

**Using an Ethical Decision-Making Model to Address**

**Ethical Dilemmas in School Counseling**

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### **Abstract**

School counselors frequently face ethical dilemmas. These dilemmas often involve relationships with principals, parents, and other stakeholders. School counselors may confront complex ethical issues involving confidentiality, student safety, parental rights, and social media. The American School Counselor Association recommends following an ethical decision-making model when dealing with complex ethical issues. An explanatory case study is provided along with sample dilemmas to illustrate how an ethical decision-making model might be used within the school setting.

*Keywords:* school counseling, ethics, ethical decision-making, ethical dilemmas

## **Using an Ethical Decision-Making Model to Address Ethical Dilemmas in School Counseling**

Ethics refer to moral and value-based decision making. Professional ethics extend beyond personal values and include behaviors deemed as good by the profession. These values have been codified and accepted by the counseling profession. Ethical codes were developed out of a need for counselors to morally solve practical problems in a consistent manner (Freeman, Engels, & Altekruise, 2004). Professional counselors, including school counselors, are required to adhere to an ethical code (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014). This article focuses on ethical dilemmas that can arise for school counselors and approaches school counselors can take to solving these ethical dilemmas.

In general, most ethical problems are not difficult for school counselors to resolve. However, complex ethical dilemmas can occur when the solution appears ambiguous. When counselors cannot find a clear decision, they will often review an ethical code (Freeman et al., 2004); however, knowing the ethical codes differs greatly from applying the ethical code (Lambie, Ieva, Mullen, & Hayes, 2011). At times ethical principles can be at odds with each other. When this happens, a complex ethical dilemma results (Freeman et al., 2004; Lazovsky, 2008). When faced with a complex ethical dilemma, school counselors may desire to use a simple solution (Foster & Black, 2007) such as only trusting their value judgment (Kitchener, 1984). They may also turn to the code of ethics for answers (Freeman et al., 2004). However, a more in-depth process is often needed.

The American Counseling Association published the most recent edition of its *Code of Ethics* in 2014. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) also published its most recent edition of the *Ethical Code for School Counselors*, an ethical code directly addressing many of the dilemmas unique to school counselors, in 2016. Both codes were designed to help counselors make decisions that will protect both the students they serve and the profession (Schmidt, 2008).

Ethical decisions can be difficult for school counselors because they are constantly seeking to minimize any harm while maximizing benefit to students (ACA, 2014; Lambie et al., 2011). School counselors often approach these ethical decisions with a personal sense of morality and values. These personal values provide the basis for the frequent small ethical decisions a school counselor must make (Levitt, Farry, & Mazzarella, 2015).

The way school counselors make ethical decisions may vary by their level of professional development (Foster & Black, 2007). As school counselors gain experience, they may rely more on intuition or instinct than on a more conscious process of ethical decision making (Levitt et al., 2015). At times school counselors may also consult a variety of sources such as colleagues, ethical codes, and school district policy when making decisions (Lambie et al., 2011).

### **Ethical Decision-Making Model**

When faced with an ethical dilemma, school counselors may refer to ethical codes for guidance (Bodenhorn, 2006; Freeman et al., 2004). Because school counselors regularly face ethical dilemmas (Bodenhorn, 2006; Hicks et al., 2014; Moyer, Sullivan & Growcock, 2012), they need a methodology for confronting these dilemmas.

The *Ethical Standards for School Counselors* states a school counselor should use an ethical decision-making model when faced with an ethical dilemma (ASCA, 2016).

School counselors should also document the steps of their decision-making (ASCA; Hicks et al., 2014).

Over 30 ethical decision-making models are available to school counselors (Cottone & Clause, 2000). These models differ in emphasis. Some focus on multicultural considerations or community while others focus on counselor education or school counseling (Levitt et al., 2015). While ethical models are prevalent in the literature (Remley & Herlihy, 2016), there is no clear criteria for selecting one model over another (Cottone & Claus, 2000). However, ASCA (2016) listed the Solutions to Ethical Problems in Schools (STEPS) as an example of a model designed for school counselors in the *Ethical Code for School Counselors*. This model was created by Carolyn Stone (2013). The model contains nine steps:

1. Define the problem emotionally and intellectually.
2. Apply the ASCA and ACA ethical codes and the law.
3. Consider the students' chronological and developmental levels.
4. Consider the setting, parental rights, and minors' rights.
5. Apply the moral principles.
6. Determine your potential courses of action and their consequences.
7. Evaluate the selected action.
8. Consult.
9. Implement the course of action.

This model provides school counselors with a clear enumerated approach to ethical decision-making. Using a concrete approach may provide comfort to some

counselors when faced with complex ethical dilemmas. This model will be used to address the explanatory case and ethical dilemmas that school counselors might encounter.

### **Case of Ms. Hannah**

Ms. Hannah is a first year school counselor at suburban elementary school in the southern United States. She holds a master's in school counseling and has completed a one year internship prior to accepting the position. During her master's degree, Ms. Hannah completed a course in counseling ethics. This course required Ms. Hannah to read both the ACA (2014) *Code of Ethics* and the ASCA (2016) *Ethical Code for School Counselors*. At the outset of her first year, Ms. Hannah felt confident she would be competent to practice ethically; however, Ms. Hannah encountered several ethical dilemmas soon after beginning at her new school. These ethical dilemmas are listed at the end of each section to illustrate possible ethical concerns. Following each dilemma an example of how to use the STEPS ethical decision-making model is provided.

### **Ethical Dilemmas Related to Confidentiality**

The law does not specify the rights of minors in regards to confidentiality (Wehrman, Williams, Field, & Schroeder, 2010). This may be one of the reasons confidentiality is the most frequently considered ethical dilemma (Bodenhorn, 2006). While the ACA (2014) *Code of Ethics* and ASCA (2016) *Ethical Code for School Counselors* offer specific guidelines on confidentiality, ethical problems arise when school counselors are conflicted between maintaining confidentiality and helping the student in other ways. Ethical dilemmas can also arise when a faculty member or administrator requests confidential information (Bodenhorn). Lazovsky (2008) noted that

serving the student and maintaining confidentiality can at times conflict. Additionally, some administrators require their school counselors to disclose infractions of the rules (O'Connell, 2012).

School counselors typically break confidentiality for justifiable reasons (Lazovsky, 2008). However, professional development levels of school counselors play a role in their choice of when to break confidentiality. Newly certified school counselors experience an internal conflict when requests from colleagues and administrators conflict with their ethical training. More experienced school counselors may become more lax over time about maintaining student confidentiality (Trice-Black, Kiper Riechel, & Shillingford, 2013)

School counselors typically provide some type of informed consent about confidentiality; however, not all school counselors maintain confidentiality to the same degree. School counselors may also differentiate between academic information and personal information when considering the limits to confidentiality (Lehr, Lehr, & Sumarah, 2007).

Limits to confidentiality can be discussed with students and faculty at the beginning of the school year (Froeschle & Crews, 2010). Students should be informed about limits to confidentiality prior to their initial counseling sessions (ASCA, 2016; Keim & Cobia, 2010). The school counselor should take into account student competency when requesting any type of informed consent (ACA, 2014; ASCA, 2016, Lehr et al., 2007).

## Ms. Hannah's Dilemma

A fourth grade girl named Julie was referred to Ms. Hannah. During the course of their visit, Julie tells Ms. Hannah her dad is in jail. Julie also says they have been living in hotels or in a friend's living room when her mom cannot afford a hotel. Julie begs Ms. Hannah not to tell anyone because she will get in trouble if her mom finds out she told. Ms. Hannah has met the mom, and believes mom would be receptive to help. Ms. Hannah also has a phone number for a local charity that helps with short-term housing. Should Ms. Hannah call mom to help Julie and her family? Does she risk getting Julie in trouble in an attempt to help?

To approach this problem using the STEPS ethical decision-making model, Ms. Hannah began by:

1. Defining the problem both emotionally and intellectually. Emotionally, Ms. Hannah has felt worried about Julie having a place to sleep. She also worried the relationship with Julie could be damaged if she violated confidentiality with the student who clearly needed support. Intellectually, she knew Julie's mom and suspected the mom would be receptive to help. She also hoped the mom would not be angry with Julie for telling this family secret.
2. Ms. Hannah then reviewed the ACA (2014) *Code of Ethics* and the ASCA (2016) *Ethical Standards for School Counselors*. She paid particular attention to A.2.e in the ASCA ethical standards. This stated a school counselor keeps all information confidential unless there is serious or foreseeable harm. It also stated a school counselor should seek consultation when unclear about what constitutes serious and foreseeable harm. Ms. Hannah was unsure if homelessness falls into this category.
3. Ms. Hannah then considered the chronological and developmental levels of the student. She noted that the student may not understand the seriousness of homelessness compared to the seriousness of getting in trouble with mom.



4. Next, she considered the setting, parental rights and minor's rights. She believed Julie has the right to confidentiality.
5. Ms. Hannah then applied moral principles. She believed strongly in being beneficent. This driving ethical principle made Ms. Hannah want to share the information. She was also concerned about nonmaleficence. She did not want to cause harm to Julie by her interference or harm the relationship she has formed with Julie.
6. Ms. Hannah determined a couple of potential courses of action and their consequences. If she helped the family find housing, it could benefit the family greatly but hurt the relationship she has with Julie. If she did not help the family find housing, the family would continue to suffer unnecessarily, but her relationship with Julie may remain intact. Ms. Hannah also noted Julie's absences from school had become more frequent, so there were academic consequences as well.
7. Ms. Hannah decided to tell Julie's mom about the housing. As she evaluated the selected course of action, she believed the benefits outweighed the harm.
8. Before taking action, Ms. Hannah consulted with another school counselor who had been assigned as her first year mentor. Her mentor suggested Ms. Hannah visit with Julie and discuss the problem with her first, illustrating the two options, before talking to mom. By doing this, she may preserve the relationships because Julie will know why Ms. Hannah was speaking to mom. Julie was an articulate and intelligent girl. Ms. Hannah believed she would be able to understand the dilemma.
9. Ms. Hannah visited with Julie. Julie's anxiety had already calmed down since the last visit. Julie listened to the dilemma and consented to telling mom about the community aid. Ms. Hannah then visited with mom and connected her with the resource.

### **Ethical Dilemmas Related to Student Safety**

Suicidal ideations and self-injurious behavior are common among teens (Pawłowska, Potembska, Zygo, & Olajossy, 2015). School counselors often address these issues, and the majority of school counselors feel competent to work with students who self-injure (Roberts-Dobie & Donatelle, 2007). When a school counselor works with a student who is self-injuring, they must be able to assess the level of risk to the student (Bernes & Bardick, 2007; Hall, Rushing, & Beale, 2010). However, formal risk assessments should be used with professional discretion and caution (ASCA, 2016). School counselors must also inform parents and/or authorities if the school counselor believes if a student is a danger to herself or others (ASCA, 2016; Huey, 2011).

Some school counselors may breach confidentiality more often in cases where signs of self-injury were visible. A school policy that defines when school counselors must break confidentiality in cases of student harm may aid the school counselor with knowing when to break confidentiality (Moyer, Sullivan, & Growcock, 2012). Many administrators have such policies in place at their schools (O'Connell, 2012).

Parents must be contacted in all cases of foreseeable harm, including threats to self or others (Hall et al., 2010); however, it may be helpful to provide students with a choice of how to communicate the situation with their parents (Froeschle & Crews, 2010). School counselors seek to provide students with autonomy whenever possible (ASCA, 2016).

Many students who are in need of mental health care are not receiving these services. Leaving these needs untreated can impact the student's academic success, social interactions, and escalate into additional struggles involving student safety and

physical health. Students from low income homes are at an even greater risk of these problems. While school counselors may desire to connect the student with services, the link between community programs and schools can be poor. This can leave the school counselor as the primary mental health provider for these students. This is a problem when many counselors do not feel adequately trained to address these problems (Walley, Grothaus, & Craigen, 2009). The problem is compounded by the ethical guideline stating a school counselor should provide only brief interventions (ASCA, 2016).

### **Ms. Hannah's Dilemma**

Jack, a fifth grader, was referred to Ms. Hannah for lack of motivation. Ms. Hannah realized Jack has many symptoms of severe depression. Ms. Hannah visited with Jack. Jack experienced some improvement after two visits. Jack was again referred to Ms. Hannah two weeks later. Ms. Hannah visited with Jack again, and sets up a conference with mom. During the parent conference, Ms. Hannah explained she had seen Jack three times, and was concerned about him. She listed all the symptoms she had seen without offering a diagnosis. She explained to his mom that the school district had a rule stating counselors can only see a child three times for an issue, and must offer a parent a list of outside counselors for additional help because school counselors only provide brief interventions. Mom stated she appreciated the help. Mom had also noticed the problem, and suspected Jack was purposely hitting his head on things; however, she did not have the time or money to take Jack to counseling. She asked if Ms. Hannah would see Jack for a few more sessions. Ms. Hannah believed her

director would reprimand her for agreeing, but also believed she must help Jack. Should Ms. Hannah violate the district policy to help Jack?

1. Using the STEPS ethical decision-making model, Ms. Hannah began by defining the problem emotionally and intellectually. Ms. Hannah wanted to help Jack and felt frustrated with mom because she believed mom was more unwilling than unable to take Jack to counseling. Ms. Hannah was also aware that one of the resources she provided mom was a counseling center that provides free counseling.
2. Ms. Hannah considered the ASCA and ACA ethical codes as she thought about the dilemma. She noted ASCA (2016, A.1.b) states school counselors only provide brief counseling and provide resources for long term counseling needs. She also noted section A.9.C (ASCA, 2016) which stated that in cases where a student is a danger to self a school counselor should emphasize the need to seek additional services. It also states a counselor may need to provide a report to Child Protective Services if the parents do not seek help.
3. Ms. Hannah then considered the chronological and developmental level of Jack. Jack was an 11-year-old boy. Lack of motivation to do school work was not uncommon among his peer group. Jack had never stated he wanted to hurt himself to Ms. Hannah. She had learned this from mom. This may have been due to Jack not being overly verbal about his emotional experience. This would have been age appropriate, especially if he comes from a home that does not support this kind of interaction.
4. Ms. Hannah also thought about the setting, parental rights and minor's rights. She noted that the parents have the right to direct the medical care of their children. She also noted the school setting was restrictive in terms of the time and care she could give one child because of her many responsibilities.
5. As Ms. Hannah thought about the dilemma, she applied moral and ethical principles. She weighed the parent's autonomy, the mom's ability to choose the care of her children, against beneficence, Ms. Hannah's desire to help this

- child. Ms. Hannah did not think she could adequately provide the care for Jack in the school setting. As she realized this, she considered the principle of veracity, being truthful with Jack's parents.
6. Ms. Hannah reviewed potential courses of action. She could attempt to see Jack, but did not believe she could fulfill this promise. She could also meet with mom again and emphasize the severity of the concern. Due to mom's resistance the first time, she did not know if this would be helpful.
  7. She decided to meet with mom. She believes this had the greatest potential for helping Jack. It also aligned with the ethical code.
  8. Before meeting with mom, Ms. Hannah consulted with her mentor. Her mentor suggests she once again provide the resources when Ms. Hannah meets with mom. She also suggested empathizing with mom's concerns about time and money. Ms. Hannah should remind mom that there was a free option available.
  9. Ms. Hannah implemented the course of action by once again meeting with mom, and attempted a spirit of collaboration and understanding while emphasizing the importance of Jack's safety.

### **Ethical Dilemmas Related to Parental Rights**

Parental rights are a common cause of ethical dilemmas for school counselors. Some school counselors believe parental rights create the most difficult ethical dilemmas. These dilemmas can include sharing information in cases of divorce and custody litigation, parents who request confidential information about their child, and dual relationships that can develop between parents and school counselors (Bodenhorn, 2006).

The *Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act* (FERPA; 1974) is a law designed to protect student information. If a school counselor releases any information without

parent consent, they have violated this protection. A student may also provide legal consent if the student has reached the age of majority. Parents may request all education records the school has regarding their children (Hall et al., 2010). School counselors must adhere to legal requirements, but their primary obligation is to the student (Huey, 2011). It may be helpful for school counselors to work with parents when they make records request and educate them about privacy and confidentiality rights (Huss, Bryant, & Mulet, 2008).

School counselors are obligated to report all cases of suspected neglect or abuse. If they fail to report abuse, they may be legally liable (Hall et al., 2010). Neglect can include a parent's failure to seek mental health treatment for their child (Froeschle & Crews, 2010). However, some school counselors do not report abuse because they have had negative past experiences reporting, they do not believe they have enough evidence, or they do not believe authorities will investigate the report (Bryant, 2009).

### **Ms. Hannah's Dilemma**

A fifth grader named Henry self-referred himself to Ms. Hannah. During their visit, Henry shared he was sexually attracted to other boys. Later that day, Henry's mother calls Ms. Hannah. The mom asks Ms. Hannah what she and Henry talked about. Ms. Hannah attempted to find out the reason behind the call, but Henry's mother persisted. Ms. Hannah did not ask Henry if she could share the information with anyone. She also did not know if the information would be helpful or hurtful if shared. How should she proceed?

1. Ms. Hannah approached this dilemma by defining the problem emotionally and intellectually. Ms. Hannah had a great desire to please and feared disappointing a parent in her new role as a school counselor. She also feared

- damaging the relationship with the student if she broke confidentiality. Additionally, she believed the information was extremely sensitive and the student had a right to decide when and with whom to share it.
2. Ms. Hannah referred to the ethical code and noticed A.1.f in the ASCA (2016) code. This stated school counselors have a primary obligation to keep student's information confidential while acknowledging a parent's right to be a "guiding voice in their children's lives."
  3. Henry was 11 years old. Ms. Hannah realized he was beginning to explore his sexuality and was at a vulnerable stage.
  4. Ms. Hannah also considered the student's right to give consent to reveal that information to his mom. Ms. Hannah had not sought or received consent to disclose any of the information. She did not know the family culture of the student, and did not know how well the information would be received by mom.
  5. She also believed this was a question of fidelity and nonmaleficence. Ms. Hannah informed all students before they began counseling that the session would be confidential with the exception of certain circumstances involving safety. Henry's Mom's request did not involve student safety, so she would be violating the spirit of good faith in which Henry shared the information. Ms. Hannah worried about causing unintentional harm.
  6. Ms. Hannah saw two options: tell Henry's mom the information and violate Henry's confidentiality or do not tell Henry's mom the information and risk mom complaining to her principal about her interference and refusal to share information about her child.
  7. Ms. Hannah believed the best course of action was to maintain confidentiality and risk mom's displeasure.
  8. However, she consulted her mentor before taking action. Her mentor suggests another option - meet with Henry and discuss with him what things

- he would like his mom to know. If there was information he felt comfortable sharing, Ms. Hannah could safely disclose that information to mom.
9. Ms. Hannah agreed that might be helpful. She met with Henry and he did not want mom to know about his attraction to boys yet, but he felt comfortable with her knowing about his academic frustrations. Ms. Hannah called mom and disclosed this information.

### **Ethical Dilemmas Related to the Behavior of Other Educators**

Teachers (Trice-Black et al., 2013) and administrators (O'Connell, 2012) may seek to know confidential details from counseling sessions. Some school counselors choose to breach confidentiality with the faculty member who referred the student (Lehr et al., 2007). Faculty requesting confidential information may be asking because of a misunderstanding of the school counseling role, and it can be helpful to educate the faculty about the limits of confidentiality (Trice-Black et al., 2015). However, some administrators may demand to know the details of a counseling session (O'Connell). These various demands can create a difficult environment for the school counselor. Navigating this environment requires political sensibilities to serve both the students and the stakeholders (Stone, 2010).

Relationships are an important factor in deciding many ethical dilemmas (Levitt et al., 2015). Dual relationships can further complicate matters. School counselors should avoid dual relationships with teachers and administrators (ASCA, 2016). To avoid dual relationships, school counselors should not counsel fellow faculty (Froeschle & Crews, 2010).



## Ms. Hannah's Dilemma

A teacher approached Ms. Hannah, and stated she believed a fifth grade boy in her class was using drugs. Ms. Hannah talked to the boy, and the boy admitted to smoking marijuana the summer before school started. He also claimed he has not used it since. After the visit, the principal approached Ms. Hannah, and asked what she discovered. How should Ms. Hannah respond?

Ms. Hannah approached this dilemma using the STEPS ethical decision-making model.

1. She was concerned about this student. While he stated that he only smoked marijuana once, she knew students sometimes provide pieces of information over time to test trust and avoid getting into too much trouble. She also worried that, if she did not tell her principal what he wanted to know, he would lose faith in her; however, sharing what the student confided in her would break confidentiality.
2. Ms. Hannah turned to the ethical codes for guidance with this dilemma. She noticed in the ASCA (2016, B.2.q) ethical standards that school counselors should collaborate with administrators to provide optimum services for students. She also noted section A.2.e which stated school counselors should keep information confidential except in cases of serious and foreseeable harm. She did not know if limited drug use would fall under this exception.
3. Ms. Hannah considered the student's developmental level. The student told her in confidence. Because the principal's role is to impose discipline, he may not have said the same thing if the principal was present. The student was also at an impressionable age. It was not likely a student this young was accessing drugs without help.
4. Ms. Hannah also wondered about the parent's right to know about the drug use. Because this can affect the wellbeing of the child, Ms. Hannah began to wonder if parents should be notified.

5. Ms. Hannah did not want to negatively affect the student's life. The student told her in confidence that the drug was used one time. There are additional questions about how the student accessed the drugs that could affect the long-term wellbeing of the student. In this case, fidelity to the student was opposed with nonmaleficence because her silence could potentially cause harm.
6. Ms. Hannah saw the following options: tell no one, tell the parent only, tell the principal only, or tell the principal and the parent. Each option had pros and cons. She believed that she must alert someone because of the age of the child and safety. She chose to tell the mom only.
7. She believed the parent has a right to know, but the principal did not need to know.
8. However, she decided to consult her mentor before taking action. Her mentor agreed that the developmental level and age of the child significantly increased the risk of access to and use of drugs, and the parent should be notified. She also agreed that the principal did not need to know because the incident was one time and happened away from school related activities. She suggested telling the principal that she wishes to maintain the confidentiality of the session, but she would alert him if a school safety issue arises.
9. Ms. Hannah followed these suggestions and met with the parents.

### **Ethical Dilemmas Related to Spirituality**

School counselors do not impose their personal values and beliefs on their students (ACA, 2014; ASCA, 2016). However, school counselors are allowed to discuss spiritual issues with their students. There is a difference between religion and spirituality, and recognizing that difference is fundamentally important in ethically working with spiritual issues. While separation between church and state protects students from government employees, including school counselors, from imposing a religion upon

them, discussion of a student's spirituality does not fall under this mandate. Spirituality differs from religion because it is highly personal and individualized. It involves the student's personal beliefs and experiences, and may be addressed in a counseling session (Dobmeier, 2011).

Because school counselors restrain themselves from imposing their beliefs (ACA, 2014; ASCA, 2016), they must find a balance between this restraint and helping the student develop greater awareness of their own spiritual beliefs (Lambie et al., 2008). School counselors are important in students' lives, and affect the way familial spirituality influences the spiritual development of their students (Davis, 2011). While school counselors may desire to use a laissez-faire approach to spirituality in order to avoid ethical conflict, this may not be ethical either because of the important role spirituality plays in a student's life (Magaldi-Dopman & Park-Taylor, 2014). However, school counselors fear addressing these issues because of a fear of litigation (Dobmeier, 2011; Lambie et al.). While school counselors may openly discuss spiritual issues with students (Lambie, Davis, & Miller, 2008), the school counselors must also be competent to work with spiritual issues (ACA, 2014; ASCA, 2016; Sink & Devlin, 2011).

### **Ms. Hannah's Dilemma**

During a visit, a 12-year-old girl named Tamatha shared with Ms. Hannah that she had doubts about her religion. Tamatha attended the same church as Ms. Hannah, and Ms. Hannah strongly believed in her faith. She also knew Tamatha's family was deeply devout, and would respond negatively to any suggestion of faithlessness. How should Ms. Hannah proceed?

Ms. Hannah approached this dilemma using the STEPS ethical decision-making model.

1. She began by looking at the problem emotionally and intellectually. She was very worried about Tamatha's decision. Ms. Hanna was aware that these feelings were based on her own spiritual beliefs. She was also aware that this biased her outlook. Additionally, she worried about her own reputation with this family and in the church. If this student told others she talked with Ms. Hannah about her faith, and then abandoned it, Ms. Hannah feared retribution from her spiritual community. She also feared Tamatha's family would discipline Tamatha if she discloses her doubts to them. While this was not a part of their faith in general, she knew Tamatha's father had a history of using discipline as a teaching tool in Tamatha's home. Ms. Hannah wanted to protect Tamatha from this reaction.
2. In the preamble, ASCA (2016) ethical standards stated that a student's spiritual identity should be respected and affirmed. Section B.3.i from the same ethical standards stated school counselors monitor their own awareness of prejudice against spiritual beliefs and seek to become a more competent counselor in this area.
3. Ms. Hannah knew that it was developmentally appropriate for Tamatha to question her spirituality and family of origin's beliefs. This was a major part of development and should not be inhibited.
4. However, she worried about the setting of the school as a place to discuss these issues. She remained worried that the community may turn on her if they found out she was having these discussions in the school. She also knew students have a right to a school counseling program that affirms their beliefs.
5. To impose her own beliefs on this student would violate the student's autonomy. However, Ms. Hannah believed giving improper spiritual guidance would harm the student and violate the principle of nonmaleficence. On the

- other hand, it would violate the principle of justice to push a certain system of beliefs. She began to wonder if it would just be better to avoid spirituality all together, but knew this may conflict with the principle of beneficence.
6. Ms. Hannah saw her options as to either avoid the issue during counseling, openly discuss the issue while trying to limit her own bias, or openly discuss this issue and try to help Tamatha understand the value of her family's belief system. She decided to try the second one to provide Tamatha support.
  7. She believed this would meet Tamatha's needs and would try not to worry about any community backlash that might result.
  8. Before taking action, she sought consultation from her mentor. Her mentor commended Ms. Hannah for being aware of her own bias. She also suggested that Ms. Hannah might need additional training and supervision on working with this issue. She suggested a book for Ms. Hannah to read and offered to connect her with another counselor in the district who had had a lot of experience with this issue for peer supervision. This would allow Ms. Hannah to support this student while meeting the ethical guidelines of competency.
  9. Ms. Hannah decided to read the book and met with the peer supervisor in conjunction with meeting with the student to discuss the issue of spirituality.

### **Ethical Dilemmas Related to Social Media**

Ethical issues involving social media include a student's right to privacy, maintaining professional boundaries, and maintaining professionalism (Mullen, Griffith, Greene, & Lambie, 2014). School counselors should maintain professional boundaries when working with student and parents. This helps avoid dual relationships which could impair objectivity (ASCA, 2016); however, boundary issues are complex (Bodenhorn, 2006). School counselors frequently participate with or live in the community and may

be connected with parents on social media for other reasons. Sometimes these reasons predate their employment as a school counselor.

Privacy can be a major concern when a school counselor uses social media. If a school counselor collects information about a student or family online, the school counselor may have violated the student or family's right to privacy (Harris & Robinson Kurpius, 2014). This can also go the other way. If a school counselor posts something about a student online, they can be guilty of violating that student's right to privacy. For example, a school counselor might post a synopsis of a student's successes for that academic year accompanied by a picture of the student. While this seems innocent, the school counselor may have violated the student's right to privacy if the school counselor did not first gain consent from the student and parents.

Social media can have a disinhibiting effect on those who interact through it. A school counselor may maintain professionalism at work, but may express things over social media that the school counselor would never say to a person or group in their physical presence (Mullen et al., 2014). School counselors have an obligation to behave professionally (ASCA, 2016). Their actions not only reflect the school counselor as an individual, but they also represent the profession of school counseling as a whole. When school counselors choose to post online, their words can reflect on the school and the district as well (Mullen et al.).

### **Ms. Hannah's Dilemma**

Ms. Hannah received a request to connect through a social media website from a mom with whom she had visited with several times that year. The mom had recently been through a divorce, and Ms. Hannah knew the mom was in need of support. She

also knew the mom had to take a second job to compensate for the change in income and could no longer come to school during school hours. How should Ms. Hannah proceed?

Ms. Hannah decided to use the STEPS ethical decision-making model to address this issue.

1. She began by considering her own thoughts and feelings about the problem. She wanted to help this mom by making herself more accessible. She also feared the mom would feel rejected if she declined the request. Ms. Hannah understood she was primarily responsible for the welfare of the student, but believed that helping the mom would help the student.
2. Ms. Hannah turned to the ethical codes for guidance. In the ASCA (2016) ethical standards, section A.1.d stated school counselors recognize that parents play a vital role in the lives of students. Section A.5.c from the same code stated school counselors avoid dual relationships with parents that might damage the student/counselor relationship. A.5.d stated school counselors maintain professional boundaries when connecting to parents through social media.
3. Ms. Hannah considered the developmental level of the student. The student was 6 years old and relied entirely on the support of her mom, who had sole custody of her.
4. Ms. Hannah noted the parent contacted her on her personal social media account. She maintained a school counseling account sanctioned by the district for school-wide communication purposes, but the parent sought out her personal account to request the social media connection.
5. Ms. Hannah was primarily concerned with the issue of beneficence, wanting to help. She was also aware having overly permeable boundaries could lead to harm of herself or the parent which would violate the principle of nonmaleficence.

6. She saw her options as either accept the connection request or deny it. She wanted to connect, but ultimately decided to deny the request.
7. She believed accepting the request would move the focus from helping the parent support the student to a more personal relationship with the parent, and it would cross the line of professional support.
8. Before she took action, she decided to consult with her mentor. Her mentor affirmed that accepting the friend request would create a dual relationship and violate Ms. Hannah's professional boundaries. She suggested that Ms. Hannah invite the parent to connect by phone during her lunch break when she needed to discuss an issue related to her daughter.
9. Ms. Hannah followed this suggestion by declining the request and calling the mom to set up a phone conference.

### **Conclusion**

The literature suggests confidentiality, student safety, parental rights, behavior of other educators, spirituality, and social media are the most commonly addressed categories of ethical concerns for school counselors (Bodenhorn, 2006; Davis, 2011; Froeschle & Crews, 2010; Hall et al., 2010; Harris & Robinson Kurpius, 2014; Hicks et al., 2014; Lambie et al., 2008; Mullen et al., 2014). Among these issues, confidentiality stood out as the most frequently addressed ethical concern. This concern often overlapped with many other ethical concerns facing school counselors (Bodenhorn, 2006).

Ethical issues occur frequently for school counselors. To address these issues responsibly a school counselor may refer to the ACA (2014) *Code of Ethics* and the ASCA (2016) *Ethical Standards for School Counselors*. However, some ethical issues are complex and ambiguous. A school counselor may not have a clear idea of how to



proceed. In these cases a school counselor may use an ethical decision-making model to aid in the decision making process.

Throughout this paper, the STEPS model was used to address ethical issues faced by Ms. Hannah. As Ms. Hannah went through the nine steps of the decision-making model, she gained clarity that helped her make a choice. By employing this model in a practical manner similar to the method demonstrated throughout this article, school counselors may resolve ethical dilemmas in a consistent and coherent way.

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