations (whether directly observed by others or talked about by the involved student) could result in a generalized sense of wariness and confusion among other students regarding their present and future relationship with the SAC.
7. Students are likely to view counseling as part of the “punishment,” which undermines both present and future relationships with all counselors.
8. The relationship with students’ families are similarly undermined, leading to increased confusion and resistance, and decreased trust, self-disclosure, and/or willingness to accept recommendations

The SAC has been, and should continue to be, the key staff member responsible for district-wide faculty training, consultation, education, student assessment, intervention, on-going counseling and referrals regarding substance abuse (or other behavioral or mental health issues). Because the SAC is essential to each of these objectives, there is an understandable tendency for school districts to utilize the SAC directly during potential medical emergencies. This is because:

- a. **The SAC is an expert on the effects of drugs and behavior:** When *any* staff member suspects that a student is under the influence, that student must be immediately

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<sup>1</sup> Information obtained in counseling sessions is usually the result of a significant investment in time by the counselor and subsequent trust by the student. Yet this trust can easily be undermined, even by erroneous assumptions.

evaluated by a qualified physician. Once reported, no staff member may interfere with the evaluation process culminating in a medical examination. The belief that the SAC—who possesses significant knowledge about the effects of drugs and alcohol on the body—would be helpful in determining whether drugs or alcohol have been used, could dangerously interfere with the district’s responsibility to have a student evaluated once suspicion of drug/alcohol use has been reported.<sup>2</sup> Failure to have a student evaluated by a physician once concern has been reported endangers the welfare of the students and significantly increases liability for the school district.

- b. **Confusion over the difference between a student who uses drugs in general and one who is *presently* under the influence:** The SAC often works directly with students who have used (or are at risk of using) alcohol and other drugs. Yet the possibility that a student is *presently under the influence* necessitates an immediate medical and administrative response.<sup>3</sup> The SAC should be notified when any student is suspected of using alcohol or other drugs, but should be directly involved primarily upon the student’s return to school in order to conduct on-going assessments regarding the student’s needs.

SACs should maintain the prerogative to be directly involved (particularly for student/family support or to communicate resources to the student’s family in the event that the medical evaluation ultimately confirms the use of substances) providing the involvement at that stage is determined to be in the best interest of all parties.

It is our recommendation that school administrators and SACs discuss these issues in order to clarify the role of the SAC and ensure the most effective response to students who are suspected of being under the influence of alcohol and other drugs.

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<sup>2</sup> If the SAC suspects that a student is *presently* under the influence, they are required to notify appropriate school personnel similar to any other faculty member.

<sup>3</sup> Faculty in-service training should clarify the difference between *general* concerns over a student’s involvement with substances and the concern that a student is *presently* under the influence.