Chapter 14
Saving Our Students:
The Importance of Suicide Prevention Work in Schools

Laura L. Gallo
Boise State University, USA

ABSTRACT

Suicide is the second leading cause of death for youth in the US. School counselors are in a pivotal position to identify and intervene with children and adolescents struggling with suicide. School counselors have a legal and ethical obligation to incorporate suicide prevention efforts into their schools. This chapter focuses on current research, including evidence-based practices, as an important aspect of suicide prevention work. This chapter provides vital information related to prevention and intervention activities school counselors can utilize to help prevent suicide. Information related to the formation and function of crisis response teams as well as postvention is also included.

INTRODUCTION

School counselors have many roles and responsibilities within the school setting, one of which is a **prevention** and **intervention** specialist (American School Counseling Association [ASCA], 2017). School counselors are also encouraged to reference the ASCA (2018) position statement, "The School Counselor and Suicide Prevention/Awareness." The **prevention** and **intervention** of death by suicide in our youth population have become an important and timely topic. Suicide has become the second leading cause of death in young people in the U.S. (CDC, 2020). School counselors' ability to quickly and confidently respond to a child with suicidal ideation is a crucial task (Gallo, 2017), yet we know the topic of suicide is challenging for many individuals. **Suicide ideation** is primarily a means of communicating emotional pain and distress. When individuals talk about suicide, they are articulating psychache and communicating a need for assistance and support (Shneidman, 1993).

The purpose of this chapter is to provide background information on suicide, identify the role of the school counselor in suicide **prevention** work, increase school counselors' knowledge of warning signs

and risk factors, and lastly, to offer recommendations and solutions within the school setting. The chapter is divided into three main foci: **prevention**, **intervention**, and **postvention** work.

BACKGROUND

Rates of suicide for youth ages 12-20 in 2018 were 10.25 per 100,000 or 4,323 deaths (CDC, 2020). Approximately 12 youths are dying by suicide every day and these numbers continue to climb each year. If we include college-age students, the numbers climb to 6,732 deaths per year and a rate of 16.36 per 100,000. According to the Youth Behavior Risk Survey, suicide rates among youths aged 14-18 years old have increased by 61% from 2009-2018 (Ivey-Stephenson et al., 2019). In addition, almost 19% of students who completed the survey reported having seriously considered attempting suicide in the previous 12 months, and almost 16% had made a plan about how they would attempt suicide (Ivey-Stephenson et al., 2019). Four out of five teens who attempt suicide have given clear warning signs (American Association of Suicidology, 2015). This is an alarming but promising statistic as this indicates there are opportunities for others (including school counselors) to identify these signs and intervene.

Adolescents often face significant challenges in this developmental stage and may not have acquired sufficient coping strategies to understand their problems. Adolescents are also at a point in their lives where they can now think abstractly and are, therefore, more capable of considering issues of life and death (King, Foster, & Rogalski, 2013). Their ability to plan and consider consequences has improved, but they are also vulnerable to emotional reactions and impulsive thinking (Casey & Caudle, 2013). This vulnerability can put adolescents at greater risk for reckless decisions when feeling hurt, afraid, or confused.

School counselors need to be readily available and cognizant of what adolescents are going through to help them cope with these difficult transitions. Experts have found that approximately 90% of the adolescents who died by suicide gave warning signs beforehand (American Association of Suicidology, 2015). School counselors need to know the warning signs of depression and suicide and be ready to discuss these issues with their students. Students spend a great deal of their time in school; therefore, school counselors are the ideal helpers in identifying students who are struggling and providing them with support (Juhnke, et al., 2011).

Adolescents often struggle with academics, peers, or other issues, common to their age group. These are likely to be more evident and appear more frequently at school than at home (Granello & Granello, 2007). School counselors (and other school staff) have the opportunity to identify students who are struggling and incorporate **prevention** activities to help address these issues. School counselors can incorporate suicide **prevention** activities into the curriculum to help create a culture of mental health awareness and support. School counselors can also collaborate with other educators, such as the nurse or health teachers, to provide a curriculum that promotes mental health awareness and help-seeking behavior.

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