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Developing an SAP Code of Professional Standards By Barbara Fafaglia and Bill White

Introduction

Integration of Student Assistance Programs (SAP) into the field of education has created a new role for school districts that is without historic precedence. Staff members who fill SAP positions are encountering complex ethical dilemmas for which they and their districts are often ill prepared. This article will describe how one Illinois school district has addressed these dilemmas through the development and implementation of a code of ethical standards and professional practice (CPS).

Context

District 186 is an urban K-12 school in Springfield, Illinois, encompassing thirty-five schools and serving approximately 15, 000 students with a faculty and staff of more than 2000. Under the leadership of a Safe and Drug-Free Schools Program (SDFS) Director hired in the 1990-1991 school year, an SAP was developed and implemented. Utilizing a Core Team model with an average of 10 team members per site working under the leadership of a full-time SAP building coordinator, the program has expanded from one staff member in one building to fifteen staff members in twenty-four buildings over the last nine years.

While the process of implementing SAP's within a growing number of our schools was exciting and fulfilling, we became increasingly aware of the growing number of ethical issues our SAP faced daily. As our fledgling SAP grappled with these sensitive issues, we sought outside assistance in the hope we could find existing ethical standards and training specific to the SAP experience. To our surprise, we found few resources that could guide staff through some of these most difficult situations. Following introductory training sessions on ethical issues in prevention and early intervention, we committed ourselves to develop a CPS that would provide consistent professional guidance to all SAP staff and Core Team members. We became convinced that developing these standards would be essential to the successful operation of the District's SAP.

We assumed that developing these ethical standards would tax our mental energy and require hard work. But, little did we know that we were about to undertake a process that would challenge us and compel us forever to question our assumptions and rethink the way we did business in the SAP. In the end, our work of nearly three years was time well spent. It generated a document that addressed ethical standards to guide staff through complex and sensitive situations, and it set clear boundaries for appropriate and inappropriate professional and personal conduct.

The process used to generate the CPS included the six critical steps that follow.

The Process

Getting Organized

Developing a CPS requires considerable up-front organization. We began by convening a working group of SAP building coordinators and a scribe, and we used SDFS money to procure a consultant to facilitate the development process. At the first meeting, we defined our goals, outlined the steps we would use to formulate the document, and established meeting dates and agenda formats for the year. We also brainstormed what we thought were the most critical ethical issues SAP staff faced and addressed them in the development of our CPS. Leaving our first gathering with a sense of where we were going and approximately how long it would take to get there, we were ready to apply our organizational plan and to learn about ethics.

Perusing Available Ethics Codes

Our first step was to identify ethical standards drawn from other arenas of the health and human services field that we thought might be applicable to the SAP program and staff. We pored over these documents, culling what we could use or adapt for our own needs. In short, we went shopping for existing ethical standards that we thought would be applicable to SAP. This process generated initial standards that would eventually be incorporated into the first draft of the CPS.

Exploring Ethical Issues in SAP

Our next step consisted of providing staff a crash course on ethical issues in SAP. First we defined and distinguished issues of ethics, morality, professional appropriateness, and relevant legalities. We focused on how each SAP member's personal and professional conduct could affect and potentially harm the student/family, SAP staff person, SAP program, District, SAP field, and community and public safety. This process brought discomfort and fear along with enlightenment as our discussions helped us refine a mission statement that would guide the specific development of ethical codes. It allowed us to create a shared context and vision for our team and clarified the need for a paradigm of ethical problem-solving. It was a critical step that propelled the value of the process.

Reviewing Critical Incidents

During our next few meetings we moved SAP staff into small working groups and presented them with ethical vignettes of critical incidents drawn from a broad spectrum of categories, ranging from personal conduct to conduct in relationships with students, families, and professional peers. In response to each vignette, the working groups identified the ethical issues within each situation; the parties that could be potentially harmed by the actions or "inactions" of staff response; and any universal values (e.g., honesty, loyalty, justice) that might apply to the ethical dilemmas.

The groups then determined how they would respond to each ethical vignette presented. Finally, each group generated a draft standard that could guide SAP staff when they found themselves in similar ethical situations.

The following critical incidents were typical of the ones used for this exercise.

Incident #1: An SAP staff member is arrested (on non-work time but in her local community) for DUI.

This situation, which applies to personal conduct, generated some interesting discussions. We had to ask ourselves these difficult questions: Is this behavior subject to professional and/or ethical scrutiny or is it a matter of personal privacy? What potentially harmful consequences could unfold from such an event? What standards, if any, should guide the conduct of SAP staff during non-work hours?

Incident #2: A student discloses to the SAP Coordinator that he has been selling and using cocaine for the past year. He wants to quit using and selling and wants the SAP staff to help him.

This example raises the boundary between confidentiality and duty to report. We asked ourselves these questions: Would an SAP professional be ethically or legally bound to report this situation? If so, to whom would this information be reported? What parties could potentially be injured in this situation?

Incident #3: One of your SAP coordinators is a "toucher." She hugs and pats friends, fellow staff members, and students. This coordinator has worked with students in SAP for three years, and so far, there have been no know incidents in which a student had misinterpreted or taken offense at her physical style of expressing support. And yet, some staff members have worried that her effusive touching might one day create a problem.

This vignette forced us to ask some complex questions: What are the ethical issues involved in physical touch between SAP staff and the students they serve? Is touch always okay, never okay, or sometimes okay? What parties might be vulnerable to injury in this situation? What are the boundaries between ethical and unethical touch? This is a tough one, isn't it?

These are just a few of the many incidents we addressed. The more we worked, discussed, and struggled for appropriate responses, the clearer it became that we needed ethical standards to effectively and sensitively deal with issues such as these.

Developing a Draft Document

Developing the draft document took about nine months of writing, editing, and re-writing. We incorporated all information from our review of various codes of ethics and the draft standards that had been generated during the group training and working experiences. Hours were spent deciding what categories we needed to address and the critical components for each category. Comprehensiveness and clarity were our top priorities. This task was rather tedious, but we found a couple of writers in our group who helped pull it together.

Implementing the Final Document

Our final document, The Code of Professional SAP Standards, Practice and Ethics, was the result of nearly three years of hard, rewarding work. We then presented the document for review and comment to the Superintendent, Director of

Personnel, Board of Education, the school's legal counsel, and SAP Core Team members. Following approval from the board, the SAP code was implemented effective the 1996-1997 school year. Today all new staff members are oriented to the code, and all staff uses the code to guide them in daily ethical decision-making.

The Product

The purpose of the CPS is to assure that all decisions and actions of SAP personnel are filtered through the SAP's mission, core values, and professional practice standards. It includes five elements: 1) the mission statement of SAP; 2) the core aspirational values of the SAP; 3) the service components of the SAP; 4) professional standards for the delivery of SAP services; and 5) the procedures through which the CPS is linked to district-wide policies and disciplinary procedures.

Several types of statements in the CPS set forth standards of practice for those working in the SAP. There are traditional ethical standards (Thou shall...and Thou shall not...statements). There are standards that capture the folk wisdom of those who have worked in SAP (It has been our experience that...statements). And there are procedural directives that define not what to do in a particular situation but the process that must be followed (e.g., seeking consultation with the SAP Director). Procedural directives usually apply to situations of such intensity and complexity that no universally applicable standard could be generated. Also included are standards that reflect mutually agreed upon practices of professional and organizational etiquette (This is how we do things around here...statements).

The District 186 CPS articulates standards related to six areas of professional practice:

1. personal conduct outside the workplace (e.g., standards regarding breaches in morality/law, personal drug use/impairment)
2. conduct related to business practices (e.g., standards regarding conflicts of interests, vendor/consultant relationships, ownership and promotion of proprietary products)
3. general professional conduct (e.g., standards regarding representation of credentials, secondary employment, speech, and attire)
4. conduct in relationships with students and families (e.g., standards regarding confidentiality, dual relationships, boundaries of competence, gifts to/from students/families)

5. conduct in professional peer relationships (e.g., standards regarding sexual harassment, conflict resolution, allegations of professional misconduct)
6. conduct in response to threats to public safety (e.g., standards delineating the boundary between rights to confidentiality and duty to report)

Reviewing and Training

Since the code of ethics is a living document, it needs to be reviewed and refined on an ongoing basis. Yearly review is prudent. We have combined this step with continual training on the subject of ethics and boundaries in SAP. This regular review and training process have contributed greatly to the professionalism of our staff.

*Anyone who would like to receive a copy of the District 186 CPS may contact the senior author: Barbara Fafoglia, M.A., C.S.A.

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