

Factors Influencing the Decision to Break Confidentiality With Adolescent Students:

A Survey of School Counselors

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### Abstract

In their work with adolescent students, school counselors often are faced with the ethical dilemma of whether to break confidentiality to report risk-taking and potentially dangerous behaviors to parents. This study reports the results of a national survey asking school counselors to rate the importance of multiple factors that influence their decision to break confidentiality with students. Based on responses from 200 school counselors, exploratory factor analysis was used to categorize these considerations into 4 factors: Dangerousness of the Behavior, Protecting the Student and Relationship, Compliance, and Student Characteristics. Respondents also provided additional considerations that influence their ethical decision-making; these additional considerations point to potential directions for future research.

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Issues surrounding student confidentiality, including determining when it is appropriate to break this confidentiality due to potentially dangerous behaviors, contribute to some of the most challenging and most frequent ethical dilemmas faced by mental healthcare providers working with risk-taking adolescent students (Bodenhorn, 2006; Jacob-Timm, 1999). School counselors are expected to respect their clients' right to privacy, but since their clients are most often minors, school counselors are also responsible for determining the extent to which parents should be included in the counseling process (Ledyard, 1998). According to ethical guidelines set forth by several professional organizations (e.g., American Counseling Association [ACA], 2005; American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2004), counselors have an ethical responsibility to break confidentiality when a client's behavior is dangerous enough to pose potential harm to the client or others. Given the age group and high number of students they serve, school counselors in middle and high school settings are especially likely to face the dilemma of whether or not breach of confidentiality is ethical and appropriate when students disclose that they are involved in potentially dangerous behaviors. The ASCA (2004) guidelines call for "careful deliberation" in determining whether the student's behavior constitutes "clear and imminent danger to the student or others" (p. 2). However, the concept of clear and imminent danger may have many different interpretations based on the individual who is making the decisions. Williams (2007) gives the example of students smoking cigarettes and whether a school counselor should or would break confidentiality based on the health risks to the student.

Yes, this behavior is dangerous, but is the danger imminent? School counselors may define “clear and imminent danger” in various ways, or may hesitate to break confidentiality due to multiple factors, such as concern that doing so will disrupt the trust between counselor and student. Thus, although ethical guidelines have been set forth, there are likely many factors that influence the decision to either protect or break confidentiality. Unfortunately, our understanding of the factors that influence this decision-making process with school counselors is limited.

Several researchers have explored the factors that influence ethical decision-making by mental health professionals working with children and adolescents. Chevalier and Lyon (1993) investigated ethical decision-making among school psychologists, and found that when faced with ethical dilemmas, school psychologists are likely to consider factors such as protecting the student’s rights, upholding personal standards, and upholding the professional code of ethics. Isaacs and Stone (1999) conducted a survey of school counselors and found that students’ age was a significant factor in determining the likelihood that counselors would break confidentiality to report several risk-taking behaviors, with this likelihood decreasing with older students. A survey study conducted with pediatric psychologists examined the importance of several factors when considering whether to break confidentiality with risk-taking adolescents (Sullivan, Ramirez, Rae, Razo, & George, 2002). This study found that, among the individual items, protecting the adolescent, intensity of risk-taking behavior, and apparent seriousness of risk-taking behavior were rated as most important, while gender of the client was rated as least important. When the individual items were subjected to factor analysis, two factors emerged that accounted for 40.2% of the variance among the

items: Negative Nature of the Behavior and Maintaining the Therapeutic Process. Further, a study conducted by Moyer and Sullivan (2008) found that school counselors' belief that it was ethical to break confidentiality and report risk-taking behaviors increased with increases in the intensity, frequency, and duration of the behaviors; similar patterns were discovered by Rae, Sullivan, Razo, George, and Ramirez (2002) in their research with pediatric psychologists.

The purpose of this study was to examine the relative importance of a set of contributing factors that may influence school counselors' decision to break confidentiality and report risk-taking and potentially dangerous behaviors to parents, using a more comprehensive set of items than in previous research. The researchers also wanted to investigate whether the item responses could be grouped into two latent factors, as they were in the Sullivan et al. (2002) study with pediatric psychologists.

## Method

### *Participants*

A total of 2000 randomly selected names were requested from the ASCA national membership data base, 1000 names of members describing themselves as high school counselors and 1000 of those describing themselves as middle school counselors. Due to a lack of available names in the middle school database along with several incorrect or undeliverable addresses, a total of 1554 school counselors were mailed the survey described below; 586 surveys were mailed to those describing themselves as middle school counselors and 968 were mailed to those describing themselves as high school counselors. Overall, 204 school counselors responded to the survey (13.1% response rate). 180 of these participants responded to the paper version

of the survey; 24 responded to the online version (see Procedure section below). Of the 204 completed surveys, 4 were removed from the statistical analyses conducted for this paper due to a high number of incomplete items or inappropriate responding; the sample used for the statistical analyses included responses from the remaining 200 participants.

The average age of the sample was 43.36 with a range of 24 to 66 years ( $SD = 11.21$ ). The mean number of licenses or certifications was 1.31 ( $SD = 0.63$ ); the majority of participants ( $n = 140$ , or 70.0%) reported having 1 license or certification. The mean number of years as a school counselor was 9.38 with a range of 1 to 35 years ( $SD = 8.23$ ); 66.0% of the sample ( $n = 132$ ) had 10 or fewer years of experience as a school counselor, and 12.0% ( $n = 24$ ) reported only 1 year of experience. More detailed characteristics of the respondents are presented in Table 1.

### *Measure*

This study is based on a section of a larger survey designed to assess school counselors' beliefs about breaking confidentiality with risk-taking adolescent students. In the first section of the larger survey measure, school counselors were asked to read a brief vignette describing a risk-taking adolescent student, and then rate the degree to which they believed it was ethical to break confidentiality when the student admitted to engaging in different behaviors (i.e., smoking, alcohol use, substance use, sexual behavior, self-mutilation, suicidal behavior, and antisocial behavior) of varying intensity, frequency, and duration. The results of the first section of the survey are presented elsewhere (Moyer & Sullivan, 2008).

Table 1

*Demographic Characteristics of Respondents*

	N	%
<b>Sex</b>		
Male	33	16.5
Female	166	83.0
Missing	1	0.5
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
Caucasian/White	175	87.5
Hispanic	8	4.0
African American	7	3.5
Native American	4	2.0
Asian or Pacific Islander	1	0.5
Other	1	0.5
Missing	4	2.0
<b>Educational Background (highest degree obtained)</b>		
Ph.D.	9	4.5
Ed.D.	13	6.5
M.A./M.S./M.S.W./M.Ed.	174	87.0
Other	3	1.5
Missing	1	0.5
<b>Student Population of Respondents' Schools</b>		
Less than 500	47	23.5
500 to 1000	73	36.5
1000 to 1500	32	16.0
1500 to 2000	21	10.5
Greater than 2000	27	13.5

The present study is based on the second section of the survey, which asked participants to rate the importance of 15 factors when determining whether to break confidentiality to report adolescent risk-taking behaviors to parents. Ratings were based on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (extremely unimportant) to 5 (extremely important). The items were similar to those used in the Sullivan et al. (2002) study, with the addition of several factors such as age of the student and complying with school district policies. All 15 items are presented in Table 2. Following these objective items, participants also were asked to describe any other factors or additional information that may influence their decision of whether to break confidentiality, and to describe their general philosophy regarding when it is appropriate to break confidentiality with risk-taking adolescents. It is important to note that this second section of the survey was independent of the first section, as the items were unrelated to the vignette, and respondents were not asked to consider any specific risk-taking behaviors; rather, items attempted to assess the importance of general considerations when deciding whether to break confidentiality. At the same time, it is impossible to determine whether the vignette had an influence on participants' responses to the second section of the survey; such influence is possible since it is presumed that all participants responded to the first section before responding to the second section, in which case their responses may have been influenced by the multiple risk-taking behaviors described in the first section.

Finally, the third section asked participants to provide demographic information such as sex, age, ethnicity, educational background (highest degree obtained), number of licenses and certifications, population of the school in which they work, and number

of years as a school counselor. These characteristics were not included in the present analyses as independent variables due to the homogeneity of the sample with regard to these characteristics.

### *Procedure*

Following approval by the institutional review board, participants were mailed a pamphlet containing the survey, a cover letter explaining the purpose of the study, and a self-addressed, stamped return envelope. After this initial round, the survey was formatted for online distribution using Survey Monkey. All of the participants in the sample were mailed a reminder asking them to either complete and return the paper version of the survey, or to access and complete the survey online. This process resulted in 24 online surveys completed and several additional paper surveys returned. Across paper and online versions, all responses were anonymous. 100% of the data were checked by at least two people (e.g., graduate assistant and one of the researchers) during the data coding and entry phase in order to ensure accuracy.

### Results

The mean and standard deviation for each item are presented in Table 2, along with percentages of item-response frequencies. These descriptive data indicate that the most highly-rated items were Apparent seriousness of the risk-taking behavior, Protecting the adolescent, and Intensity of risk-taking behavior. Based on item standard deviations, these 3 considerations were also those for which respondents indicated the most agreement; that is, most respondents rated these items as either somewhat or extremely important. The lowest-rated items were Gender of the student, Age of the student, and Avoiding legal problems for the adolescent, with Gender being rated as

Table 2

*Item Responses: Percentages and Means*

Items	% response					<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
	1	2	3	4	5		
1. Apparent seriousness of the risk-taking behavior	1.5	0.0	4.0	14.0	80.0	4.72	0.68
2. The negative effects of reporting on the family	15.0	13.0	25.5	31.0	14.5	3.17	1.27
3. Confidence that risky behavior has actually occurred	2.5	5.5	14.5	43.5	34.0	4.01	0.97
4. Upholding the law	1.0	7.0	13.5	25.5	53.0	4.23	1.00
5. Complying with school district policies	1.0	4.5	10.5	37.0	47.0	4.25	0.89
6. Protecting the adolescent	1.0	1.0	5.5	13.0	79.5	4.69	0.71
7. Avoiding legal problems for the adolescent	12.0	20.0	26.5	24.0	17.0	3.14	1.26
8. Not disrupting the process of counseling	7.0	14.0	27.5	41.5	9.0	3.32	1.05
9. Potential for risk-taking behavior to stop without telling parents	6.5	10.5	21.0	42.0	19.5	3.58	1.12
10. Likelihood that student will continue counseling after breaking confidentiality	8.5	21.0	26.5	33.5	10.5	3.17	1.13
11. Frequency of risk-taking behavior	1.5	3.5	6.5	27.5	61.0	4.43	0.88
12. Intensity of risk-taking behavior	2.0	1.5	5.0	19.0	72.5	4.59	0.82
13. Duration of risk-taking behavior	2.0	2.0	5.5	22.0	68.5	4.53	0.85
14. Gender of the student	60.0	8.5	26.0	3.5	1.5	1.77	1.05
15. Age of the student	24.0	11.5	17.0	31.0	16.0	3.04	1.43

*Note.* Rating scale: 1 = extremely unimportant, 2 = somewhat unimportant, 3 = neutral, 4 = somewhat important, 5 = extremely important. Percentages that do not add up to exactly 100 are the result of missing data and rounding.

much less important than the other considerations. Interestingly, Age of the student resulted in the least amount of agreement among respondents, based on standard deviation. Response percentages for this item also indicate that the responses were rather spread out among the response options.

Next, the researchers conducted a preliminary principal-components factor analysis with varimax rotation to explore the factor structure of the 15 items. Based on the initial component eigenvalues, item loadings (see Table 3), and scree plot, the researchers determined that a 4-factor solution best fit the data. With this initial impression of the items' factor structure, a second exploratory factor analysis using principal-axis factoring with varimax rotation was conducted. Given the results of the preliminary principal-components analysis, the principal-axis analysis was limited to 4 factors when setting up the analysis.

Results of the principal-axis analysis provided further support for a 4-factor model to fit the data. Based on the rotated solution, Factor 1 (eigenvalue = 2.76) included items 1, 3, 11, 12, and 13; Factor 2 (eigenvalue = 1.87) included items 2, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10; Factor 3 (eigenvalue = 1.21) included items 4 and 5; and Factor 4 (eigenvalue = 1.07) included items 14 and 15. The complete rotated solution for the principal-axis analysis is presented in Table 3. After considering the items within each factor, as well as each item's factor loading, the researchers named the factors as follows: Factor 1 = Dangerousness of the Behavior (18.4% of the item variance), Factor 2 = Protecting the Student and Relationship (12.5% of the item variance), Factor 3 = Compliance (8.1% of the item variance), and Factor 4 = Student Characteristics (7.1% of the item variance). Overall, the 4 factors accounted for 46.1% of the item variance. Given the eigenvalues,

Table 3

*Factor Loadings for the Rotated 4-Factor Solution*

Items	Factor Loadings			
	1	2	3	4
1. Apparent seriousness of the risk-taking behavior	<b>.26</b>	-.05	.20	-.06
2. The negative effects of reporting on the family	.16	<b>.41</b>	.14	.25
3. Confidence that risky behavior has actually occurred	<b>.36</b>	.20	.20	.12
4. Upholding the law	-.02	-.04	<b>.62</b>	.05
5. Complying with school district policies	.05	.02	<b>.74</b>	-.07
6. Protecting the adolescent	.12	<b>.32</b>	.26	-.04
7. Avoiding legal problems for the adolescent	.15	<b>.47</b>	.23	.07
8. Not disrupting the process of counseling	-.04	<b>.69</b>	-.05	.05
9. Potential for risk-taking behavior to stop without telling parents	.17	<b>.57</b>	-.15	.05
10. Likelihood that student will continue counseling after breaking confidentiality	.06	<b>.67</b>	-.10	.08
11. Frequency of risk-taking behavior	<b>.82</b>	.19	.07	.07
12. Intensity of risk-taking behavior	<b>.93</b>	.16	-.09	.09
13. Duration of risk-taking behavior	<b>.95</b>	.12	-.04	.07
14. Gender of the student	-.05	.05	-.02	<b>.84</b>
15. Age of the student	.13	.11	-.03	<b>.48</b>

*Note.* Boldface indicates loading of the item on its respective factor. Factor 1 = Dangerousness of the Behavior; Factor 2 = Protecting the Student and Relationship; Factor 3 = Compliance; Factor 4 = Student Characteristics.

variance accounted for, and number of items on each factor, Factors 1 and 2 are considered strong factors, while Factors 3 and 4 are relatively weaker factors. Further, some of the items (e.g., item 1, item 6) loaded similarly on two factors; in these cases the items were assigned to the factor with the highest loading. These item assignments also were consistent with the interpretation of the 4 factors.

The final stage of data analysis involved examination of the open-ended survey items, in which participants were asked to describe any other factors or additional information that may influence their decision of whether to break confidentiality, and to describe their general philosophy regarding when it is appropriate to break confidentiality with risk-taking adolescents. Other factors or considerations provided by respondents are presented in Table 4, organized into several different categories. The largest number of additional factors were considered “Student Factors”, as they were related to characteristics within the student (e.g., student’s emotional state, student’s maturity level, presence of disabilities). At the same time, additional considerations related to the behavior, family, history, parents, school, and support also were identified.

Some respondents provided more elaborate descriptions of the additional factors they consider when deciding whether to break confidentiality. A few examples of such elaborations that are particularly illuminating, and that contribute to our understanding of the list provided in Table 4, include responses based on *behavioral* factors (e.g., “Single occurrences of most risky behaviors don’t concern me as much as repeated attempts at these risky behaviors”; “Distinguish between experimentation and habit formation”; “With suicide and self-mutilation, it’s *always* important to break confidentiality”; and “Some of my decisions to break confidentiality are based on the number of risk taking

Table 4

*Additional Factors Provided by Respondents*

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Behavior Factors

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Impact of the behavior on the student

Impact of the behavior on other people

Immediacy of danger

Protecting the student from him/herself

Whether the student is engaging in multiple risk-taking behaviors at once

Purpose behind the behavior

Family Factors

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Consequences for the family

Violence or drug use in the home

Knowledge of abuse at home

Family history of physical or sexual abuse

Whether there is domestic violence in the home

History Factors

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Background information and history

History of risk-taking behaviors

Previous attempts at self-harm

History of mental health issues

History of failed interventions

### Parent Factors

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Previous communication with the family

Emotional stability of the parents

Parent's attitude towards parental responsibility

Parent's likely reaction to reporting

Parent's personality

Past history of parent's reaction to risk-taking behavior

If telling parents would harm the student

Involvement of parent in the student's life

Previous communication with parents

Responsiveness of parents

Relationship between student and parent

### School Factors

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School administration's standards

Input from teachers / administrators

Liability to the counselor and school if confidentiality is not broken

### Student Factors

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Cultural norms and values

The emotional state of the student

The student's character

Emotional stability of the student

Whether the student has a reputation for making up stories to get attention

Student's attitude towards their own behavior

Student's ability to self-reflect

Whether the student is in special education and has an Individualized Education Program

Whether the student has broken a behavioral contract with the counselor

Student's ethnicity

Whether the student is on medication

Student's maturity level

Student's success in school

Involvement with sports

Whether the student has a cognitive disability

The student's ability to work towards a positive change

How the student presents in session

Whether the student has remorse for the behavior

The student's attitude towards the behavior

#### Support Factors

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Whether the student is receiving other help from outside sources (other counseling, youth groups, etc.)

Whether the student has shared the information with anyone else

Whether reporting has the potential to make the situation worse

Knowledge of support available for student

Availability of other methods to help the student stop the behavior

Financial resources / healthcare insurance

Support system outside of school

If student needs help stopping the behavior

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*Note.* The categories used in this table were developed by the authors and are not empirically-based; rather, their purpose is purely organizational.

behaviors, i.e. a cluster, that would warrant notifying parents”), *family* factors (e.g., “Telling a parent about a son/daughter’s risky behavior may escalate an already unstable situation”; and “If parents are divorced, which parent will handle the information better”), and *school* factors (e.g., “Since I work for a school system, the school policy may over-ride confidentiality”; and “If I report every little thing, word would get out, and no one would tell me anything”). Many respondents also reported that they consult with other professionals (e.g., other counselors, school social workers, supervisors) in deciding whether to break confidentiality, and that they educate students about confidentiality at the beginning of the counseling relationship.

With regard to respondents’ general philosophy of when it is ethical to break confidentiality, the recurring theme was potential for harm to self or others, and illegal activities. Most participants provided responses similar to these: “If the risk taking behaviors could lead to physical harm to student or others. If the behavior could have long-term negative consequences” and “If they are taking extreme risks that could affect their health, mind, grades, relationships, etc., I believe parents, administrators or other authorities should be told.” Many respondents also noted the importance of the *imminence* of the danger. Other frequent responses were similar to these: “I always try to gain consent from student before breaking confidentiality. If they still do not want me to tell parents and I feel I should, I always tell the student first” and “I prefer to speak with the student first and give them a chance to speak with their parents first unless it is a situation of imminent danger.” Thus, many respondents stressed the importance of informing the student that they were going to report the behavior, and attempting to facilitate students’ reporting the behavior to parents themselves. These responses

suggest that respondents value the importance of maintaining the student-counselor relationship even when confidentiality must be broken (which is consistent with the Protecting the Student and Relationship factor identified in this study), and also that respondents value opportunities for students to take responsibility for their dangerous behaviors.

The researchers also asked respondents to list student behaviors other than those specified in the first section of the survey (i.e., smoking, alcohol use, substance use, sexual behavior, self-mutilation, suicidal behavior, and antisocial behavior) that they encountered in practice, and that caused them to question whether it was ethical to break confidentiality to report the behaviors. Responses included the following behaviors: pregnancy, abortion, involvement in gangs, cheating in school, bullying, sexually transmitted diseases, homicidal thoughts, high-risk internet activities, witnessing others' criminal activities, revealing sexual abuse or rape, eating disorders, taking other students' medications, vandalism, running away from home, sneaking out of the home, body piercing, having a parent who is suicidal, and sexual or dating relationships in which the partner is much older than the student.

### Discussion

At the end of the survey, one respondent noted: "I rely on many factors including my gut reaction to the disclosure. Not everything is cut and dry." Indeed, there are many gray areas and multiple factors in determining whether to break confidentiality; it is these factors and considerations that the researchers were interested in exploring, with the hope of providing professional school counselors with some guidance when faced with difficult ethical decisions.

The four factors identified via factor analysis represent a more comprehensive model than the two factors found in the Sullivan et al. (2002) survey of pediatric psychologists. The two strongest factors (i.e., Dangerousness of the Behavior and Protecting the Student and Relationship) are similar to the factors from the Sullivan et al. study, which they similarly named Negative Nature of the Behavior and Maintaining the Therapeutic Process. It is likely that our inclusion of more items and a greater number of respondents as compared to the Sullivan et al. study resulted in the identification of the two additional factors, Compliance and Student Characteristics, that are easily interpretable and that appear to play a role in counselors' decision-making. Overall, our 4-factor model accounted for 46.1% of the item variance, which is slightly more than the variance accounted for in the Sullivan et al. study.

The Dangerousness of the Behavior factor, and the strong endorsement of the individual items on that factor, likely reflects the "clear and imminent danger to the student or others" guideline from the ASCA ethical code (2004, p. 2). At the same time, the Protecting the Student and Relationship factor suggests the importance of attempting to maintain the counseling relationship even when confidentiality must be broken to report highly dangerous risk-taking behaviors. The presence of both of these factors illustrates that those surveyed seek to maintain a balance between protecting the student and ensuring they receive the therapeutic services they need.

With regard to the individual item responses (i.e., Table 2), many counselors did not perceive the student's age to be an important consideration. This finding was surprising, as many risk-taking behaviors may be seen as more developmentally appropriate and acceptable among older adolescents as compared to younger students.

At the same time, this item resulted in the least amount of agreement among respondents.

The additional factors identified by respondents (presented in Table 4) point to further considerations that should be included in future research, in order to determine whether these factors are perceived as important among a large sample of respondents. For example, respondents identified multiple student characteristics other than age and gender that might contribute to counselors' decision-making, in addition to history factors such as history of mental health issues. These additional factors suggest important questions such as: If the student had been previously diagnosed with a mood disorder, would this increase counselors' willingness to break confidentiality? What about previous diagnoses of conduct disorder or ADHD, which are characterized by poor impulse control (and may therefore compromise the student's judgment and behavioral inhibition)? Conversely, the identification of such factors as the student's involvement with sports and the student's support system suggests that school counselors consider protective factors in addition to risk factors when determining whether there is enough danger to warrant breaking confidentiality; such consideration may lead to more informed and well-reasoned decisions on the behalf of students. Clearly, there are a host of factors that play into counselors' decision-making processes, and it appears that many of these factors (or at least the intricacies thereof) have not been captured by previous research. It will be important to conduct follow-up research with a more comprehensive set of influencing factors for counselors to consider, in order to see whether they fall into underlying categories (such as those categories presented in Table 4) using factor analytic approaches.

These results must be interpreted in light of two central limitations with this study. First, the survey had a low response rate, although the total number of participants was adequate for the factor analytic procedures. Second, based on the number of additional responses provided by participants, the sample of items was incomplete, and a more comprehensive set of items may have led to the identification of additional underlying factors.

#### Implications for School Counselors

Respondents' identification of so many additional considerations points to the complexity of counselors' ethical decision-making when faced with dangerous student behaviors. Remley and Herlihy (2001) mention that when confronted with an ethical dilemma, school counselors should act as a reasonable counselor would in a similar situation in order to avoid legal problems. The factors identified in this study may provide professional school counselors with some guidance as they navigate their own ethical dilemmas. By identifying those considerations perceived to be most important among their peers (i.e., among a sample of "reasonable counselors"), the authors have provided school counselors with an empirical basis for including these factors in their ethical decision-making practices.

In addition, the authors would like to point out several ways that school counselors can best prepare themselves to deal with ethical dilemmas. (1) While it is always important to know and understand state and federal laws, it is also crucial to be up to date on local district policies and procedures. School counselors are encouraged to advocate for local and district-wide workshops that allow professionals to discuss local policies and circumstances that impact ethical decision-making. This

recommendation is consistent with our survey findings, in which complying with school district policies was identified as an important factor in making ethical decisions. (2) When faced with an ethical dilemma, school counselors should seek out consultation with colleagues and/or supervisors. The item responses presented in this study suggest that for some items, there was little agreement among school counselors with regard to the importance of these factors in reaching ethical decisions. Thus, different professionals are likely to have different opinions regarding when it is appropriate to break confidentiality (and how to reach that decision); listening to how others respond to similar situations may help in evaluating our decision-making strategies. Further, Cottone (2003) explained that school counselors are less susceptible to ethical challenges when they are linked to strong professional organizations. It is likely that these professional organizations provide important resources such as publications, position statements, and opportunities to consult with peers, and members can access these resources when faced with difficult ethical decisions. (3) Lastly, school counselors should constantly monitor their motives for action, whether this action involves lack of disclosure or disclosure of information to parents and/or guardians. Research supports the notion that counselors' values permeate every aspect of the counseling process, so it is crucial for counselors to understand their own values and beliefs and how they influence the way they work with students, including their ethical decision-making (Corey, Corey, & Callahan, 2007).

### Conclusion

Ethical decisions must be made on a daily basis and the most ambiguous or most difficult issues may be those that are encountered the majority of the time

(Millstein, 2000). Although this research sought to provide some insight into school counselors' considerations when making ethical decisions, the number of additional considerations and problematic risk-taking behaviors provided by respondents suggests that future research should include a wider range of considerations and risk-taking behaviors. While there are a host of ethical decision-making models already available, it seems as though there is still some need for additional guidance in how to best reach difficult ethical decisions. Eventually, the study of these considerations may spur the development of novel decision-making models that professionals can use when faced with ethical dilemmas.

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### Biographical Statement

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