

# STUDENT ASSISTANCE CENTER

at  
**PREVENTION FIRST**  
*Building community capacity to prevent substance abuse*

## Administrative Guide



The Student Assistance Center (SAC) at Prevention First, a statewide nonprofit dedicated to building community capacity to prevent substance abuse, is headquartered in Springfield, and is the only organization in Illinois providing comprehensive Student Assistance training and technical assistance to Illinois public and private schools. For additional information about Student Assistance Training or Youth Mental Health First Aid training, contact Dale Gasparovic, SAC Administrator, at 217.299.8803, or at [dale.gasparovic@prevention.org](mailto:dale.gasparovic@prevention.org).

Visit the Student Assistance Center Prevention First website at [www.prevention.org](http://www.prevention.org) to learn more about training, technical assistance, webinars, and resources for standards-based Student Assistance Programs in grades K-12.

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School administrators are consistently being asked to raise standards and student achievement levels. Expectations for our school leaders include many tiers of complex relationship development, assessment of need for teachers, students, and families and creative efforts in dealing with a multitude of life stressors for students. Administrators are challenged to find ways to create the perfect blend of student support, including family involvement, teacher knowledge, and community interest.

“Students First!” is the mantra of the very best school leaders. These leaders inherently understand that schools have been given the responsibility of being a place where healthy growth and development must occur while moving students toward high academic achievement.

However, one need only pick up a newspaper to learn the many reasons students cannot always accept that healthy challenge. Many problems plague our students today. Truancy, behavioral and mental health struggles, substance abuse and violence are often causative factors of families and entire communities burdened by unhealthy choices and unhealthy life situations. Sometimes the stressors of everyday life mean that our students simply cannot achieve academically, and cannot learn at their potential.

Historically, when adults have struggled with stress and been unable to do their jobs, they have been referred to work programs called EAP’s (Employee Assistance Programs). These programs were designed to help people work through life’s issues and get them back on track and back to a productive work performance. That 1960’s model of support was translated to our schools and school policies in the 1980’s to provide similar ways for students to maneuver through stressors that impeded academic success. Known as SAP (Student

Assistance Program), this model has become a means for preventing, intervening, referring and supporting our students who may be experiencing problems that prevent them from fully benefitting from their educational experience.

As with all things related to students, academics, behavior, family communication, and school programs, administrative support is essential. Processes within the school that do not have the crucial “nod” of awareness and support by administration often do not see great success.

Across the state of Illinois (and nationally), SAP teams have found that their administrators are critical to the teams’ success, providing opportunities for real change and acting as a driving force for school and community culture changes that affect students’ lives.

Student Assistance Programs have been designed to get results. Schools that provide SAP often see improvement in behavior and academics and reduced truancy.

SAP’s are a powerful resource to integrate into the educational community. With the involvement of all staff and volunteers, behavioral problems and fights are reduced, attendance is enhanced, grades are better and fewer students drop out.

Administrators value increased daily attendance. Lower truancy rates equate to dollars and cents to support district programs and services. Studies have confirmed higher attendance rates for students receiving SAP services. When students are able to feel more connected to the school, they typically will attend school more often. A major tenant of Student Assistance is connecting students with a positive adult in the building to foster school connectedness. A Nebraska study found that students attending schools with SAPs reported lower alcohol use

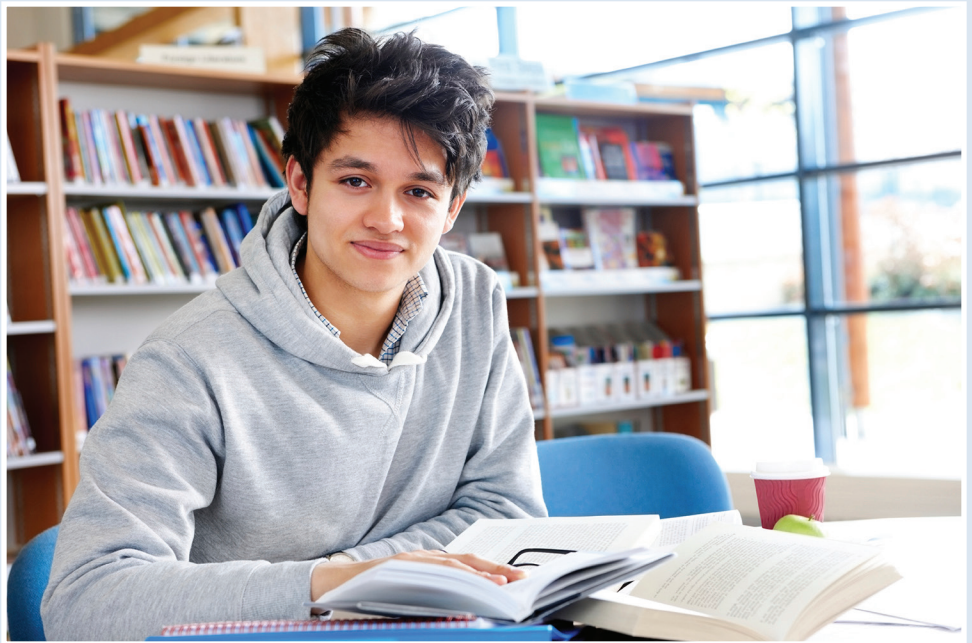
*Schools that provide SAP often see improvement in behavior and academics and reduced truancy.*

rates (in the last 30 days) and significantly higher levels of academic achievement than schools with no SAP.

School-wide messages and programs focusing on alcohol, tobacco, and other drug prevention, social-emotional learning and positive life-skill development help prevent and minimize problem behaviors and choices throughout a school, while student well-being and overall school performance both improve. Students whose needs are beyond the scope of the school are connected to community services and take advantage of those services at higher rates than their national counterparts.

Students through SAP are consistently, and at a higher rate than reported nationally, linked to the behavior health care system. Many students coming through a Student Assistance Program are referred to a community human services agency for an assessment. A majority of the students who are linked to and assessed at the local agencies comply with the assessment recommendation and access some, if not all, the recommended programs and services.

Today's school counselors are so overwhelmed with scheduling, test scores, graduation credits and college recommendations that little time is left over for old-fashioned counseling, even for more troubled or at-risk students. Students who have no skill deficits and yet are not successful in school can be helped through Student Assistance services. Regardless of the reason for a lack of success, the outcomes often involve truancy or dropping out of school, delinquency, substance use and other negative consequences. The SAP's goal is to discover what barriers to learning, other than skill deficits, are contributing to the student's lack of school success, and identify the school and community resources necessary



to get the student on track for successful completion. By definition, an SAP is a K-12 school-based evidence-informed framework for prevention, early intervention, referral and support for students with identified needs that may prevent them from fully benefitting from their educational experience. SAP's focus is building supports for students dealing with non-academic issues including mental health, family and other relationship issues, bullying and other school violence issues, and basic life needs. While doing so, they remain the primary resource for dealing with substance abuse prevention and early intervention concerns. SAP services vary due to needs and resources available in the schools and communities in which they are applied. Over the years, a number of research studies have shown SAP as an effective approach in the delivery of services that reduce truancy and behavior problems while improving academics and bonding to school as well as increasing referrals to community services at rates higher than reported nationally. (Student Assistance Program Guidebook: A Resource for Schools, Prevention First, 2011, pgs. 5, 8, 9)

SAP serves to reduce the burden of in-school crises for school social workers, school psychologists, and, of course, teachers. SAP provides the direct link for the school's collaboration with community resources.

Students who are dealing with non-academic barriers to learning are the primary target population for SAP services. These barriers include school judgement and attendance problems, dropouts, depression or suicide issues, self-injury, stress and anxiety related issues, physical and sexual abuse, substance abuse, family dissolution, displacement and relationship difficulties, delinquency, involvement with the juvenile justice system, violence and more.

The purpose of the school is to teach a child, not to teach a subject. Student needs arising from home situations, relationship issues, mental health concerns and substance use must be addressed as part of the whole child. To focus on the child as a learner without addressing the child's social emotional needs reduces the potential outcomes for the curriculum and the student.

Barriers to learning exist in large segments of the student population. The school's role has changed over the past 50 years from a singular focus on education to becoming a primary source of meeting basic safety, physical, and emotional needs in order to successfully address learning needs.

Schools often find it necessary to provide for students' health needs, provide meals other than lunch, work with students' hygiene, provide appropriate clothing, as well as address mental health and substance use issues.

Schools most often focus on the cognitive level of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs in the educational process. Better student outcomes at this level are achieved when families, neighborhoods and schools are safe and healthy, and students feel accepted socially by both adults and their peers. Educators cannot assume that children have their physiological, safety, social and emotional needs met and that they are ready to learn simply because they are in school.

Among all high school students, 11.9 percent have a substance use disorder. Adolescent substance use serves as a significant barrier to successful academic performance. Educational performance is attributable to the direct effects of addictive substances on the parts of the brain responsible for attention, thinking, reasoning, and remembering. Impaired academic performance and educational attainment also are due to teen substance users' associations with peers who may consider academics a lower priority.



One in 10 children in Illinois suffers from mental illness severe enough to cause some level of impairment; yet, in any given year only about 20 percent of these children receive mental health services. Many mental health problems are largely preventable or can be minimized with prevention and early intervention efforts.

Children exposed to family violence are more likely to develop social, emotional, psychological and/or behavioral problems than those who are not. Recent research indicates that children who witness

domestic violence show more anxiety, low self-esteem, and depression. This experience can show up in emotional, behavioral, social, and physical disturbances that affect their development educationally and can continue into adulthood. (Student Assistance Program Guidebook: A Resource for Schools, Prevention First, 2001, pg. 6-7)

Some key mental health statistics for young people include:

- One in 10 children and young people aged 5-16 suffer from a diagnosable mental health disorder – roughly three children in every class. Between 1 in every 12 children and 1 in 15 young people deliberately self-harm.
- There has been a big increase in the number of young people being admitted to the hospital because of self-harm. Over the last ten years this figure has increased by 68%.
- More than half of all adults with mental health problems were diagnosed in childhood. Less than half were treated appropriately at the time.
- Nearly 80,000 children and young people suffer from severe depression.
- Over 8,000 children under the age of 10 suffer from severe depression.
- 95% of imprisoned young offenders have a mental health disorder. Many of them are struggling with more than one disorder.
- The number of young people aged 15-16 with depression nearly doubled between the 1980's and the 2000's.

(Young Minds, Young People Statistics, 2013, chapter 6)

Schools often experience the blame for not doing enough to address regional and national problems such as substance abuse. SAP is a process that provides solutions to these issues. SAP is designed to prevent, and intervene with students and families in such instances. SAP members are trained community collaborators and find resources for children and adolescents in need.

SAPs serve our school administrators. For our school leaders, SAP thwarts the issues of community awareness of regional and national substance abuse concerns. With substance abuse being the number one factor in student deaths across the U.S. (Drug Watch, 2015), it is crucial that schools have a dedicated and trained professional, such as a SAP team or coordinator, in place to address these concerns.

The implementation of SAP into schools creates positive conditions for learning. SAPs integrate well with other school programs and adhere to essentials of learning and social/emotional standards. SAPs foster positive outcomes across all grade continuums for struggling students. Administrators and

other school leaders agree that increased awareness of personal and family problems for students has led schools to adopt additional educational approaches. (California Education, Student Assistance Program, 2013)

SAP is not for attendance requirements, academic concerns, or testing scores, but it affects each of those issues. The very best SAPs become a hub for student support, social work team help, and teacher training on issues that deter student success. However, SAPs cannot do it alone. All successful in-school programs need administrators to agree that student success in their schools means Student Assistance Programs - a proven process and multi-tiered approach to student success.

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In many schools SAPs have proven longevity, boasting 30 years or more of evidence-based successes. Those that succeed also boast of administrative support. That support can mean simple tasks like attending SAP meetings. It can also mean more involved commitment like policy development, in-service training time and space and helping SAP team members achieve whole-staff buy-in. SAP support involves having a SAP team or coordinator within the school building, identifying the best SAP model or approach to match individual school culture and climate and promoting use and collaboration with the SAP team/coordinator for each child in need of services.

Administrators with a deep, personal concern for the learning and academic success of their students use SAP as a bridge. SAP bridges and connects students to partners who can and do help. Administrators who believe in the process of an SAP know how mobilizing school, students, family, and community resources can remove barriers to learning.

When problems come to school with students, when problems enter a family unit, and when a community suffers from those problems, our schools become a haven for solutions. Administrators who understand this support SAPs; and in turn, SAPs support those students.

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The mission of the Center is to develop capacity in schools to support their prevention, intervention and related program efforts in implementing a systems approach to delivering non-academic support services for students, as well as to improve school environment and achieve student success.

Do you have a Student Assistance Program? We want to add you to our list of schools doing this important work. Send an email with your name, school/organization, mailing address and email address to [SAC@prevention.org](mailto:SAC@prevention.org)