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**School Practitioner
Listserv**

**A Weekly Community of Practice Network
for Sharing and Interchange**



October 24, 2016

Request from a Colleague

>Finding space for confidential counseling at a school

- Center Comments
- Comments from Colleagues in the Field

Invitation to Listserv Participants to Share Perspectives

Featured Set of Center Resources

>on confidentiality in working in schools

**Please forward this to a few colleagues you think might be interested.
The more who join, the more we are likely to receive to share.**

**For those who have been forwarded this and want to be part of
the weekly exchange, send an email to Ltaylor@ucla.edu**

**For previous recent postings of this community of practice, see
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/practitioner.htm>
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Note: In keeping with the *National Initiative for Transforming Student & Learning Supports*,* this is being sent to and forwarded by over 114,000 school and community stakeholders concerned about (1) daily matters confronting schools, (2) promoting whole child development and positive school climate, and (3) the transformation of student and learning supports.

Rquest from a Colleague: On behalf of the Ethics Committee of a state association of licensed professional clinical counselors, the question was asked: “What if a school wants to offer mental health counseling to students, but doesn't have a room dedicated for this purpose? ... I'm looking for guidance on best practices in schools when resources are scarce. If you have any documents that address this issue, I would appreciate any suggestions.” (Note: For discussion, the request wondered about using a shared space with cubicles and a white noise machine, but recognized “this would not seem adequate to protect confidentiality.” The request also wondered about “counseling outdoors when recess isn't in session. Or not doing it at all?”)

Center Comments: Space in general and confidential space in particular indeed are sparse resources at many schools. The bigger the school campus, of course, the more possibilities there are for finding appropriate space.

But space is not the first concern. The matter of community providers working at a school site during the school day raises a range of issues and problems related to school-community collaboration. Some of these are district concerns; some arise related to specific schools.

Agreements about confidential counseling space should be worked out when initial agreements (e.g., memoranda of understanding) are written out. Such agreements also should clarify what the school expects, what the community provider will do, what the provider will need from the school in addition to space (e.g., parent contact and consent, access to student records, conferences with teachers and student support staff, times when students will be available, payments, etc.), and what the school will provide.

FERPA and HIPPA provide a baseline for ensuring confidentiality and privacy. Additional considerations arise when counseling is part of a special education student's IEP. In such cases, specific requirements and appropriate resources, including confidential space, must be met by the school as part of the mandate. And if there is a third party payer involved (e.g., Medicaid), there probably also are practice standards that apply and must be met by the school.

Once a strong set of formal agreements is in place with the district, the next step is for a district administrator and the community provider to meet with a school administrator to arrange implementation of the agreement. Ultimately, it is the principal who makes it happen at a school, so when the principal wants the provider's services, appropriate space usually will be found.

As to the examples raised in the request, based on our experiences in working in schools

- A shared space/cubicles/white noise machine are not good choices. They are insufficient and students won't view them as protecting their privacy.)
- Counseling outdoors sometimes works, but even when the weather is good, school yards always have some traffic and people looking around (while the content may be private, the student may feel exposed and stigmatized).
- Not providing counseling at all seems unethical if the service is available and students are in need. At times, we have had to delay starting while we scouted the school for possible spaces (in the company of an administrator, support staff member, or custodian). While not ideal, we have worked in some very small rooms (e.g., a text book storage room, furnace room, etc.) However, we think it sends a bad message to students about the value of counseling when such unusual locations are used. (At one school, a counselor was invited to use the handicapped elevator.) More ideal is to establish a good working relationship with student support staff (e.g., a school, counselor, psychologist, nurse) and see if they are willing (at a few specific times) to share space that allows for private discussions.

With respect to documents on the topic, see:

> *School counseling office space* – <http://www.schcounselor.com/2010/08/office-space.html>

Brief excerpt

"... During one of my long term substitute positions I did not have a consistent space to meet with kids! I had a desk in between two special education teachers. I enjoyed working with the special education teachers, but I had no space to meet with students that was confidential or consistent. I had to utilize other teachers classrooms, book nooks, conference rooms, the cafeteria, and the nurses office at times to meet with students. I did lots classroom guidance since I did not have a consistent space to meet with students...."

> For images of various spaces used for counseling at schools, see:

https://www.google.com/search?q=school+counseling+space&rls=com.microsoft:en-us&biw=853&bih=367&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjrioK_uuPPAhUIs1QKHQSoAU8QsAQIKA

> For a perspective on what folks would like schools to develop, see:

Guidance Counseling Center Concept Perspective –

<http://www.dodea.edu/edSpecs/upload/Guidance-Counseling-Center-16-Nov-11.pdf>

Comments from Colleagues in the Field:

(1) "... I have a hard time believing that there isn't SOME space for a counselor to use to meet with a student. I've been in 2 schools where the therapist was very creative and turned a storage closet into a small but cute/usable meeting room for herself and a student. I think it would be very difficult to maintain confidentiality in a cube type setting even with a sound screen machine. There is no door (maybe they could use a curtain?) but I don't think the sound screen completely drowns out noise/words if there are no walls or door. ... using the playground when recess is not in session is an option but again, that could potentially jeopardize confidentiality if other students see the one student and counselor outside talking (and what about if there is inclement weather?). [How about the] nurses office or using the principals office ...or an empty classroom on some kind of rotating schedule? Some schools have also invested in PODS and used those."

(2) "... In general- indoor counseling is shaped by guidelines such as: to protect the client's rights, dignity, facilitate participation and growth. If those guidelines are met in the outdoor space then maybe. ... just as individuals are matched to therapeutic style and method, they would need to be 'screened' in some manner i.e. potentially explosive or eloping or distractible or allergies, heat sensitivity.... I feel that outdoor counseling may dilute the process particularly if the counseling is more on the therapeutic side. So, if this is seen as an impediment to reaching counseling goals then best practices would preclude the outdoor event. [Indoor] space ... will most likely be different at different times of the day" (e.g., the multi-purpose room, behind the stage area, spaces used by itinerant staff when they are not on site the principal's office).

These ideas are off the top of my head and I am certain there is far more to say and think about this question. I will start a thread on NASP for this question and see what we get. I do not have any written document but if one is out there someone will know of it."

(3) "... They may want to look over the American School Counselor Association website (<https://www.schoolcounselor.org>) to learn more about elementary counseling programs. There really isn't anything there about counselor space — but it is an important consideration. Children need to be in comfortable surroundings where they feel safe. They also need to feel comfortable with the person with whom they will talk. ... I trust that the Ethics Committee has also dealt with issues of students becoming familiar with and having access to the counselor."

With specific respect to space: "First, I would strongly discourage anyplace with cubicles — unless the rest of the room is vacant. Not only could conversations be overheard, but the setting isn't conducive to making a student feel at ease and able to confide in the counselor. Similarly, I don't see children being able to focus very well if they are outside with an adult — too many distractions. Plus, how might the student feel if they are seen by others talking with this person.

The best option, of course, is a room with toys, games, puzzles and art materials so that kids are “busy” doing things with while they talk. If they are in a fun and safe place with things to keep their hands busy, they can be more comfortable, let down their guard and will feel more like talking.

When resources are scarce, the next best option is to share space. For example, most schools have a nurses’ office but not a nurse on duty 100% of the time. Perhaps the nurses office could be used a few hours a week. Or, sometimes spaces are reserved for speech therapists, special needs students and other required services that are not usually occupied by students 100% of the time. If the teacher/provider of those services also uses that space when students are not there, I would hope that the adult would step aside to allow the counselor to work with students. I’ve shared my office when others needed to meet with students — they just needed to ask. Obviously, administrators need to be involved. And speaking of them, they have offices..... The only consideration there is the perception of a student is going ‘to the principal’s office’ — I hope that could be a good thing.

There may also be music, art and PE rooms that could be used since those classes tend to meet on specific days and are sometimes vacant on other days. The problem with sharing spaces is that the counselors still need “materials” for students and comfortable surrounds to put them at ease. A corner in a classroom could work if the classroom is otherwise empty. The other consideration is that students need to know where to find the counselor should they want to seek them out. It will be important to remain as consistent as possible with the location of the counselor’s room and the time the counselor is available. Be assured that if the counselor is there on MWF, the student will have a traumatic event occur on a Tuesday. The students (and teachers) will need to know what to do when the counselor isn’t around.

It’s important to start with the principal. A relationship with that person can go far to find options in a school. If that person is convinced that the counselor services will help students, they will find a way (and a place) for them to happen. The important things to keep in mind are the needs of the students — what do they need, where can go for help, and do they trust the person to help them.”

(4) “Wow...where to begin. A confidential room dedicated to providing mental health counseling to elementary or any level student is non-negotiable for several reasons. By requiring certain standards the school mental health staff is establishing precedent, priority, and purpose. In order for a trusted relationship to exist between mental health staff and student the student must know that confidentiality will be enforced and guaranteed. Providing services in cubicles and outside DOES NOT guarantee what is needed for trust to be established and sets an unacceptable precedent. Creative solutions need to be explored on either sharing a space or moving other less confidential services. ...”

(5) “The short answer is that a school that cannot provide a confidential space for therapy may not be able to host the program. Therapists require a confidential space. In my program, I say that a school must be able to provide four walls and a door in order to have a therapist. Ideally, that space can accommodate 3-4 people comfortably as parents need to complete intake assessments with the therapist, and family sessions may need to occur as well. The problem with the outdoor option is that weather will not always cooperate. Also, it is extremely unprofessional and possibly unethical to deliver services in unsuitable spaces like a cubicle. Furthermore, client’s mental health challenges can be exacerbated by space challenges, making it difficult for therapist to address the primary needs. As an example, we had a therapist in a very small space that was barely large enough for two people. This required the therapist and client to sit in close proximity to one another. The client experienced anxiety due to the small space, and it was counterproductive to treatment.”

(6) “Billing drives protocol. If they are being billed for their services, there should be HRSA or other standard requirements that dictate confidentiality in facilities. If they are funded by the schools, then there may be some leeway, in following the same protocol as a school counselor or whatever they do to meet the needs of the kids, and that might include a walk around the track...”

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Invitation to listserv participants: What does it say about addressing barriers to learning and enhancing equity of opportunity when student and learning supports are so low a priority at a school (e.g., limited space for such supports, plenty of space for sports)?

What are your reactions/suggestions to this request?

**Share lessons learned. Comments. Recommendations.
And let us know what’s happening locally?**

Send your responses to Ltaylor@ucla.edu

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Featured Set of Center Resources

>on confidentiality in working in schools

The above exchanges raise a range of concerns related to working with students in schools. For more on the issues, see links to resources from our Center and from others on the following Center online clearinghouse Quick Finds:

>*Confidentiality* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/confid.htm>

>*Ethical/Legal/Consumer issues in school mental health* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p1406_01.htm

Among the resources from our Center, see for example:

>*Confidentiality and Informed Consent* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/confid/confid.pdf>



*For information about the ***National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports***, <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html>

And note that our new book detailing the prototypes and related resources is now in press.

For a preview, contact Ltaylor@ucla.edu .

THE MORE FOLKS SHARE, THE MORE USEFUL AND INTERESTING THIS COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE BECOMES!

Send resources ideas, requests, comments, and experiences to Ltaylor@ucla.edu

We post a broad range of issues and responses to the *Net Exchange* on our website at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newnetexchange.htm> and to *Facebook* (access from the Center’s home page <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/>)