



# Supporting Our School Employees

*How can an Employee Assistance Program help with the wide-ranging effects of school violence?*

School employees are under as much stress as ever in the wake of the recent school violence. Not only do teachers and other staff suffer trauma and stress when they go through these events first hand, but they could develop psychological distress after experiencing it through media coverage, social media posts or other sources like online videos. Secondary traumatic stress (STS), which is the emotional duress that results when an individual hears about the first-hand trauma experiences of another, typically affects those in “helping professions” like teaching and other school positions.

## ■ Managing Workplace Stress

You can take some basic steps to deal with increased stress levels in the workplace:

- Be alert to signs of stress among employees, and solicit input from employees and school leaders on this issue.
- Be aware that certain events — such as violent events, news of school violence, layoffs and other pressures — may trigger stress levels in employees beyond what is to be expected on a day-to-day basis.
- Arrange for on-site intervention and counseling services in the

event of a severe workplace trauma.

- Make employee assistance program services available so that workers have ready access to help with dealing with stress.

## ■ What is an Employee Assistance Program (EAP)?

An EAP is a service designed to help employees manage life’s challenges. Professional counselors and services can help employees and their eligible family members resolve a broad range of personal problems affecting their emotional health, family life and work life.

## ■ Considerations when selecting an EAP

What is the right EAP vendor for your district? Match your employees' needs to the services offered and intake process – both are important to selecting a program that will be valuable to your staff.

EAP services are often diverse, but they generally fall into three categories:

### 1. Personal support for individuals.

This typically includes counseling services, work/life benefits, and/or other tools and resources to help individuals address a variety of life concerns such as grief, stress, depression, marital and family issues, financial worries, substance abuse, work-related difficulties, life transitions and more.

**2. Consultation and training for management.** This is designed to help management better understand a range of workplace issues that may be impacting employee well-being and performance. This could include onsite training, education resources and assessment tools.

**3. Critical incident response.** This typically includes workplace violence, tragic accidents, the death of an employee and other events that might have caused emotional distress to those involved or who witnessed the incident. Some EAPs offer services to help your organization and your employees respond after an incident occurs.

Because it can be daunting for individuals to take that first step to use the EAP, much depends on the first contact. Therefore, you want the intake process to be comfortable, efficient and effective for your

employees and their families. Familiarize yourself with how the first point of contact works – who answers the call, if they work for the EAP vendor or are outsourced, and what kind of training they have. Ideally, they would have counseling, social work, or related experience rather than only serving as call-center staff.

## ■ How can your district benefit from an EAP?

According to the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy, EAPs can help all types of employers be more productive and efficient by contributing to:

- Decreased absenteeism.
- Reduced accidents and fewer workers' compensation claims.
- Greater employee retention.
- Fewer labor disputes.
- Significantly reduced medical costs (arising from early identification and treatment of individual mental health and substance issues).

## ■ Communicating the EAP

It's critical that employees and other EAP users understand the services available and how to access them. A communication plan that is clear and frequent (not just to introduce the EAP) can improve utilization and help achieve the results listed above.

For example, employees who are experiencing stressful life events (a new baby, moving, financial challenges, etc.) may not know the EAP includes services to help them. Year-round communications will remind employees that resources are available for these events. In addition to the frequency of your communications, it's crucial to get the message itself right. Many employers focus

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*To learn more, visit [wasb.org/legal-human-resources-services](http://wasb.org/legal-human-resources-services).*

their communications on counseling employees with substance abuse problems, for example, so that employees may believe the EAP is solely a program for that issue.

Ongoing communications about all of the services your EAP provides will help you make the most of this valuable program. In addition to providing information during employee orientation and employee benefits open enrollment, consider sending monthly messages in traditional and electronic formats about the EAP and how to use it.

High utilization of your EAP can translate to lower health plan costs because employees will use the program to ward off stress-related illnesses, meaning fewer trips to the doctor. As the employer, an EAP offers numerous other advantages as well. A happier and healthier workforce means more positive, productive and loyal employees. ■

*Associated Benefits and Risk Consulting is a member of the WASB Insurance Plan Endorsed Agency Program.*

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