



Why parent-school communications may be difficult: Regulatory constraints and confidentiality issues

This information is intended to help both parents and school staff understand each other's perspectives about communication and the factors that affect their communications.

Parents of children with an eating disorder (diagnosed or undiagnosed) sometimes express frustration about what they perceive as a lack of communication about their child's behavior from school teachers, coaches, guidance counselors, and other school administrative personnel. From the parents' perspective, feelings have been expressed that "my child is in school and at school activities more waking hours a day than they are home. Why didn't the school staff notice something was wrong? Why don't they contact us about our child to tell us what they think?"

From a teacher's perspective, feelings have been expressed that "my hands are tied by laws and regulations about what and how we are allowed to communicate concerns to parents. Also, it's often the case that a given teacher sees a student less than an hour a day in a class full of kids. So no school staff person is seeing the child for a prolonged period. Kids are good at hiding things when they want to."

While rules vary from state to state, the Position Statement on Confidentiality from The American School Counselor Association may help both sides better understand why communications between family members and school personnel may be difficult at times. The rationale behind this position is that an atmosphere of trust is important to the counseling relationship. In addition, schools may be bound by strict protocols generated by state regulations about how teachers and staff are required to channel observations and concerns. For example, school districts in a state may be required to have a "student assistance program" team to handle student nonacademic issues. Teacher concerns are submitted on a standard form to the team that then meets to develop a "student action plan." Privacy laws can prohibit a teacher from discussing their concerns with a student without parent permission. Teachers explain that sometimes the student considers the problem to be the parent, so contacting the parent about a concern can make a student's problem worse in the students' eyes. Conversely, a student can also prohibit a teacher from talking with parents about the teachers' concerns without evidence from direct observations of behavior.

The following link presents the position statement from the professional association of school counselors: <http://www.schoolcounselor.org/content.asp?contentid=198>. It states the professional responsibilities of school counselors, emphasizing rights to privacy, defining the meaning of confidentiality in a school setting, and describing the role of the school counselor. The position statement's summary is as follows:

"A counseling relationship requires an atmosphere of trust and confidence between student and counselor. A student has the right to privacy and confidentiality. The responsibility to protect confidentiality extends to the student's parent or guardian and staff in confidential relationships. Professional school counselors must adhere to P.L. 93-380."

KEY SOURCES:

American School Counselor Association
<http://www.schoolcounselor.org/content.asp?contentid=198>
 ECRI Institute interviews with educators and parents of children with eating disorders