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## School Counselors' Perceptions of and Recommendations for Increased Parent Involvement in Student Assistance Program Referrals

Joanna Harrington-Diorio  
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# Walden University

College of Education and Human Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Joanna Harrington-Diorio

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
and that any and all revisions required by  
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University

2024

Abstract

School Counselors' Perceptions of and Recommendations for Increased Parent

Involvement in Student Assistance Program Referrals

by

Joanna Harrington-Diorio

MA, Western Governors University, 2010

BS, McGill University, 1999

Project Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

August 2024

## Abstract

Parent refusal of Student Assistance Program (SAP) referrals limits their child's access to critical behavioral and mental support services offered by the school district, which may put the child at risk academically, socially, and emotionally. In a county in an eastern state, the problem that was addressed in this study was that students were not receiving the recommended professional services through the SAP. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore school counselors' perspectives about practices being used to educate and encourage parent involvement in SAP referrals. Using Epstein's school-family-community partnership model as the conceptual framework, the perspectives and recommendations of school counselors were explored regarding parent education and involvement in the SAP referral process at the study site. Data were collected from 11 school counselors from the study county using semistructured interviews. Data were analyzed using content analysis employing both a priori and open coding. Themes emerged on (a) strategies for parent communication, (b) strategies for parent involvement, (c) challenges regarding parent education and involvement, and (d) recommendations for strengthening parent education and involvement in SAP. The resulting project, a white paper with recommendations, was created to inform stakeholders of the study findings and propose actions for consideration. This study may support positive social change by strengthening stakeholders' understanding of strategies to increase parent education and involvement in the SAP referral process. Subsequently, this may increase SAP referral acceptances and student access to needed services, leading to improved academic, mental health, and behavioral outcomes for students.

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## Dedication

I would like to dedicate this work to my children, Skylah and Xander. They are my light and inspiration every day, and I am honored to be their mother. They have shown me unconditional love and support throughout my journey at Walden. Having to spend time apart from them while working on my degree was very difficult at times, and I thank them for giving me the space I needed to achieve my dream of becoming a doctor.

Skylah and Xander- may the road rise to meet you and the wind be at your back.  
My love for you has no bounds and no matter what, I am here for you; always. xox

## Acknowledgments

My dream of becoming a doctor was realized through the culmination of diligence, persistence, and a relentless drive to become a better version of myself both personally and professionally. This project represents my unwavering belief in the importance of mental health and my lifelong pursuit to help those around me find peace and comfort.

I am incredibly thankful to all the participants who graciously shared their time and thoughts with me, without whom this project would not have been possible. Thank you to the Walden University faculty who helped shape my education and opened my mind to new possibilities. Thanks to friends and family who have helped me on this journey, keeping me inspired, laughing, and feeling loved. No one does it alone. It takes a village, and mine is beautiful.

Thank you to my committee chairperson, Dr. Schroll, for giving me such meaningful insight and for trusting my journey. I knew very little about qualitative research before I started, and your patience and guidance were very appreciated.

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Thank you to my sister Phyllis, our family's first doctor. As my best friend, you have walked beside me holding my hand my entire life. You have shown me the true meaning of sisterly love and unwavering support through highs, lows, tears, laughs, loss, and more. You made me believe that I can do hard things. I love that you're my sister.

To my mom, Roslyn- you are the root of our family tree so deeply filled with love. Thank you for believing in me, cheering me on, and helping me become Dr. Joanna. You never held back my dreams, but rather lifted me up with loving arms and for that, I am forever grateful. Thank you to my children for being by my side, loving me, and bringing me endless joy. You are the reason I am who I am today. I love you beyond words and beyond measure.

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## Section 1: The Problem

### **The Local Problem**

The problem that was addressed in this study was that students were not receiving the recommended professional services through the Student Assistance Program (SAP) in the study county. Parent refusal to SAP referrals limits their child's access to critical behavioral and mental support services offered by the school. Despite efforts to involve parents in the SAP process, there is still a need for more parental involvement to increase the likelihood that a child will receive critical professional services. Through this basic qualitative study, I sought to close a gap in practice by getting parents more involved in the SAP process to ultimately accept their child's referral. Increasing parent involvement could help expand students' access to professional services offered by the school district, which may have a positive outcome on children's overall well-being.

The SAP serves as a mechanism to get a student referred to appropriate services within the school and community. The SAP was established by the Pennsylvania government in 1991 to help identify students from kindergarten to 12th grade who were experiencing problems due to substance abuse and mental health challenges (Pennsylvania Network for Student Assistance, n.d.). The overall goal of the SAP is to identify and help struggling students so they can succeed academically, graduate, and lead successful lives. The SAP teams for each school can include school counselors, teachers, principals, vice principals, school nurses, school psychologists, social workers, and other external agencies (Sekhar et al., 2021). Any stakeholder may submit a SAP referral for a child, including parents, students, or the child themselves. The SAP process

has four main stages: First, a referral is submitted on the student's behalf and the SAP team meets to discuss the referral and if intervention is needed. If they decide to proceed with the referral, then the parents and student are contacted, and if the parents accept the referral, then the child's recommended support services can begin. Regular follow-up meetings are scheduled with both the SAP team and the parents to ensure that the child's services are meeting expectations and to determine if further support is needed (Sekhar et al., 2023). If the parent refuses the referral, or does not respond to the team's outreach, then the case is closed and the child does not receive any professional services (Pennsylvania Network for Student Assistance, n.d.).

Major depression, anxiety, and suicide among American youth have risen abruptly over the last few decades. Contributing factors to youths' declining mental health have been linked to social, environmental, and economic aspects, mainly at home and school (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2022; Runkle et al., 2023). SAP referrals in Pennsylvania increased 24% from 2013 to 2018 (Sekhar et al., 2022b), and in 2021, 42% of American students felt persistently sad or hopeless, while 29% experienced poor mental health (CDC, 2023a). In the 2022–2023 school year, 100,438 SAP referrals were made in Pennsylvania schools, of which 40,202 were discontinued due to parent refusal (Pennsylvania Safe Schools Online, n.d.). These data indicate that approximately 40% of Pennsylvanian students are not receiving the SAP assistance they need. During the same time period in this study's county, 3,622 students were referred to the SAP, of which 1,065 were discontinued due to parental refusals or missing written permission (Pennsylvania Safe Schools Online, n.d.). The report also



cites lack of parent participation as the greatest influence on referral approvals, although there is little to no data explaining the reason behind a parent's SAP refusal (Pennsylvania Safe Schools Online, n.d.). This county can serve as evidence of a local and statewide problem exhibited from the fact that students in this county are not receiving the recommended professional referrals through the SAP. Filling the gap in practice relating to parental involvement and the SAP process may provide information to help local stakeholders increase children's access to mental and behavioral health services.

### **Rationale**

Students are not receiving the recommended professional services through the SAP in the study's county. Parent refusal to SAP referrals limits their child's access to critical behavioral and mental support services offered by the school. The Pennsylvania SAP is a collaboration between the Pennsylvania Department of Drug and Alcohol Programs, the Pennsylvania Department of Education, and the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services (Pennsylvania Network for Student Assistance, n.d.). The SAP team, which is required in all Pennsylvania public schools, consists of a group of interdisciplinary professionals trained to help students with a variety of obstacles that could potentially interrupt academic success (Pennsylvania Network for Student Assistance, n.d.; Sekhar et al., 2023). Pennsylvania's SAP is often cited as a national model due to its successful history of interdisciplinary collaborations since its inception in 1984 (Pennsylvania Network for Student Assistance, n.d.; Sekhar et al., 2023).

Pennsylvania-based researchers have shown its effectiveness over the years, substantiating the value of implementing the SAP program in all schools.

Researchers have shown that there is a significant relationship between family profiles and student suicide risk. A 2014 study found that students who were not referred to the SAP had twice the rate of suicide, as compared to their SAP-referred peers (Biddle et al., 2014). When assessing youth suicide risk factors, Weissinger et al. (2023) analyzed data from 12,760 SAP referrals in Pennsylvania and determined a relationship between family profiles and student suicide risk. The analysis showed that family factors (low, medium, and high risk) were related to student suicide risk, school-related issues, and mental health problems (Weissinger et al., 2023). Researchers have often emphasized the important role that parents play in their child's success in school (Marsh & Mathur, 2020; Stuckey et al., 2021; Weist et al., 2018). Researchers have also noted the value of preventative strategies and trainings for school personnel and parents as methods for decreasing mental-health-related suicides among Pennsylvanian students (Biddle et al., 2014; Weissinger et al., 2023).

A veteran school counselor from a neighboring county recounted a tragic situation that occurred after a parent's SAP refusal: "Both kids are now deceased. One shot her boyfriend and herself and the other one died of a drug overdose." Although this occurred in a neighboring county, their experience indicates that parental involvement in the SAP could help to prevent horrific tragedies. In another exchange, a school counselor from a different county described the barriers to SAP referrals:

Since we have to have parent involvement to move forward, the lack of parent participation puts the brakes to the process. And if they are adamant about not being involved, but now they know their child is on our radar, it makes some people even more .... sensitive, maybe.

In the most recent publication of the Pennsylvania Youth Survey (2021) that surveyed 246,081 students in Grades 6 through 12, the results showed that 36.2% of students agreed with the statement “at times I think I am no good at all” (p. 21), 38.3% claimed that they “felt sad or depressed MOST days in the past 12 months” (p. 21), and 18.1% of students had seriously considered attempting suicide. These findings directly relate to this basic qualitative study’s purpose, which was to explore school counselors’ perspectives about practices being used to educate parents and encourage parent involvement in SAP referrals. The results of this study could be used to close a gap in practice by getting parents more involved in the SAP process and possibly more accepting of their child’s referral. Increasing parent involvement could help expand students’ access to professional services, which may support a positive outcome for children’s overall wellness.

The reality is that school counselors and school psychologists receive little training in family counseling, systems theories, and models in their graduate studies. Both school counselors and school psychologists have been found to help facilitate conversations with parents of troubled teens (Carlson et al., 2021). Pennsylvania SAP teams have requested further training in their top three areas of concern: mental health issues, trauma, and parent engagement strategies (Sekhar et al., 2022a). The focus of this

study was on the parent involvement aspect as it relates to getting parents more involved in the SAP process and approving the SAP referrals so that critical mental health services can be provided to the students identified with the greatest need.

### **Definition of Terms**

This section includes the terms and scholarly definitions that are specific to this project study. The terms and definitions will facilitate readers' comprehension of the terms used in this study related to the phenomenon, literature, and conceptual framework.

*Parent involvement:* The definition of parental involvement has been described as follows:

Parents being actively committed to spending time to assist their children's academic and general development ... Home activities entail doing schoolwork with children at home and at school, doing volunteer activities, attending meetings, and communicating with teachers about their children's academic and behavior progress. (Cook, 2024, p. 2)

*Student Assistance Program (SAP) referral:* A SAP referral is the first stage of the SAP that allows the SAP team to open a case file on the student in question and to proceed with the referral processes (Pennsylvania Network for Student Assistance Services [PNSAS], 2023).

*School counselor:* According to the American School Counselor Association [ASCA] (2023), school counselors are "highly educated, professionally certified individuals who help students succeed in school and plan their career. An integral part of

the total education system, school counselors help students form healthy goals, mindsets and behaviors” (p. 1).

*Student Assistance Program (SAP):* SAP is a state program, overseen by the PNSAS, to identify and address issues that pose a barrier to student academic success (Sekhar et al., 2023).

### **Significance of the Study**

In the 2022–2023 school year, approximately 40% of Pennsylvanian students were unable to access critical behavioral and mental support services due in part to parent refusals to their SAP referrals (Pennsylvania Safe Schools Online, n.d.). This study was significant because the findings provided information to support formulating recommendations that will help school counselors fill a gap in practice to increase parent involvement in their child’s SAP referral. A rise in parent involvement may lead to an increased acceptance rate of SAP referrals, which could result in improved student access to professional mental and behavioral health services. This information may also help inform school counselors about what resources are needed to increase parent involvement in the SAP so that their child can be provided professional services. Runkle et al. (2023) noted that major depression, anxiety, and suicide among American adolescents has risen abruptly over the last few decades. They identified several contributing factors such as social, environmental, and economic factors that contributed to negative mental health outcomes (Runkle et al., 2023). Rohrig and Puliafico (2018) explained that chronic medical illness in children is a contributing factor in behavioral and emotional problems as these youth tend to miss more school and suffer academically as a result. Mamat et al.

(2016) noted the importance of parental involvement in helping “to facilitate the teachers, develop children's self through the emotions, behavior and self-concept” (p. 106).

Positive social change may result from improving parental involvement in the SAP referral process, increased SAP referral acceptances leading to improved academic, mental health, and behavioral outcomes for children in the study county.

When a student is referred to the SAP, a team of stakeholders become involved in the case, including teachers, principals, school counselors, social workers, and parents. Without parental approval, the process is discontinued, and the student cannot be recommended for services (Pennsylvania Safe Schools Online, n.d.). According to Sekhar et al. (2022b), between 2013 and 2018, parental refusals comprised 39% of discontinued SAP referrals in Pennsylvania. In the 2022–2023 school year, there were 100,438 SAP referrals made in Pennsylvania schools, of which 40,202 were discontinued due to parent refusal (Pennsylvania Safe Schools Online, n.d.). These data indicate that approximately 40% of Pennsylvanian students are not receiving the SAP assistance they need based on school staff recommendations. In the study county for the same school year, there were 3,622 SAP referrals, of which 1,065 were discontinued due to parent refusal (Pennsylvania Safe Schools Online, n.d.). The study county has a lower parental SAP refusals rate than the state, with approximately 30% of parents refusing the SAP.

Parental involvement in school counseling decisions has been found to have a large positive impact on students receiving critical referrals. However, the importance of guiding parents through their child’s mental health issues has long been a challenge permeating both schools and the medical community (Hoover & Bostic, 2021; Mac Iver

et al., 2015). Eugene et al. (2021) determined that connectedness (between school climate and peer victimization) was higher in schools with more parental involvement. Their study provided more evidence for the impactful role that parents play with regards to their child, school climate, and peer victimizations (Eugene et al., 2021). This study has the potential to result in positive social change by helping parents become more involved in the SAP process, which may lead to a better understanding and more parental approvals of the SAP. Students who receive the necessary referral services have the potential to rise above academic, mental, and social challenges to live healthy, fulfilling lives.

### **Research Questions**

Two research questions were developed in accordance with the problem and purpose, as a means to explore perspectives of school counselors in this eastern state on the challenges they face when trying to involve parents in the SAP referral process.

RQ1: What are K–12 school counselors’ perspectives about the current practices being used to educate parents and encourage their involvement in SAP referrals in one western Pennsylvania county?

RQ2: What are K–12 school counselors’ recommendations for improving parent involvement in order to increase SAP approvals?

### **Review of the Literature**

In the 2022–2023 school year, statewide data for Pennsylvania showed that approximately 40% of children’s SAP referrals had been refused by parents (Pennsylvania Safe Schools Online, n.d.). That is to say that potentially 40% of students,

who have parents refuse their students' access to services that would be afforded through the SAP referral process, are not able to access the necessary mental health and psychological and academic support services that they might otherwise have access to with parent approval and involvement in the SAP referral. The problem that was addressed in this basic qualitative study was that students were not receiving the recommended professional services through the SAP in the study county. Parent refusal to SAP referrals limits their child's access to critical behavioral and mental support services offered by the school.

To better understand the research problem, I begin this review of literature with the definition and description of Epstein's conceptual framework, followed by a review of these topics relating back to the research problem and purpose: history of SAP research in Pennsylvania, mental and behavioral health of children and adolescents, school counselor roles and responsibilities, parents' involvement in their child's mental and behavioral health, and the school and family partnership. In the following section, I discuss the conceptual framework used for this basic qualitative study.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Parent involvement is a critical component in the quality of a child's education from kindergarten through 12th grade. Increasing parent awareness and involvement in their child's emotional and behavioral health has proven to be an effective method for preventing and treating childhood anxiety disorders, suicidal ideations, depression, drug abuse, and school avoidance (Carlson et al., 2021; CDC, 2022a; Kass et al., 2023). Moreover, strengthening partnerships between home and school can improve school



climate, connect families with others in the school and community, and provide families with services and support (Epstein et al., 2002, 2021). With increased interactions between schools, families, and the community, students are more likely to receive consistent messaging on the importance of mental and behavior health, and of staying in school (Epstein et al., 2002, 2021; Newman et al., 2019).

The conceptual framework for this study was Joyce Epstein's school–family–community partnership model (PM), an influential framework that focuses on nurturing the relationships between schools, families, and communities (Epstein & Becker, 1982). The development of Epstein's PM integrates and expands upon Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, Leichter's educational insights of families as educators, Litwak and Meyer's sociological perspectives on connections of professional and nonprofessional institutions and individuals, and Seeley's emphasis on shared responsibilities (Epstein, 1992). The PM's framework of "overlapping spheres of influence" developed from historical sociological and psychological research that defined the connections between families and schools as either separate, sequenced, embedded, or overlapping influences upon one another (Epstein, 1992). Epstein's overlapping spheres of influence framework evolved into the PM framework, which outlines six types of involvement and a multistep program that includes a six-step action plan, designating action teams, and achieving partnership goals within 1 to 3 years (Epstein et al., 2002). The PM framework has been thoroughly researched and tested over the past 40 years with sustained positive results and has proven to be an effective model for increasing partnerships between school, family, and community stakeholders (Bower & Griffin, 2011; Epstein et al., 2011).

The PM defines six types of involvement:

Type 1 Parenting: Help all families establish home environments to support children as students; Type 2 Communicating: Design effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school programs and children's progress; Type 3 Volunteering: Recruit and organize parent help and support; Type 4 Learning at Home: Provide information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decision, and planning; Type 5 Decision Making: Include parents in school decisions, developing parent leaders and representatives; Type 6 Collaborating with Community: Identify and integrate resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development. (Organizing Engagement, 2024)

Based on the research problem and research questions of this qualitative study, I focused on three types of involvement; Types 1, 2, and 6. Table 1 reflects the involvement types of Epstein's PM that were used as a conceptual framework for this study.

**Table 1***Epstein's Partnership Model*

Type	Definition
Type 1 Parenting	Help all families establish home environments to support children as students.
Type 2 Communicating	Design effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school programs and their children's progress.
Type 6 Collaborating with the Community	Identify and integrate resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development.

*Note.* Information from Organizing Engagement (2024).

The PM is an influential framework that is scattered throughout parental school involvement research of the last 40 years. Epstein redefined the connections between schools, families, and communities as “overlapping spheres of influence” where the stakeholders share a combined responsibility for the child’s overall success (Organizing Engagement, 2024). The ways in which schools care about children are reflected in the way schools care about the children’s families as well (Epstein, 2018). If educators view students as children (and not simply pupils), they are more likely to see both the family and the community as partners with the school (Organizing Engagement, 2024). By employing a partnership model and recognizing their shared overlapping interests in the

child's welfare, stakeholders can work together to create improved programming and opportunities for students (Epstein et al., 2002, 2021).

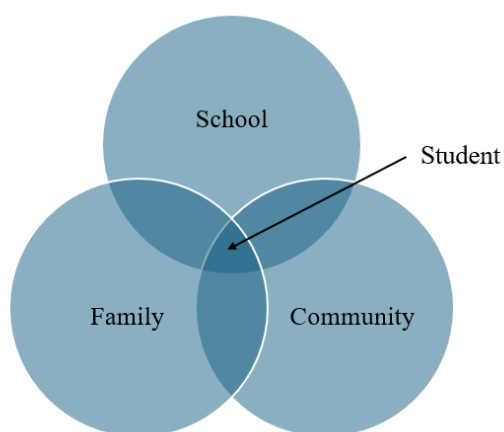
In the early 1990s, Epstein proposed the PM as a more effective way to unite the three areas of a child's life. Early theorists regarded families and schools as separate, disconnected entities, but Epstein's research demonstrated that schools and families function best when they work together in unison (Bower & Griffin, 2011; Epstein et al., 2002). She also provided proof that the overlapping areas of both the school and family spheres correlated to increased student success (Epstein et al., 2021). Epstein defined the term "school-like families and family-like schools" as the crucial roles and actions that families and schools play in unison with one another (Epstein, 2018). In "school-like families," the parent's responsibility is to support, motivate, and work towards advancing their child's academic skills (Epstein, 2018; Organizing Engagement, 2024). In the home, this might be helping with homework, working on school projects, or doing extra academic activities with the child. In Epstein's model, everyday life at home includes school activities as part of the families' regular routine. "Family-like schools" describes how the school climate resembles that of a caring family, such as providing individual attention and care to each student, much like in a family setting (Epstein, 2018; Organizing Engagement, 2024). Through this lens, the school stakeholders adapt rules and policies to the needs of individual students and their unique circumstances (Newman et al., 2019). In using the PM, Epstein focused on encouraging open, two-way conversations between home, school, and community by building stronger relationships where the spheres overlap. As a result of Epstein's overlapping spheres of influence and

the six-step action plan, schools, families, and communities develop a mutually beneficial coexistence that ultimately benefits each child within the school (Epstein et al., 2021).

Figure 1 depicts Epstein's overlapping spheres of influence framework.

**Figure 1**

*Epstein's Overlapping Spheres of Influence*



The PM has been effective across grades, races, and socioeconomic classes to increase family involvement, and it continues to provide a consistent and effective framework for improving student success rates (Bower & Griffin, 2011; Epstein et al., 2011, 2021; Mamat et al., 2016). A high school in Ohio, for example, demonstrated the PM's Type 1 Parenting and Type 2 Communicating by establishing parent support groups to educate families on ways to help their children successfully transition from middle to high school (Epstein et al., 2021). The results of the support groups were beneficial as they gave parents a chance to share their own concerns and facilitated dialogue about the importance of adolescent mental and behavioral health. In an example of Type 1

Parenting, Type 2 Communicating, and Type 6 Collaborating with the community, Dikel (2019) described how one district partnered with medical providers to design a checklist of various mental health disorder symptoms in order to share it with educators and families. The checklist helped stakeholders familiarize themselves with mental health disorder symptoms, thereby creating more opportunities to identify and help children in need (Dikel, 2019).

The problem that was addressed in this study was that students were not receiving the recommended professional services through the SAP in the study county. Epstein's Type 1 Parenting, Type 2 Communicating, and Type 6 Collaborating with community of the PM framework aligned with my study's research questions and problem statement. The PM emphasizes the importance of the overlapping spheres of influence and underscores the partnerships between families, schools, and communities as critical components to a student's success. Moreover, the PM's three types of involvement used in this study also corresponded to the study's purpose, which was to explore school counselors' perspectives about practices being used to educate parents and encourage parent involvement in SAP referrals. The research questions were developed to gain a deeper understanding of the relationships between the overlapping spheres of influence (parent, school, community) within the study county. The interview questions were designed using the PM, problem statement, purpose, and research questions to explore the practices being used to educate and involve parents in the SAP. Based on the PM, a strong partnership between parent, school, and community is the key to successful, healthy students. Therefore, the interview questions helped determine what practices

were being done as well as possible recommendations for increased parent involvement in the SAP process. The PM's three types of involvement, Type 1 Parenting, Type 2 Communicating, and Type 6 Collaborating with Community, were used as themes for a priori deductive coding in the data analysis section. The results of the deductive and inductive data analyses helped determine the study project's direction and white paper.

### **Review of the Broader Problem**

In this literature review, the problem statement and research questions guided my search within the Walden University library. I used ERIC, SAGE, Education Source, and ProQuest to search for peer-reviewed articles between 2019 and 2024 using key words *school counselor, guidance counselor, counselor, parent, guardian, parent involvement, parental involvement, engagement, parent refusal to treatment, parent refusal to referral, student assistance program, student assistance services, SAP, student assistance, teen, teenager, adolescent, school-aged, student, pupil, school, mental health, behavioral health, and Pennsylvania*. In addition to peer-reviewed journal articles, I also found the Pennsylvania Department of Education and the Pennsylvania Network for Student Assistance (PNSAS) websites to be invaluable sources for Pennsylvania-specific data and information about the SAP.

For the bulk of my literature review, I focused on examining the history of SAP research, the roles and responsibilities of school counselors, the benefits of parental involvement in schools, the mental and behavioral health of children and teens, and the school–family partnerships. Expanding outwards from the Pennsylvania focus, I discovered that the CDC had done extensive longitudinal studies collecting significant

data over the past 10 years covering multiple areas of this study. Their data included a national view of children's mental and behavioral health trends, including preventative and protective plans for schools, parents, and community. In addition to these topics, I researched my conceptual framework, Epstein's PM, focusing on its development, implementation, and implications with regards to home-school-community partnerships and involvement.

The problem that drove this study was that students were not receiving the recommended professional services through the SAP in the study county. A parent's SAP referral refusal leaves the child unable to access professional services provided by the school. The broader problem addressed in this study pertained to state and nationwide concerns associated with the increasing number of mental and behavioral health needs of American students. The literature review explores the history of SAP research, mental and behavioral health needs of students, roles and responsibilities of school counselors, the impact of parental involvement, and the school-family partnership. It also addresses the factors that may contribute to parent SAP refusals and parent involvement, as they relate to student access to professional services. Epstein's conceptual framework served as the project study's guiding model for designing effective strategies to enhance home-school-community relationships, strengthening parent involvement, and hopefully increasing SAP referral acceptance rates.

### ***History of SAP Research in Pennsylvania***

The SAP is unique to Pennsylvanian elementary, middle, and high schools and yields a yearly report of referrals by county, month, grade, gender, race, reason, referral



source, recommendation, and treatment. During the 2022–2023 school year, there were 100,438 SAP referrals reported in Pennsylvania, with 3,622 referrals occurring in the study county (Pennsylvania Network for Student Assistance [PNSAS], 2023). Despite three decades of data collection, very few researchers have analyzed the trends, patterns, and outcomes of SAP historical data. In 2014, Biddle et al. examined SAP data from 1997–2006 to determine if relationships existed between participation of students at risk of suicide in the SAP and their educational outcomes. They stated that this study was the only available evidence at the time regarding Pennsylvania’s SAP and educational outcomes of suicidal students (Biddle et al., 2014). It was concluded that students who received more SAP services may have experienced greater positive effects, helping to address suicide and substance abuse issues. Wang et al. (2018) surveyed 1294 rural Pennsylvanian students in Grades 9–11 over a 3-year period, who self-reported a range of mental health improvements and declines over the 3 years. Their findings noted the impact of supportive school and community environments to promote positive student emotional wellness, while negative parent–child relationships and peer smoking and drinking were related to negative student emotional wellness (Wang et al., 2018).

Two Pennsylvanian studies occurred in 2021, both researching the impacts of depression and universal depression screening among Pennsylvania students. Stuckey et al. (2021) used qualitative focus groups of Pennsylvanian parents and students to understand parent and adolescent perceptions of in-school depression screening and barriers to seeking help. Sekhar et al. (2021) surveyed 12,909 Pennsylvanian students in Grades 9–12 to determine whether universal or targeted in-school depression screening

produced better results leading to service referral. Both studies' findings, discussed more in the next section, found that depression awareness, barriers, and screenings played large roles in determining Pennsylvanian students' mental health.

Sekhar et al. (2022a) noted in their research findings, when they analyzed SAP data between 2013 and 2018, that there were 352,640 SAP referrals made in Pennsylvania during that five-year span. When they examined the most frequent reasons that a student was referred to the SAP, the most common reason was for behavioral concerns (31%), academic concerns (14%), and family concerns (10%) (Sekhar et al., 2022b). The primary recommendation (55%) following the SAP screenings was for further mental health, behavior health, or drug and alcohol assessments (Sekhar et al., 2022a). When they explored the role of parents in the SAP, 68% of the SAP cases received parental permission to proceed, 86% of which included parent/guardian participation (Sekhar et al., 2022a). One of the most significant data points that they observed in their research, was that 39% of cases were discontinued due to parent refusal or lack of permission to proceed (Pennsylvania Network for Student Assistance, 2023; Sekhar et al., 2022b). When comparing mental health treatment between genders, Sekhar et al. (2022b) analyzed SAP data from 2013-2018 and found that females referred to SAP were more often already in a treatment program and that SAP refusals from parents and students were higher among males.

There is agreement among researchers that the Covid-19 pandemic had significant emotional impacts on school-aged children. According to Sekhar et al. (2023), PNSAS partnered with the Penn State College of Medicine in 2020 to evaluate the SAP's

strengths and limitations in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite the SAP's thirty-year history in Pennsylvanian schools, it was only in 2023 that Sekhar et al. reported the first ever formal evaluation of data collected from all 1003 SAP teams across the state. In 2023, Weissinger et al. also reported the first ever research to explore the connections between family profiles and student suicide risk based on years of SAP data. Although there is more work to be done, it is evident from the SAP research findings that the data collected over the past thirty years can be an invaluable resource for determining the wellness levels of Pennsylvanian students and whether they are receiving adequate professional services. Moreover, the data can also help researchers identify any gaps in practice and how to better address students' and families' needs with professional services.

### ***Mental and Behavioral Health of Children and Adolescents***

Behavioral concerns are often precursors to academic concerns, given the enormous physical and emotional changes that occur during the school-aged years. To gain a more complete understanding of children's mental and behavioral health development, it is necessary to recognize contributing factors and their potential outcomes (Wang et al., 2018). The CDC's (2023b) *Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Data Summary & Trends Report 2011-2021* revealed that mental health among American students is declining. In 2021, more than "40% of high school students reported feeling so sad and hopeless that they could not engage in their regular activities for at least two weeks" (CDC, 2023b, p. 4). As an example of female students' declining mental health, the CDC's (2023b) report revealed that nearly 30% of female students had drunk alcohol

in the past 30 days, and that almost 20% of female students had experienced sexual violence in the past year.

Children can demonstrate both external and internal signs of emotional wellness. In Weist et al.'s (2018) analytic report on aligning positive behavior interventions and supports with expanded school mental health services within the multitiered system of support, their findings emphasized the need to focus on children's less detectable (internalized) signs and symptoms. Internalized mental and behavioral health issues such as depression, anxiety, and traumatic experiences may be harder to identify in children which may in turn make it more challenging to provide them professional services (Carlson et al., 2021; Donohue et al., 2022). Students' internalizing behavior is less noticeable but equally concerning, as studied qualitatively by Carlson et al. (2021), who provided additional examples of internalizing behavior such as absenteeism, withdrawing from conversation and interaction, incomplete work, and excessive trips to the nurse or bathroom. Similarly, Henry and Bryan's (2021) qualitative study interviewing twenty school-aged children found that internalizing problems can lead to substance abuse, violence, and suicidal thoughts and behaviors. Students suffering with internalizing behaviors can also be those who are overperforming and excelling academically and/or athletically, according to a review of scientific data by Hoover and Bostic (2021). They noted in their literature review that these students often develop coping strategies to fight feelings of anxiety, stress, and inadequacy towards others (Hoover & Bostic, 2021). From a medical standpoint, McCabe's (2021) qualitative research analysis of primary care physician interview conclusions agreed with Hoover and Bostic's (2021) results that

overperformers are less likely to be the target of proactive and supportive responses because they *appear* to be well-adjusted and flourishing in school. Dikel (2019) described these students as ‘*internalizers*’ because they keep their problems to themselves while actively engaging in sports, social groups, and academics, all the while suffering internally from anxiety and depression.

New research is emerging showing that the Covid-19 pandemic had a considerable impact on adolescent health and well-being, and that disruptions to daily life contributed to detrimental outcomes. The growing rates of poor mental health and suicidal thoughts and behaviors were noted as an international issue in the research of Kass et al. (2023), as well as a Pennsylvania issue in the research of Stuckey et al. (2021). Consistent with Kass et al. (2023) and Stuckey et al. (2021), the CDC (2022) found that “almost 60% of female students experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness and nearly 25% made a suicide plan” (p. 2). For students ages 10 to 24, the second leading cause of death is suicide, and more than 90% of students who committed suicide had at least one diagnosable mental health disorder (Sekhar et al., 2022a). When Fox et al. (2022) surveyed over 1000 students aged 13-17 with a history of mental health treatment, they found that participants were less likely to disclose suicidal ideation and attempts, as compared to non-suicidal self-injury. They concluded that this was most likely due to shame or embarrassment, fear of worrying parents, or fear of being hospitalized (Fox et al., 2022). Sekhar et al. (2022a) also documented the psychological impacts of shame and stigma as barriers to mental health help-seeking, particularly for male students.

More than 13% of children and adolescents will experience significant anxiety and/or depression to the point that it causes impairment in school and social functioning (Marsh & Mathur, 2020). Sadly, only 36% of youth in need of mental health intervention typically receive it (Bryan et al., 2020). Multiple studies have shown that students who receive services early for mental health issues have the lowest rates of problematic outcomes and the highest level of school connectedness and decision-making skills (Childs et al., 2020; Mac Iver et al., 2015; Mehta et al., 2019). Conversely, in a case study by Rohrig and Puliafico (2018), they determined that students who did not receive early intervention services were at an increased risk for dropping out of school, expulsion, and engaging in unhealthy risk behaviors. Studies have consistently emphasized the fact that youth with poor mental health are more likely to struggle with academics, decision making, and their health (Banks et al., 2020; Weissinger et al., 2023). In three separate analyses on child wellness, Marsh and Mathur (2020) and the CDC (2022, 2023a) all concluded that mental health problems in youth often lead to increased risk of drug use, violence, and a higher rate of sexual behaviors leading to STD's and unintended pregnancy. Moreover, in a quantitative study examining overall student wellness in Pennsylvania schools, Hoke et al. (2023) resolved that behaviors and habits established in adolescence will carry over into adulthood, making students' school years critical for building proper mental and behavioral health.

Another area where students suffer mental and behavioral issues can arise from their experiences with sexual and gender identification. Students who identified with LGBTQ were significantly more likely to experience more forms of violence and

substance abuse (Abreu et al., 2020; CDC, 2022; Eugene et al., 2021). In fact, almost 70% of LGBTQ students surveyed by the CDC (2023b) experienced persistent feelings of sadness/hopelessness in the past year and more than 50% had experienced poor mental health in the past 30 days. In a quantitative analysis of SAP data, Weissinger et al. (2023) found that transgender students in Pennsylvania were at a higher risk of suicide which may arise from negative interactions or lack of support from family, peers, and the school community. Although their study occurred five years prior to Weissinger et al. (2023), Toomey et al. (2018) had comparable findings in their quantitative study of suicidal behavior among 120,617 students aged 11-19 who identified as one of six gender identity groups (female; male; transgender, male to female; transgender, female to male; transgender, not exclusively male or female; and questioning). They found that approximately 14% of students reported a prior suicide attempt, and that the highest rates of suicide attempt were for those students identifying as female to male (50.8%), not exclusively male or female (41.8%), and male to female (29.9%) (Toomey et al., 2018).

Although the primary goal of schools is academic learning, they also play a critical role in shaping mental, physical, and social growth. Historically, externalizing behaviors such as bullying, aggression, disruption, violence, and harassment have been the focus of social supports (Leo et al., 2019; Weist et al., 2018). Externalized behaviors have tended to be easily identifiable since they often interfere with day-to-day school activities (Hoover & Bostic, 2021; McCabe, 2021; Sekhar et al., 2021). The more difficult task falls on school staff and parents to identify students with internalizing

behaviors such as depression and suicidal tendencies, that threaten to disrupt students' mental health and wellness.

### ***School Counselor Roles and Responsibilities***

School counselors play a multidimensional role as counselor, leader, collaborator, and educator. They must fulfill a variety of responsibilities including instruction, counseling, assessments, advising, and SAP referrals (Brewington & Kushner, 2020; Childs et al., 2020; Su et al., 2021). The American School Counselor Association describes the position as “encompassing leader, advocate, collaborator, and systems change agent” (Henry & Bryan, 2021, p. 2). Both qualitative studies by Henry and Bryan (2021) and Su et al. (2021) found that school counselors regularly improve the lives of vulnerable children including those who have faced trauma due to adverse childhood experiences such as abuse, poverty, neglect, and discrimination. Childs et al. (2020) explained in their quantitative study that school counselors have been called the “gatekeepers” within the school environment because of their “ability to interact with students, educators, and administrators and provide services for students in need” (p. 1582). Given the large number of school counselor roles and responsibilities, it was perhaps unsurprising for Brewington and Kushner (2020) and Geesa et al. (2022) to discover through their interviews and surveys (respectively) on school counselors' perspectives on successful programs, that they were being tasked with an enormous amount of non-counseling duties. Their excessive and time-consuming duties greatly limited school counselors' time with students and their abilities to offer proper counseling (Brewington & Kushner, 2020; Geesa et al., 2022). A similar investigation by Donohue



et al. (2022) examined the link between school counselor-to-student ratios across six states, and through advanced statistical analyses determined that schools with higher ratios had lower SAT scores, and higher suspensions and absenteeism. There is no doubt the important role that the school counselor plays within the school walls, and that given enough time and resources, their work has the potential to create long-lasting change.

One of school counselors' primary duties is to strengthen the school-family-community relationship by helping connect families to community resources. School counselors regularly promote the benefits of receiving mental and behavioral health services (Epstein et al., 2021; Hoover & Bostic, 2021). Banks et al.'s (2020) quantitative analysis of survey results on parents' and school counselors' perceptions of antibullying preventions and interventions, found a significant and positive relationship between the collaboration of school counselors and families. Both the CDC (2022) and Bryan et al. (2020) also found that school counselors helped unite the school-family-community stakeholders by implementing essential supports and resources to provide the protective factors and skills leading to successful youth. In two separate studies examining sustainable counseling programs that build resilience in students, both Henry and Bryan (2021) and Su et al. (2021) found that school counselors were positioned to connect students and families to psychologists and social workers who could provide services beyond the school counselors' capacities. Effective communication between stakeholders is an invaluable foundation for helping students and families lead successful lives. Commonalities among research findings on successful communication strategies between home and school have included active listening (Diamond et al., 2022; McCabe, 2021),

empathy (Carlson et al., 2021; Jeynes, 2018), and the use of flexible communication modalities (phone, email, in-person) (Ben-Tov & Romi, 2019; Mehta et al., 2019; Newman et al., 2019).

As educators, school counselors are also tasked with training staff, students, and families about mental and behavioral health symptoms and support services (Childs et al., 2020; Sekhar et al., 2023). A quantitative analysis in Pennsylvania found that by educating all stakeholders in the identification of mental and behavioral health signs and symptoms, they become partners in every student's success (Weissinger et al., 2023). After receiving mental and behavioral health training from school counselors, a quantitative study found that teachers surveyed had increased mental health awareness, self-confidence, and an expanded skill set with which to assist students (Childs et al., 2020). Parents and students can also benefit from mental and behavioral health education and guidance. In a mixed methods study by Sekhar et al. (2023) using survey data from SAP teams across Pennsylvania, they found that more effort was needed to educate parents and students based on their limited knowledge of the SAP. In the same study, Sekhar et al. (2023) also noted a distinct lack of SAP professional development (PD) requirements for school counselors and SAP teams, which may have led to an even wider knowledge gap for all stakeholders.

School counselors support LGBTQ and transgender students by advocating, counseling, and working with families. Research has shown that approximately nine in 30 students identify as LGBTQ and that school counselors have become increasingly aware of and concerned for this critical student population (Abreu et al., 2020; CDC, 2022). In

Abreu et al.'s (2020) qualitative study that interviewed 174 school counselors across 39 states, they found that only half the participants felt prepared to work with transgender students and hoped for further training. The 2021 U.S. National School Climate Survey found that 45% of transgender and gender nonconforming students felt unsafe at their school due to gender expression, 42% were not permitted to use their pronouns, and 24% were physically harassed due to their gender expression. By contrast, the CDC (2023a) reported that when schools implemented LGBTQ-supportive and inclusive policies, that all students experienced lower emotional stress, less violence, and fewer suicidal tendencies. School counselors have a responsibility to lead and advocate for LGBTQ students and “they play a pivotal role in providing leadership to create systemic change to enhance the school and promote a culture of inclusivity and safety” (Abreu et al., 2020, p. 1937; Marsh & Mathur, 2020). School employees, such as school counselors, who interact with students on average for 6 hours per day, 5 days per week, for 30 weeks of the year are in a prime position to identify students who need SAP referrals (Hoover & Bostic, 2021). Weissinger et al.'s (2023) quantitative analysis on family factors and mental health in schools, explained that children are likely to disclose depression, substance abuse, and suicide risk in the school setting, which reinforces the school setting as a refuge of support, mental and behavioral health communication, and prevention strategies.

### ***Parental Involvement in Their Child's Mental and Behavioral Health***

Parent involvement in the school community positively affects students' academic and behavioral outcomes from kindergarten through grade 12. Researchers have found

direct connections between the use of Epstein's PM for parent involvement and increased student achievement (Bower & Griffin, 2011; Leo et al., 2019; Mac Iver et al., 2015). In a meta-analysis of 203 studies over the past 15 years, Jeynes (2018) determined that parental involvement in their child's education was associated with higher academic results and that regardless of whether parent involvement occurred in the home or at school, both types maximized a child's academic and behavioral successes. In a similar study, Eugene et al.'s (2021) quantitative research confirmed that parental volunteerism in particular had one of the strongest influences on their child's perception of school climate and connectedness.

Protective factors and risk factors can have a direct influence on children's mental and behavioral health. For example, in the CDC's (2023b) executive summary of their Youth Risk Behavior Survey 2011-2021, they recommended three protective factors to create supportive school environments: school connectedness, parental monitoring, and parental-adolescent communication. All three of the recommended protective factors included a caring adult figure with a shared concern for the child's education, safety, and activities (CDC, 2023b). Researchers have shown that parental monitoring (awareness of the child's whereabouts) can also reduce the child's risk of substance use, mental health issues, bullying, STD diagnoses, and suicidal ideation (Barnett et al., 2023; CDC, 2022; Marsh & Mathur, 2020). In a detailed literature review highlighting the significance of attachment theory, Diamond et al. (2022) also underscored the importance and influence of risk and protective factors that can impact children's lives. According to the central concept of attachment theory, children instinctively seek protective care from their

parents and according to Diamond et al. (2022), risk and protective factors greatly influence the degree to which the caregiver develops a secure attachment with the child. If the attachment between child and caregiver is weak or underdeveloped, risk factors will tend to outweigh protective factors, leading to short-term and long-term developmental issues for the child (Biddle et al., 2014; Diamond et al., 2022).

Lack of parent involvement and child maltreatment are often viewed as predictors of youth bullying behaviors. Eugene et al. (2021) used data from the responses of 3230 adolescents' surveys to explore factors of school connected and parental involvement and found that lack of parent involvement and child maltreatment were key predictors of youth bullying behaviors and victimization. Students' perceptions of academic support in the home environment directly influenced victimization in the school environment (Mehta et al., 2019; Stuckey et al., 2021). Through their qualitative research interviewing 339 parents and 343 students, Ben-Tov and Romi (2019) determined that parents have a direct influence on their child's personal perception of school climate through conversations about their own involvement in school related topics. Family systems framework was the model used by both Newman et al. (2019) and Carlson et al. (2021) to illustrate the importance of nurturing a partnership between home and school. Researchers used the family systems framework to explain how each individual (student) is a critical part of the whole (family), and that each system's delicate balance can be upended by risk factors such as abuse, neglect, poverty, and abandonment (Carlson et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2019). Given the influence that parents can have on their child's perception of school, it is important to consider how parental involvement can equally

influence the outcome of the SAP and ultimately a child's success in school and life (Sekhar et al., 2022b; Stuckey et al., 2021; Weissinger et al., 2023).

### ***The School and Family Partnership***

Epstein's PM has undergone decades of successful research studies, all stemming from the original overlapping spheres of influence framework. Researchers have repeatedly confirmed the benefits of using the model to enhance school-family-community relationships (Epstein, 2018; Epstein & Becker, 1982; Epstein et al., 2011, 2021; Leo et al., 2019). The increase in partnerships and deepening of relationships between all stakeholders have proven to be essential contributors to children's mental and behavioral health (Geesa et al., 2022; Hoke et al., 2023; Reardon et al., 2017). Both Epstein et al. (2021) and the CDC (2022) agree that since children spend much of their time in school, the partnership between school and home can only be strengthened by increased communication about the child's condition and well-being. In the CDC's (2023b) executive summary of their Youth Risk Behavior Survey 2011-2021 and in Hoover and Bostic's (2021) meta-analysis, both studies underscored the importance of an intentional and focused partnership between parents and school to provide increased mental and behavioral health services either in or out of school. Multiple researchers have suggested that parents may not understand the SAP processes, nor perhaps the warning signs of youths' mental distress that can often be missed or overlooked without proper training (Sekhar et al., 2022a; Stuckey et al., 2021; Weist et al., 2018). Similarly, Sekhar et al.'s (2023) analysis of SAP referrals from 2013 to 2018 determined that schools are a prime space for educating students and families on how to access these services, and a

strengthened partnership between home and school may increase the likelihood of participation in and acceptance of the SAP referral.

Examples of successful partnerships and collaborations between home and school can be found in research literature. An example of a successful model for partnership and collaboration between home and school was in Olubiyi et al.'s (2019) study that sought to comprehensively identify the characteristics of effective family engagement activities based on 21 community school models. Community schools were described as public schools that focused on “family support, health and social services, and community development...emphasizes family and community engagement and collaborative leadership and practices whereby students, teachers and stakeholders with different areas of expertise work together to achieve common goals” (Olubiyi et al., 2019, p. 298). The researchers found that by creating a partnership between the families, schools, and communities, not only did engagement increase from all stakeholders, but it did so with lasting effects (Olubiyi et al., 2019).

Despite the community school model successes, Olubiyi et al. (2019) noted that it does come with a high price for the community due to funding requirements for many extra-curricular programs. Robertson et al. (2019) used a very different setting for their research on engagement strategies and surveyed 195 juvenile justice supervisors across twenty states to examine the extent to which family engagement interventions influenced family participation. Their multivariate models showed that the agencies that utilized more varieties of family engagement methods, had better family engagement with their youth (Robertson et al., 2019). The researchers did note that further study was needed to

understand the importance (or weight) of certain strategies over others when engaging families (Robertson et al., 2019). Interestingly, when the school or agency provided a variety of opportunities for families to participate and gave them choices on how and when to engage, these factors contributed to increased involvement (Barnett et al., 2023; Leo et al., 2019; Mehta et al., 2019). Moreover, Barnett et al. (2023) and Jeynes (2018) were in agreement concerning the importance of facilitating family engagement by providing flexibility in communication (phone, email, text) and modality of service delivery (phone, video, in-person) to increase partnerships between home and school.

Communication strategies have been investigated to determine the best techniques for sharing information between health professionals and patients to yield the most positive response rates. McCabe (2021) used qualitative research to analyze interviews with 52 U.K. physicians in order to investigate communication strategies between physicians and patients. Their research concluded that the most successful patient outcomes resulted from a “shared understanding” that included active listening, using the patient’s precise words, and empathy towards the patient’s experiences and perspectives (McCabe, 2021). McCabe (2021) also noted that at times, despite the physicians’ best efforts, it sometimes took several rounds of communication to achieve the patient’s acceptance of treatment. An Australian study asked school staff to score the factors that they felt had the greatest influence on CALD (culturally and linguistically diverse) families’ understanding of autism (Syeda & Dresens, 2020). The most significant barriers to parent understanding were from cultural differences (69%), lack of access to information (62%), and differing family priorities (Syeda & Dresens, 2020). Although



Syeda and Dresens's, (2020) study examined CALD students and their families, their findings may help us understand the barriers to getting parents involved in their child's SAP. Getting parents to accept the SAP referral may take multiple rounds of communication and increased efforts to nurture relationships with families and communities. These discoveries across practitioners may help add to our understanding of communication barriers that exist between school counselors and families within the SAP.

Effective communication strategies between home and school are vital to upholding the overlapping spheres of influence. By solving problems together and staying informed, Carlson et al. (2021) and Jeynes (2018) found that joining with the student's family and using empathy to address their challenges, strengths, relationships, and needs resulted in a stronger partnership and greater engagement from all sides. Ben-Tov and Romi (2019) reached similar conclusions as Carlson et al. (2021) and Jeynes (2018) when they surveyed 339 parents and 343 students to find that establishing effective communication forums for home and school were critical to solving problems and staying informed, because a parents' alienation from school was a direct predictor of a child's negative experience in school. A quantitative analysis examining monthly interaction survey data from paraprofessionals (n=32) and parents (n=375) found the following combination of service and communication strategies contributed to the highest number of interactions or involvement: parent groups, home/community visits, other individual contacts (phone calls, check-ins, drop-in times), and case management. On a national scale, it may be helpful to explore the CDC's (2022) comprehensive report on

What Works in Schools as an evidence-based program to implement “quality health education, connecting young people to needed services, and making school environments safer and more supportive, with a strong focus on improving school connectedness” (p. 1). These studies and reports may help school counselors employ evidence-based practices for increased parent involvement in their child’s SAP.

### **Implications**

The problem that was addressed in this study was that students were not receiving necessary professional services provided by the school districts in the study county. The literature review sought to explore the history of SAP research in Pennsylvania, mental and behavioral health of children and adolescents, school counselor roles and responsibilities, parental involvement in their child’s mental and behavioral health, and the school and family partnership. The history of SAP research analysis is not as thorough as one might expect, and despite the 30-year collection of SAP data, it appears that only within the past decade has that data been analyzed and published. The results of this study have the potential to fill a gap in practice surrounding parent involvement and the SAP. Interviews with school counselors regarding their perspectives and recommendations for parent involvement in the SAP yielded data that may contribute to a better understanding of parental SAP refusals and other barriers to services.

The data obtained from the interviews served to navigate the project’s direction. The data indicated a need for more SAP education and outreach for stakeholders, enhanced PD for school personnel, and more dedicated time to support SAP. It was determined that a white paper would be an appropriate project genre to address the

findings, which is further discussed in Section 3. The project study could hopefully fill a gap in practice regarding the need for further parent education and involvement in the SAP, possibly leading to higher SAP referral approvals, and potentially resulting in improved academic and mental health outcomes for students who need assistance.

In the long term, this study's findings could help further illuminate students' mental and behavioral health issues in the county serving as the research setting for this study. By understanding what school counselors perceive as current and recommended strategies regarding parent education and involvement with SAP, this study has the potential to better the lives of students in the county, the state, or even the country. If school counselors could devote more time and resources to student wellness, perhaps we could improve students' academic successes and reduce the rates of youth suicide. By interviewing the 'gate keepers' of student wellness, the study findings could help develop and sustain increased parent education and involvement in SAP and improved partnerships between home, school, and the community.

Decades of research on the connections between student mental and behavioral health and parent involvement approaches have shown, through this comprehensive literature review, that evidence-based strategies between schools, parents, and counselors already exist. The results of this basic qualitative study may increase mental and behavioral health support, SAP education and awareness, open communication, and empathy (Sekhar et al., 2021, 2022a, 2023; Weissinger et al., 2023). Over the long term, this study's findings may lead to further research advances to lower the stigma of mental health including barriers to help-seeking, shame, bullying, drug abuse, and death.

## Summary

The problem that was addressed in this study was that students were not receiving the recommended professional services through the SAP in the study county. Parent refusals to the SAP referrals leave the child without access to professional mental and behavioral services provided by the school district. The literature review includes an exhaustive evaluation of the history of SAP research in Pennsylvania, mental and behavioral health of children and adolescents, school counselor roles and responsibilities, parental involvement in their child's mental and behavioral health, and the school and family partnership. In addition, the literature review also discusses Epstein's PM which served as the conceptual framework for this basic qualitative study. The PM framework is a detailed, evidence-based design that outlines the critical stakeholder roles within a school-home-community partnership program and assigns clear responsibilities for each one through the overlapping spheres of influence. Epstein's PM has undergone decades of successful research studies by researchers whose findings confirmed the benefits of using the model to enhance school-family-community relationships (Epstein, 2018; Epstein & Becker, 1982; Epstein et al., 2011, 2021; Leo et al., 2019).

The SAP helps identify, counsel, educate, and assist students in Pennsylvania whose academic success has been (or is being) compromised by mental and/or behavioral health challenges (PNSAS, 2023). The literature review revealed the limited number of published research studies pertaining to SAP. However, despite the limited number of studies, their findings agreed on the increasing quantity of SAP referrals across the state and county, but also on the positive outcomes and successes after incorporating the SAP

into students' lives (Sekhar et al., 2021, 2022b, 2023; Weissinger et al., 2023). Children and adolescents experience physical and mental developmental changes throughout their school years that can directly affect their ability to thrive academically (Childs et al., 2020). Consistent findings depict the vital role that parents play in their child's academic and mental well-being (Fox et al., 2022; Hoke et al., 2023). Multiple studies have shown that students who receive services early for mental health issues have the lowest rates of problematic outcomes and the highest level of school connectedness and decision-making skills (Childs et al., 2020; Mac Iver et al., 2015; Mehta et al., 2019). New research is emerging showing that the Covid-19 pandemic had a considerable impact on adolescent health and well-being, and that disruptions in daily life contributed to detrimental outcomes (CDC, 2023b; Weissinger et al., 2023). Internalized mental and behavioral health issues such as depression, anxiety, and traumatic experiences may be harder to identify in children which may in turn make it more challenging to provide them professional services (Carlson et al., 2021; Donohue et al., 2022). In summary, findings point towards increased mental and behavioral health training for school staff, counselors, parents, and students to create an educated environment of awareness and support.

School counselors play a multidimensional role as counselor-leader-collaborator-educator with a variety of responsibilities including instructor, counselor, assessor, adviser, and SAP referral facilitator. School counselors are considered the 'gatekeepers' who can provide facilitation and access to mental and behavioral health services for families (Brewington & Kushner, 2020; Childs et al., 2020; Su et al., 2021). They also

function as liaisons between school staff and parents, while supporting and advocating for LGBTQ and transgender students (Abreu et al., 2020; CDC, 2022). However, due to their excessive and time-consuming duties, school counselors' one-on-one time with students is limited, and decreases their availability for counseling (Brewington & Kushner, 2020; Geesa et al., 2022). In summary, Childs et al. (2020), Abreu et al. (2020), Brewington and Kushner (2020), and Su et al. (2021) all demonstrated through their research that giving school counselors an opportunity to voice their needs and concerns through interviews resulted in valuable and practical data for future planning.

Parent involvement in the school community positively affects students' academic and behavioral outcomes from kindergarten through grade 12. Protective factors and risk factors can have a direct influence on children's mental and behavioral health (Cook, 2024; Epstein et al., 2021). Given the influence that parents can have on their child's perception of school, it is important to consider how parental involvement can equally influence the outcome of the SAP and ultimately a child's success in school and life (Sekhar et al., 2022b; Stuckey et al., 2021; Weissinger et al., 2023). In summary, the focus needs to be on educating parents through mental and behavioral health using trainings, outreach, and parent groups to destigmatize mental health and help-seeking behavior.

Researchers have demonstrated that both an increase in partnerships and a deepening of relationships between all school stakeholders to be essential contributors to children's well-being). Schools are a prime setting for educating students and families on ways to access professional services and building partnerships between home and school,

all of which may increase the chance of parent involvement in the SAP (Geesa et al., 2022; Hoke et al., 2023; Reardon et al., 2017; Sekhar et al., 2023). Research on evidence-based communication strategies have concluded that the best techniques for sharing information between health professionals and patients includes active listening, empathy, and building trusting relationships over time (Jeynes, 2018; McCabe, 2021; Olubiyi et al., 2019; Su et al., 2021). In summary, variety and choice of involvement options have proven successful when facilitating parent groups, home/community visits, other individual contacts (phone calls, check-ins, drop-in times), and case management strategies (Barnett et al., 2023; Mehta et al., 2019; Newman et al., 2019; Robertson et al., 2019). In the following section, I discuss the methodology of this basic qualitative research study with regards to research design, participant criteria, sampling, setting, data collection method and instrumentation, and data analysis techniques.

## Section 2: The Methodology

The problem that was addressed in this basic qualitative study was that students were not receiving the recommended professional services through the SAP in the study county. Evidence from data collected through the state education website show that approximately 40% of SAP referrals were discontinued in the 2022–2023 school year due to lack of parent approval (Pennsylvania Safe Schools Online, n.d.). Without parent approval, the SAP referral cannot continue, and the student does not receive any professional services. In this study, I examined the perspectives of school counselors on parent education and involvement with SAP using the basic qualitative design. The research questions were focused on K–12 school counselors’ perspectives on and recommendations for increased parent education and involvement in SAP referrals. The research questions of this study were used to design the interview questions, which were used as part of the interview protocol. The interview questions explored the school counselors’ perspectives on a deeper level to gain a rich understanding of parents’ education and involvement in SAP, any challenges they had experienced, and recommendations for increasing parent education and involvement. The interview questions, guided by the interview protocol, also included follow-up questions and probes. The following research questions guided the study:

RQ1: What are K–12 school counselors’ perspectives about the practices being used to educate parents and encourage their involvement in SAP referrals in one western Pennsylvania county?



RQ2: What are K–12 school counselors’ recommendations for improving parent involvement in order to increase SAP approvals?

The basic qualitative design served as a means of collecting a detailed data set and a more complete understanding of the school counselors’ perspectives on parent education and involvement and the SAP. The findings provide valuable information that can be used to help guide recommendations for increasing parent education and involvement as it pertains to the SAP. In the next section, I describe the research design and approach, data collection, and analysis methods.

### **Qualitative Research Design and Approach**

This basic qualitative study was used to explore the perspectives of school counselors on parental education and involvement in the SAP. Qualitative studies are rooted in constructivism, as researchers strive to build or create meaning from interactions with participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Using direct communication throughout the interview process allows the researcher to construct a deeper understanding of the personal perspectives of each participant (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). While quantitative research involves analyzing numerical data, qualitative research analyzes the lived experiences of participants using a variety of methods (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Qualitative research can include grounded theory, ethnographical, phenomenological, and case study designs. A qualitative approach was chosen over quantitative or mixed methods because qualitative research allows the researcher to explore participants’ experiences with a particular phenomenon. Based on the purpose of this study, which was to explore the perspectives and experiences of school counselors on

an individual basis, qualitative research allowed for the collection of a rich and detailed data set.

### **Description of Qualitative Design Used**

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore school counselors' perspectives about practices being used to educate and encourage parent involvement in SAP referrals. The study used a basic qualitative approach that has been described as an effective and efficient way to collect data from individual participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). In qualitative research, it is not the researcher's responsibility to discover meaning. Qualitative research is used to construct or build meaning based on the participants' experiences as described through their interactions with the researcher (Babbie, 2017). The PM was used as a framework to guide this study and to construct meaning from the PM's overlapping spheres of influence to increase involvement and partnership across stakeholders. Epstein's PM describes the use of six types of involvement between home, school, and community as effective strategies to strengthen partnerships and boost student success (Organizing Engagement, 2024).

### **Justification of Choice of Research Design**

There are many approaches to qualitative research, including ethnographical, case studies, phenomenological, and grounded theory that were considered for this project study. Ethnographical design was considered as a potential research design for this study. Ethnographic research requires the researcher to immerse themselves in a particular setting to gain a deeper cultural understanding of participants in the field (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Because this study did not focus on a specific culture or field experience, it

would not have served as a functional design for the purpose of this study. Grounded theory was also considered as a potential qualitative research design for this study.

Grounded theory is used when the researcher intends to use the data to develop a new theory through interviews, observations, and documents (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Grounded theory was not chosen for this study because an existing conceptual framework, Epstein's PM, was used to enhance my understanding of the complex parent involvement phenomenon. Phenomenological design was considered as a potential design for this study; however, phenomenological studies focus on the lived experiences of individuals regarding a specific phenomenon (Babbie, 2017). Because this study was not focused on the lived experiences of participants through a specific phenomenon, but rather on the perspectives of school counselors and parents with SAP, phenomenological design was also not chosen for this study.

Basic qualitative research was chosen for this study due to the nature of the research questions, problem, and purpose. While quantitative research involves analyzing numerical data, qualitative research analyzes the lived experiences of participants using a variety of methods (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). A qualitative approach was chosen over quantitative or mixed methods because qualitative research allows the researcher to explore participants' experiences with a particular phenomenon. Using the interview process allowed me to explore school counselors' experiences with the SAP and parent involvement, resulting in rich and descriptive data (Kiper Riechel et al., 2020).

Qualitative research, unlike quantitative research, allows the researcher to interpret the participants' responses to capture the diverse nature of individual responses, and to infuse

follow-up questions and probes as a means of diving deeper into the discussion (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

### **Participants**

School counselors are at the center of the SAP process, and as a result, they have direct contact with the SAP team, administration, staff, students, and families. Moreover, they have a deep understanding of the SAP process and were therefore well-positioned to help answer the research questions (Sekhar et al., 2021). In the following section regarding participants, I describe the setting of the study, the sample and sampling procedure, justification for the sample, gaining access to participants, building relationships with participants, and the rights of participants.

### **Setting**

In qualitative research, participant interaction and communication are beneficial when it occurs in participants' natural or normal setting (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Due to the interview nature of this project and the distance needed to travel to each site, school counselors were able to choose between Zoom or phone interviews. In all cases, I confirmed that the participant consented to being audio recorded only. I offered scheduling options for interviews outside of school counselors' normal contract hours to avoid interruptions and scheduling conflicts. All school counselors volunteered to participate in this study based on their geographical location within the study county, their role as active school counselors, and the criteria necessary for this study. The setting for this study was a county in western Pennsylvania that consisted of 17 high schools, 19 middle schools, and 43 elementary schools with a total enrollment of 45,766 public

school students in the 2022–2023 school year. Across the county, there are 73 school counselors listed as active members of the study county School Counselor Association.

### **Participant Criteria**

Choosing the correct criteria for selecting interview participants is a critical component of any qualitative study. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore school counselors' perspectives about practices being used to educate and encourage parent involvement in SAP referrals. The criteria for participation were based on individuals' position as an active certified K–12 public school counselor within the study county and their experience educating parents and encouraging their involvement in SAP referrals. School counselors who met the required criteria brought valuable insight to the project study from their knowledge and personal experiences working with the parent involvement phenomenon.

The kind of sampling chosen for the study was purposeful sampling. This kind of sampling involves choosing participants for a specific reason, based on employment, geography, and life experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In purposeful sampling, the researcher deliberately seeks individuals because of their unique connection to the phenomenon, which can in turn help to answer the research questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The invitation letter and consent form to the participants clearly stated the criteria required for this study as being (a) an active certified K–12 public school counselor in the study county with (b) experience educating parents and encouraging their involvement in SAP referrals.

The letter of invitation was sent via email to each school counselor's work email address, which is publicly available on each school's website. Within 2 weeks, I had received 11 responses from interested school counselors who met the criteria. I did not need to resend the email due to the number of suitable participant responses I received. Although I was prepared to send another round of emails and upload a recruitment flyer to social media, once I had secured and scheduled my 11 participants, I was satisfied with my sample size. My initial sample size goal was eight to 12 participants for the study, and I was fortunate to recruit 11 volunteers who met the inclusion criteria to explore the perceptions and recommendations of school counselors regarding parental education and involvement in the SAP. Table 2 represents the participant demographics, including each of the 11 participants, number of years in their role as school counselors, and their gender.

**Table 2**

*Participants and Demographics*

Participant	Years in role	Gender
P1	1	Female
P2	22	Female
P3	3	Female
P4	3	Female
P5	9	Female
P6	5	Female
P7	2	Female
P8	4	Male
P9	22	Female
P10	6	Female
P11	15	Female

### **Sampling Procedure**

For this basic qualitative study, I used purposeful sampling that helped me select for the individuals who could help answer the research questions as they relate to the research problem and purpose. Purposeful sampling is used in qualitative research to intentionally select for certain individuals who have similar personal experiences with the phenomenon being studied (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). As such, the purposeful sample consisted of the 73 active K–12 public school counselors in the study county who had experience working with parents and the SAP. Out of 73 individuals, I recruited 11 participants who fit the participant criteria to address the research problem that students in the study county were not receiving professional services offered by the SAP.

### **Sampling Size**

In qualitative research, one hopes to collect enough information as possible from the participants to sufficiently answer the research questions. In quantitative research, there is a tendency to aim for larger sample sizes, which can result in a more accurate data set (Babbie, 2017). In qualitative research, however, a large sample size does not necessarily equate to stronger data. While quantitative researchers often use data to generalize findings to a larger population, qualitative researchers seek an understanding of individuals' perspectives that can be shared with stakeholders for future planning. According to O'Reilly and Parker (2013), "within qualitative research, sufficiency of sample size is measured by depth of data rather than frequencies and, therefore, samples should consist of participants who best represent the research topic" (p. 193). Similarly, Ravitch and Carl (2021) noted the importance of studying only a few individuals in a

qualitative sample, which allows the researcher to collect a large amount of detailed data from each person. Several qualitative interview studies, where participants were asked about their perspectives and experiences, used between four and 20 participants (Brewington & Kushner, 2020; Henry & Bryan, 2021; Su et al., 2021). The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore school counselors' perspectives about practices being used to educate and encourage parent involvement in SAP referrals. Based on this study's purpose and other researchers' successes with a small sample size, the decision was made to aim for eight to 12 participants with the intention of achieving data saturation at the completion of the interviewing process. I successfully recruited 11 volunteer school counselors, which allowed me to meet the overall target sample and saturation.

### **Accessing Participants**

Once I gained permission to conduct the study from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), I began my initial outreach to school counselors. Initial outreach was done through an electronic invitation, delivered to their school email addresses, which were available on each school's website. I sent the invitation from my Walden email address, containing an introduction to myself and the study purpose, participant role, time requirement, and participant criteria. If a school counselor responded with positive interest to my email and study, I replied by asking for an additional confirmation that they fit the study criteria. Once they confirmed that they met the criteria, I then sent a calendar link using the Calendly website so they could choose an interview time slot, and a link to my Zoom room. All participants chose to be interviewed



over Zoom (without video), and no one requested a phone interview. If they wanted more information before becoming a participant, I asked them to email me with any questions or concerns. I informed each person that their participation was voluntary and confidential, that they would be audio recorded, and that their transcribed interview data would be analyzed as part of the qualitative research process.

In the email invitation and confirmation, I provided a consent form to each participant stating how I obtained their email address, participant criteria, the role of the researcher, the purpose of the study, the data collection methodology and process, interview options, sample interview questions, risks and benefits of participating, participant privacy, and researcher contact information.

### **Researcher–Participant Working Relationship**

The researcher–participant working relationship is one that is built on trust and mutual respect. As a researcher, one hopes that the interviewee will share the information that one is seeking, in order to answer the research questions. But this relationship is that of two strangers, and thus needs to be handled with care and compassion. Rubin and Rubin (2012) noted that “interviewees share their personal experiences, thoughts, and feelings, researchers incur an obligation to protect interviewees especially if they say something that could be embarrassing to themselves, their organization, or their group” (p. 36). It is of utmost importance that the participants feel as comfortable as possible answering questions with openness and honesty from beginning to end (McGrath et al., 2018). Moreover, Ravitch and Carl (2021) suggested that the researcher strive to remain neutral during the interview and abide strictly to the prepared interview protocol.

Due to the delicate nature of the researcher – participant relationship, I reminded each interviewee of my contact information and that they were welcome to ask questions via e-mail. I was also sure to state that their participation was voluntary, and they could choose to discontinue their participation at any time throughout the process. I highlighted the fact that at any point they could refuse a question during the interview process and that I would provide sample questions as part of their consent form. To help nurture a trusting relationship, I addressed confidentiality and assured them that the transcript and any manuscripts pertaining to the study would be free from any identifying information including the site, district, school, or names. Each participant was assigned a numeric pseudonym, all files were kept on my home computer under password protected security and in a locked file cabinet in my home, and I was the only one with knowledge of each participant's identity.

### **Participants' Rights and Protections**

It is the ethical responsibility of researchers to protect the participants rights before, during, and after the interview process. To uphold the ethical responsibility of a researcher, I completed all IRB trainings to comply with Walden's ethical standards and protocol. With regards to potential risks, this study did not place participants in any danger to their safety or well-being. There was the minor possibility of fatigue during the interview, which is also a potential risk in everyday life. During the interview process I let them know that they could pause, stop, or reschedule the interview at any time. Moreover, they were welcome to take a break, skip a question, or discontinue the interview at any point. The importance of safety, confidentiality, and ethical

considerations was of utmost importance throughout the study. As such, all files were kept on my home computer under password protected files and in my locked home filing cabinet. As per Walden protocol, I will store and maintain the files under these protective methods for 5 years and then will shred and delete the information and files.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection is at the heart of qualitative research and is an essential component of any research design. For this basic qualitative research study, the data collected will serve to inform and educate stakeholders about parent involvement and the SAP. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore school counselors' perspectives about practices being used to educate and encourage parent involvement in SAP referrals. The findings resulted in resourceful recommendations for improving parent education and involvement in the SAP. The semistructured interviews were comprised of 11 questions designed in alignment with the research questions, literature review, and PM framework. The interview questions allowed school counselors to expand on the topics of parent education and involvement in SAP while also giving them the opportunity to suggest recommendations for furthering parent education and involvement.

### **Justification of Data for Collection**

Qualitative data collection can be done in a variety of ways that include observations and field notes, focus groups, and interviews. Focus groups were considered as a possible data collection tool for this study, however, focus groups are used to generate ideas and discussions from groups of people, rather than individual perspectives

(Babbie, 2017). Due to the nature of the study and my focus on individual school counselor perspectives, focus groups were not a good fit for this study. Observations and field notes were also considered as a data collections strategy for this study.

As the primary researcher, I intended to ask direct questions to encourage participants to share their experiences and perspectives on parent education and involvement with SAP. Based on the nature of this study, observations and field notes were not a good match for the purposes of my research. Interviews are a qualitative research method that enable the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' unique perspectives and experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Other qualitative research studies have also used audio recorded, semistructured interviews to explore school counselor perspectives and lived experiences (Brewington & Kushner, 2020; Su et al., 2021). For their study, Su et al. (2021) recruited 15 school counselors and chose qualitative research methods with semistructured interview questions "because it allows researchers to gather data from a theoretical framework to understand an experience" (p. 2). Brewington and Kushner (2020) recruited four school counselors, and they too used semistructured audio recorded interviews for data collection. For this study, the interview method was chosen as the primary data collection tool based on other researchers' successes using similar methodologies and participants. Since I was contacting school counselors and conducting their interviews, I served as the primary data collection researcher.

## **Instrumentation**

In qualitative research, the main instruments for data collection include observations, interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires. Although each instrument was considered for this study, due to the nature of the research questions and the need for individual school counselors' perspectives on parent education and involvement in SAP, it was determined that semistructured individual interviews would be the most effective and efficient data collection method. Interviews allow the researcher to ask interview protocol questions but also allow for follow up questions and probes to gain a deeper understanding of the interviewees' responses (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

There are three main types of interviews, structured, semistructured, and unstructured interviews. Structured interviews allow the researcher to ask specific questions and the participant responses are narrow due to the limited use of probes and follow up questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Unstructured interviews resemble more of a casual conversation and are not guided by a set of questions, but rather they are open-ended and mostly directed by the participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Based on the research problem, purpose, and questions it was determined that semistructured interviews would be the best fit for this study. Semistructured interview questions allow for a mix of both structured and unstructured questions providing the opportunity for unstructured responses, added details, and new ideas all stemming from the original question. The structured questions in this study followed the interview protocol whereby each participant was asked the same 11 questions. Depending on each individual's

responses, the opportunity for follow up questions or probes was also an option based on the interview protocol.

According to McGrath et al. (2018), an interview protocol determines a clear, predictable interview script so that each participant's experience is consistent and controlled. This allows for both the participants' and researcher's communication to be structured and unbiased, in the hopes of collecting the most accurate data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). In alignment with the interview protocol, I interviewed participants using my 11 predetermined open-ended questions that correspond directly to both research questions, the problem statement, purpose, and PM framework. Interview questions 1-8 were used to answer Research Question 1, while questions 9-10 were used to answer Research Question 2, giving participants a platform to describe their experiences and recommendations for improving parent education and involvement in the SAP. Table 3 illustrates a crosswalk between the interview questions, corresponding research questions, and the PM framework. In addition to the established interview protocol, I supplemented the conversation with follow up questions and probes as needed.

**Table 3**

*Interview Questions and Correlation to Conceptual Framework—Epstein’s Partnership Model*

Interview questions	Epstein’s partnership model
1. How many years have you been a school counselor?	
2. Describe the Student Assistance Program process in the county. What does it look like and who is involved in it? (RQ1)	
3. In your experience, describe the specific level of parent involvement with the SAP process. (RQ1)	Type 1- Parenting
4. Describe the current practices being used to educate parents and encourage their involvement in SAP referrals. (RQ1)	Type 1- Parenting Type 2- Communicating
5. Do you have an example of a time you got a parent or parents to be more engaged in the process? If so, can you describe it and what was done? (RQ1)	Type 1- Parenting Type 2- Communicating
6. Describe any educational trainings that have been provided to inform parents and encourage their involvement in SAP referrals. (RQ1)	Type 1- Parenting Type 2- Communicating Type 6- Collaborating
7. Describe any challenges with getting parents educated and involved in the SAP referrals. (RQ1)	Type 1- Parenting Type 2- Communicating
8. What role do other faculty and staff members, including administration and leaders, play in getting parents involved in the SAP referral approval process? (RQ1)	Type 1- Parenting Type 2- Communicating
9. Based on your experience and knowledge, what are your recommendations for improving parent education and involvement in order to increase SAP approvals? (RQ2)	Type 1- Parenting Type 2- Communicating Type 6- Collaborating
10. If you could create a wish list of what you realistically need to improve parental involvement with the SAP referral process, what would it be? (RQ2)	Type 1- Parenting Type 2- Communicating Type 6- Collaborating
11. Is there anything else you would like to add about this topic before we conclude this interview?	

The semistructured interview questions were designed based on the literature review, the research questions, and Epstein's PM as a framework for this study. The questions were purposely written to allow all participants the opportunity to share their stories, without inadvertently leading them down any predetermined conversation paths. Using terms such as "describe" and "in your experience" provided the necessary space for participants to share their viewpoints and experiences freely. Designing the questions in this way allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of school counselors' personal experiences with the SAP, parent education and involvement, and recommendations for the future. I practiced the interview protocol ahead of time with my committee and experts for input on content validity. I ensured that the questions were clear and concise in preparation to allow the interviewee's responses to align directly with the research questions and PM framework of this study.

### **Sufficiency of Data Collection**

This study was guided by two research questions regarding school counselors' perspectives on parent education and involvement in the SAP and their recommendations for increasing parent education and involvement in the SAP process. With the use of the interview protocol's 11 interview questions aligned to the research questions, sufficiency of data collection was determined when the point of saturation had been reached. Probing questions continued until, as the researcher, I felt saturation had been reached and that I completely understood the participant's point of view (see Saunders et al., 2017). According to van Rijnsoever (2017) "data collection and analysis should continue until the point at which no new codes or concepts emerge" (p. 2). Data saturation was met



when repeated answers were collected from all interview questions and the research questions had been answered sufficiently.

### **Systems for Keeping Track of Data**

Keeping track of interview data is an important and vital component of qualitative research. For this study I used the interview protocol that comprised the interview questions, follow up questions, and probes to offer each interviewee the opportunity to respond in detail. Audio recordings were completed using Zoom and a backup recording was completed simultaneously using a voice recorder application on my iPhone 13. All audio recordings were completed without the use of web cameras, and the backup audio recording provided an added level of safety in case of technical mishaps.

Another system for keeping track of data included using a research log. The research log is a collection of hand notes that allows the researcher to make note of changes in the interviewees tone, emotion, body language, delays in responses or any other essential information that occurs during the interview. The research log served as an invaluable tool to place an ‘emotional stamp’ on the moment and was used later for reflection and analysis. According to Phillippi and Lauderdale (2018) research logs “aid in constructing thick, rich descriptions of the study context, encounter, interview, focus group, and document’s valuable contextual data” (p. 381). Research logs and documents were masked for confidentiality and were also password protected on my home computer and locked in my home filing cabinet. To boost participant confidence and confidentiality, Ravitch and Carl (2021) also suggested using password-protected computers and files, avoiding the use of flash drives, and destroying raw data once it has

been analyzed. The audio transcription's raw data were saved to a Word document as a first step to analyzing the data and breaking down each transcript into smaller chunks for coding. The mp3 file, saved from the Zoom recording, was uploaded to Word's transcription feature which created a transcript. The audio file was then relistened to and matched to the Word transcription to account for complete accuracy. The interview was transcribed within 72 hours of the interview date, as prompt transcription ensures the researcher retains the most accurate information from the interview and that transcription is completed with precision (see Saldana, 2021).

### **Procedures for Gaining Access to Participants**

After obtaining permission to conduct the study from Walden University's IRB, I began my initial outreach to school counselors. Initial outreach was done through an electronic invitation, delivered to their school email addresses which were available on each school's website. The invitation was sent from my Walden email address, and it contained an introduction to myself, the study purpose, participant role, time requirement, and participant criteria. If a school counselor responded with positive interest to my email and study, I replied by asking for an additional confirmation that they fit the study criteria. Once they confirmed that they met the criteria, I then sent a calendar link using the Calendly website and a link to my Zoom room, so they could choose an interview time slot. All participants chose to be interviewed over Zoom (without video) and no one requested a phone interview. If they wanted more information before becoming a participant, I asked them to email me with any questions or concern. I informed each person that their participation was voluntary, confidential, that they would be audio

recorded, and that their transcribed interview data would be analyzed as part of the qualitative research process.

### **Role of the Researcher**

Having worked in the field of education for the past 20 years, I understand that certain biases may arise during this study. My roles in education have included classroom teacher, college professor, academic advisor, and student counselor. I have never worked in the study county, nor do I have any personal or professional relationships with any school counselors in the county. My children attend school in the county, which could have potentially affected the accuracy and neutrality of my data collection and analysis. As a safeguarding measure, I used procedures to support confidentiality by assigning each a numerical pseudonym to protect their identity. In addition, I masked any personal or identifying items to protect their identify and maintained researcher neutrality and confidentiality. According to McNair et al. (2008), “reflexivity has been recommended as a means of ensuring that not only the data gathering, but also interpretation of the findings is qualified by this knowledge” (p. 2). After each interview I evaluated myself as the researcher and used the reflective journal to ensure that I was not allowing my personal experiences or biases to influence participant responses (see Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

### **Data Analysis Methods**

Coding qualitative data enables the researcher to break down large amounts of transcript data into smaller more similarly organized sections and subsections. As a result, a large collection of coded data leads to a smaller subset of categories, and then to

an even smaller subsection of themes or concepts (Saldana, 2021). I conducted a qualitative data analysis using five phases of data analysis outlined in Yin (2016) that included: (a) compiling, (b) disassembling, (c) reassembling, (d) interpreting, (e) and concluding. In the following section, I describe the data analysis process and present examples of the coding and analysis processes used to identify codes, categories, and themes. My data analysis process maintained a consistent level of trustworthiness and integrity as the data evolved from its raw phase to the final determination of themes. The data analysis process also consistently referred back to the research questions, conceptual framework, and the purpose of the qualitative study.

### **Data Generated, Gathered, and Recorded**

Interviewing participants provided the opportunity to explore their perspectives of and recommendations for parent education and involvement in the SAP. My research study represents qualitative research with its focus on originality, transparency, methodology, and evidence (see Yin, 2016). Qualitative research enabled me to capture the participants' candid responses whose perspectives were influential to my study. To address RQ 1 and RQ 2, I interviewed 11 school counselors in the study county following my semi-structured interview protocol. The one-on-one interviews were audio recorded over Zoom and lasted between 30 to 45 minutes. The transcripts were then cleaned and analyzed after numerous read-throughs using the five phases of data analysis as defined by Yin (2016). The multi-phased data analysis process concluded with the emergence of four themes that relate back my two research questions.

## **Data Analysis Results**

Qualitative data analysis was done using five phases of data analysis outlined in Yin (2016) that included: (a) compiling, (b) disassembling, (c) reassembling, (d) interpreting, (e) and concluding. In this section, I describe the data analysis process and use examples of the coding and analysis process as it relates to identifying codes, categories, and themes. I provide tables and direct quotes to further represent the findings and to draw associations back to the data. This section concludes with thematic findings which respond to the two research questions and address the study's problem and purpose.

### **Compiling**

The compiling phase was initiated by collecting and saving the audio recorded Zoom files. The mp3 files were then uploaded into a Word document and I used the Word transcription feature to transcribe the audio recording. I listened carefully to the recordings multiple times while reading the transcriptions to account for errors and ensure accuracy. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym for anonymity and the file was saved according to the pseudonym.

The process of listening to recordings multiple times and reading and rereading transcripts helps the researcher become better acquainted with the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). In the compiling phase, Yin (2016) explains that it is here that the researcher becomes deeply familiar with the data while looking for appropriate codes. I read through each transcript thoroughly and looked for strong statements that aligned to the two research questions, problem, purpose, and conceptual framework. As I found useful

excerpts, I highlighted them, and copy and pasted each one onto an Excel spreadsheet, which I organized by participant's pseudonym. Once each participant's excerpts had been copied to the spreadsheet, this allowed me to begin the disassembling phase of data analysis.

### **Disassembling**

Once the excerpts had been collected on the spreadsheet, I began the disassembling phase of Yin's (2016) five step process. I used qualitative content analysis employing a priori coding, a form of deductive coding, based on the conceptual framework. A priori coding served as the initial analysis step towards breaking down the large transcripts of raw data into short, reoccurring phrases based on the conceptual framework and literature review (see Saldana, 2021). The PM conceptual framework suggests six types of involvement and for this study I used Type 1 Parenting, Type 2 Communicating, and Type 6 Collaborating with the Community. According to Bengtsson (2016), "content analysis is unique in that it has both a quantitative and a qualitative methodology, and it can be used in an inductive or deductive way" (p. 10). This system of analysis allows the researcher to look for similarities, differences, patterns, and associations within the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

The literature review reinforced the conceptual framework to demonstrate that student success (academic and mental health) is greatly influenced by parent involvement, parent awareness and education, and strong partnerships between parents and school stakeholders. As such, the a priori codes Parenting, Communicating, and Collaborating with the Community were used for the initial coding process in this study.

The a priori codes helped ground my study during the deductive coding data analysis process. I assigned each excerpt to one of the three a priori codes until each line had been addressed on the spreadsheet. I used a pivot table to tabulate the frequencies of each a priori code during the deductive data analysis phase. Table 4 demonstrates the number of text excerpts coded per each of the three a priori codes as determined from the conceptual framework.

**Table 4**

*A Priori Codes and Count of Text Excerpts by A Priori Code*

A priori codes	Count of interview raw data text excerpts
Collaborating with community	81
Communicating	217
Parenting	168
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>466</b>

Table 5 provides a sample excerpt for each a priori code that typifies the code itself and its connection to the framework.

**Table 5***A Priori Codes Derived From Conceptual Framework and Text Excerpt Samples*

A priori codes	Text excerpt	Participant
Collaborating with community	Our SAP program in the county revolves around supporting students who might need services beyond the scope of what the school can provide in-house, so any of our mental health services, and counseling, psychological evaluations.	P4
Communicating	We send information out, we have people involved in any back to school night or parent teacher night to tell them about what it [SAP] is. We have those individuals on site at those to ask questions. So we try to give them every opportunity to get that information.	P2
Parenting	This year we did get the whole family on a SAP referral, and I think that was just persistence in communication. Just continuing to call the parent and tell them what we're seeing, what we think will benefit them, what we have to offer and just keeping that open line of communication, I think that's what made the difference.	P11



As the next step in Yin's (2016) disassembling phase, two rounds of open descriptive coding were completed. Disassembling the data helps the researcher examine the excerpts in greater detail and to move through the proceeding analysis phases with increased accuracy (Saldana, 2021). In Round 1 open coding, I identified 26 codes based on similar wording, patterns, and associations. Table 6 shows the results of Round 1 open descriptive coding and the associated counts for each one.

**Table 6**

*Round 1 Open Descriptive Coding and Count of Codes*

Round 1 open descriptive code	Count of raw data text excerpts
Adding personnel: recommendation	11
Challenge	99
Connecting families to community resources: educate	26
Easing parent scheduling conflict: involvement	5
Educate parents on SAP: recommendation	25
Educate students: recommendation	13
Email parents about SAP: involvement	3
Flyers/brochures available: educate	7
In school events about SAP: recommendation	1
More in school events about SAP: recommendation	5
More regular outreach to parents: recommendation	4
More SAP info on website: recommendation	4
More SAP training for faculty: recommendation	14
Parent seeking SAP info: educate	22
Phone call outreach: involvement	38
Program info sent home: educate	19
SAP info on website: educate	7
SAP liaison follow up: involvement	25
SC establishing trust with families: involvement	38
SC sharing SAP info with parents: educate	33
School events about SAP: educate	14
Sharing SAP with community: recommendation	14
Teacher to parent communication: educate	27
Variety of attempts made to get form signed: involvement	2
Variety of attempts made to get parent involved in SAP: involvement	7
Working around parent schedule: recommendation	3
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>466</b>

A second round of open coding was done after the first round was completed, which served to further collapse and combine similar codes. I used my field notes as an additional source as I merged codes that were similarly worded and frequently referenced throughout Round 1. As I coded Round 2, I continued to ensure that the newly merged codes connected back to the two research questions and the study's problem. After reading and rereading Round 1 codes, participants' perspectives recommendations for parent education and involvement in the SAP began to emerge more clearly. Throughout the disassembling phase, I reread the codes multiple times to ensure that each code maintained its alignment to the original excerpt. Using a pivot table to tabulate the codes in Round 2, 18 codes emerged which are represented in Table 7.

**Table 7***Round 1 to Round 2 Open Descriptive Codes and Count of Coded Text*

Round 1 to round 2 codes	Count of coded text
<b>Challenge: logistics (insurance, work schedule, incorrect contact info)</b>	<b>10</b>
Challenge	10
<b>Challenge: low parent involvement/follow through</b>	<b>12</b>
Challenge	12
<b>Challenge: parent refuses SAP/unable to be reached</b>	<b>25</b>
Challenge	25
<b>Challenge: parental attitude/beliefs/dispositions/understanding of SAP</b>	<b>47</b>
Challenge	47
<b>Challenge: staff/faculty dispositions</b>	<b>5</b>
Challenge	5
<b>Educate: email/text/website/brochure</b>	<b>36</b>
connecting families to community resources: educate	1
flyers/brochures available: educate	7
program info sent home: educate	19
SAP info on website: educate	7
SC sharing SAP info with parents: educate	2
<b>Educate: face to face/phone call with teacher/counselor</b>	<b>73</b>
parent seeking SAP info: educate	21
phone call outreach: involvement	1
SC sharing SAP info with parents: educate	25
teacher to parent communication: educate	26
<b>Educate: in-school meeting with parent/student</b>	<b>12</b>
connecting families to community resources: educate	2
easing parent scheduling conflict: involvement	4
SC sharing SAP info with parents: educate	5
teacher to parent communication: educate	1
<b>Educate: open house/back to school night</b>	<b>17</b>
connecting families to community resources: educate	1
parent seeking SAP info: educate	1
SC sharing SAP info with parents: educate	1
school events about SAP: educate	14
<b>Educate: school/third party helps families find outside services</b>	<b>23</b>
connecting families to community resources: educate	22
SAP liaison follow up: involvement	1
<b>Involvement: email/text/website</b>	<b>4</b>
email parents about SAP: involvement	3

Round 1 to round 2 codes	Count of coded text
variety of attempts made to get form signed: involvement	1
<b>Involvement: face to face/phone call/home visit</b>	<b>47</b>
easing parent scheduling conflict: involvement	1
phone call outreach: involvement	37
SAP liaison follow up: involvement	1
variety of attempts made to get form signed: involvement	1
variety of attempts made to get parent involved in SAP: involvement	7
<b>Involvement: personalized communication</b>	<b>39</b>
SAP liaison follow up: involvement	1
SC establishing trust with families: involvement	38
<b>Involvement: phone/email/meeting with SAP liaison</b>	<b>22</b>
SAP liaison follow up: involvement	22
<b>Recommendation: adding/training personnel</b>	<b>24</b>
adding personnel: recommendation	11
more SAP training for faculty: recommendation	13
<b>Recommendation: consistently educate parents/students/community about SAP</b>	<b>33</b>
educate parents on SAP: recommendation	15
educate students: recommendation	12
more regular outreach to parents: recommendation	4
more SAP training for faculty: recommendation	1
sharing SAP with community: recommendation	1
<b>Recommendation: easing SAP logistics for parents</b>	<b>7</b>
educate parents on SAP: recommendation	4
working around parent schedule: recommendation	3
<b>Recommendation: sharing SAP with community via formal event/website</b>	<b>30</b>
educate parents on SAP: recommendation	6
educate students: recommendation	1
in school events about SAP: recommendation	1
more in school events about SAP: recommendation	5
more SAP info on website: recommendation	4
sharing SAP with community: recommendation	13
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>466</b>

## **Reassembling**

In Round 2 of open inductive coding, 18 codes emerged that could then be reassembled in phase 3 of Yin's (2016) data analysis process. Reassembling the codes into categories required a deep immersion of Round 2 codes and the use of pivot tables to reassemble the codes in various ways. It was imperative to consistently ensure that the categories could directly answer RQ 1 and RQ 2, while also keeping in alignment with the study's problem and purpose. Meaningful Round 1 and Round 2 open inductive coding allows the researcher to further collapse down codes into similar groupings, or categories (Saldana, 2021). In this phase of data analysis, 18 codes were combined together based on similarity of patterns, resulting in 11 categories. Table 8 represents the 11 categories, organized by Round 2 codes, categories, and text count. Table 9 represents the 11 categories in bold and the count of coded text.

**Table 8***Round 2 to Categories and Count of Coded Text*

Round 2 Codes to Category	Count of coded text
<b>Educate: emails/texts/website/brochures</b>	<b>36</b>
Educate: email/text/website/brochure	36
<b>Educate: face to face meetings/phone calls/outside personnel</b>	<b>107</b>
Educate: face to face/phone call with teacher/counselor	72
Educate: in-school meeting with parent/student	12
Educate: school/third party helps families find outside services	23
<b>Educate: formal events</b>	<b>17</b>
Educate: open house/back to school night	17
<b>Recommendation: additional faculty training/added personnel/logistics</b>	<b>31</b>
Recommendation: adding/training personnel	24
Recommendation: easing SAP logistics for parents	7
<b>Recommendation: student/parent/community SAP education</b>	<b>33</b>
Recommendation: consistently educate parents/students/community about SAP	33
<b>Recommendation: formal events/website</b>	<b>30</b>
Recommendation: sharing SAP with community via formal event/website	30
<b>Challenge: SAP refusal/low involvement/logistics/faculty</b>	<b>52</b>
Challenge: logistics (insurance, work schedule, incorrect contact info)	10
Challenge: low parent involvement/follow through	12
Challenge: parent refuses SAP/unable to be reached	25
Challenge: staff/faculty dispositions	5
<b>Challenge: parent understanding of SAP/attitudes/ beliefs/dispositions</b>	<b>47</b>
Challenge: parental attitude/beliefs/dispositions/understanding of SAP	47
<b>Involvement: emails/texts/website</b>	<b>4</b>
Involvement: email/text/website	4
<b>Involvement: meetings/phone calls/ SAP liaison</b>	<b>70</b>
Educate: face to face/phone call with teacher/counselor	1
Involvement: face to face/phone call/home visit	47
Involvement: phone/email/meeting with SAP liaison	22
<b>Involvement: personalized communication</b>	<b>39</b>
Grand Total	466

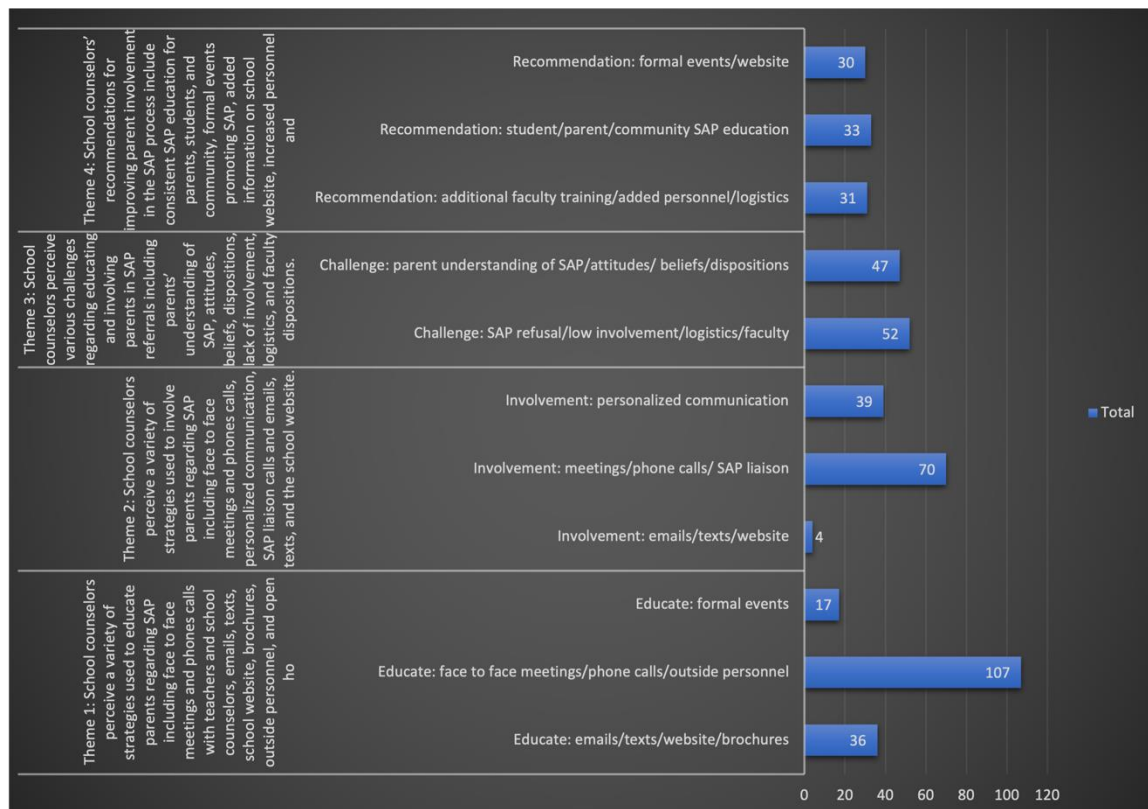
**Table 9***Categories and Count of Coded Text*

Categories	Count of coded text
Educate: emails/texts/website/brochures	36
Educate: face to face meetings/phone calls/outside personnel	107
Educate: formal events	17
Recommendation: additional faculty training/added personnel/logistics	31
Recommendation: student/parent/community SAP education	33
Recommendation: formal events/website	30
Challenge: SAP refusal/low involvement/logistics/faculty	52
Challenge: parent understanding of SAP/attitudes/ beliefs/dispositions	47
Involvement: emails/texts/website	4
Involvement: meetings/phone calls/ SAP liaison	70
Involvement: personalized communication	39
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>466</b>

My immersion into the transcripts, excerpts, codes, and categories resulted in an in-depth examination of the rich data. After immersing myself in the data through the compiling, disassembling and reassembling phases, pivot tables were used to tabulate frequencies of overall codes and categories from the diverse data set. The development of themes evolved from merging similar categories into sentence form after careful consideration of their alignment to the RQs, framework, problem, and purpose. After thorough and reflective qualitative data analysis, four themes emerged from the categories: two themes for RQ 1 and two themes for RQ 2. Figure 2 represents the progression of data analysis from categories to themes.

**Figure 2**

*Categories to Themes*



**Interpreting**

It is in phase four of Yin's (2016) qualitative data analysis process that the researcher begins to make sense of findings through meaningful interpretation. The result of Yin's (2016) phases one through three revealed four themes that helped respond to my two research questions. Therefore, my intention for this phase was to extensively interpret the themes based on relevant research literature that aligned to my research questions, framework, problem, and purpose. The interpretation phase of the four emergent themes in conjunction with current literature further validated my findings and helped spur ideas for future areas of research. Comprehensive examination of the themes



confirmed and validated their authentic representation of all the perspectives and recommendations of the participants regarding parents' education and involvement in SAP. The next section concludes with the fifth phase of Yin's (2016) data analysis process.

### **Concluding**

Concluding is the final phase of Yin's (2016) qualitative data analysis and serves as a bridge that connects the data interpretation back to the study's purpose. I analyzed each of the 11 interview transcripts using one round of a priori deductive coding and two rounds of open descriptive coding. I made use of my field journal for keeping interview notes and for bracketing and used analytic memos to organize codes during phases two and three of qualitative data analysis. Through the use of spreadsheets and pivot tables I was able to compare and contrast codes and collapse codes into categories which resulted in four emergent themes. The four themes emerged as a result of vigorous, extensive analyses and consistently observing alignment with the problem, purpose, RQs, and conceptual framework.

### **Findings Aligned With Research Problem and Questions**

The purpose of this study was to explore school counselors' perspectives about practices being used to educate parents and encourage parent involvement in SAP referrals. To address RQ 1, Theme 1 describes school counselors' perspectives on educating parents about the SAP, and Theme 2 describes school counselors' perspectives on involving parents in the SAP. To address RQ 2, Theme 3 demonstrates the challenges experienced by school counselors when trying to educate and involve parents in the SAP,

and Theme 4 provides school counselors' recommendations for increasing parent education and involvement in the SAP.

In summary, the four themes that emerged from qualitative data analysis using a priori and open coding were as follows:

- Theme 1: School counselors perceive a variety of strategies used to educate parents regarding SAP including face to face meetings and phones calls with teachers and school counselors, emails, texts, school website, brochures, outside personnel, and open house/back to school nights.
- Theme 2: School counselors perceive a variety of strategies used to involve parents regarding SAP including face to face meetings and phones calls, personalized communication, SAP liaison calls and emails, texts, and the school website.
- Theme 3: School counselors perceive various challenges regarding educating and involving parents in SAP referrals including parents' understanding of SAP, attitudes, beliefs, dispositions, SAP refusal, lack of involvement, logistics, and faculty dispositions.
- Theme 4: School counselors' recommendations for improving parent involvement in the SAP process include improved SAP education for parents, students, and community, more formal events promoting SAP, added information on school website, increased personnel and training, and more dedicated time provided for school personnel.

## **Thematic Results for Research Question 1**

### ***Theme 1: School Counselors Perceive a Variety of Strategies Used to Educate Parents Regarding SAP Including Face-to-Face Meetings and Phone Calls With Teachers and School Counselors, Emails, Texts, School Website, Brochures, Outside Personnel, and Open House/Back to School Nights***

In Theme 1, participants described a variety of ways that are used to educate parents regarding the SAP process and referrals. The data indicate that the majority of parent education is conducted using face-to-face meetings, phone calls, emails, texts, school website, brochures, outside personnel, and formal events. Participants shared their perspectives on current strategies being used to educate parents on the SAP process, to better help them understand the SAP and how it could benefit their child.

**Face-to-Face Meetings and Phone Calls.** The data indicated that all 11 participants use face-to-face meetings and phone calls to educate parents about the SAP. These meetings and phone calls occur between parents and teachers, school counselors, and the SAP liaison. The phone calls included communication from school to home, or from home to school, while the face-to-face meetings occurred in the classroom, the school counselor's office, a school meeting room, or the parents' home. P1 gave a general description of how parents are contacted, "If the school counselor or another teacher feels that they want to refer a student, they'll call and explain it to a parent, and then as far as that goes, that's all that's explained to the parents." P3 had a similar response regarding meetings and phone calls, "the most engagement would be me reaching out via phone to have that open communication with the parent when I have

concerns, keeping them updated on how the student is.” An example of a home visit meeting was shared by P10, “My principal actually rode the bus with the student and got off the bus stop and handed it [SAP referral] to mom. He told her, ‘We need this signed. We need another meeting. We're extremely concerned. We love your child, but there's something definitely going on here.’”

SAP liaison calls and face-to-face meetings with parents were discussed by 7 out of 11 interviewees as a means of educating parents on the SAP process. In terms of outside personnel (outside of teachers and school counselors) helping educate parents, P2 discussed how the district social worker “does a lot with families”, P4 shared that the nurse will bring up SAP as needed with parents, and P6 added that their principal also advises parents to consider SAP for their child. While the majority of participants discussed the use of face-to-face meetings and phone calls as an effective way to educate parents on SAP, many also describe the use of electronic and paper resources as another means of educating the parents.

**Resources: Emails, Texts, Website, and Brochures.** The data indicated that all 11 participants mentioned the use of resources such as emails, texts, websites, and brochures as a means of educating parents about the SAP. P2 explained how their school uses texts and the website to educate parents on SAP, “We send out information every year to parents about what the program is, and that is through web blasts or text blasts; it's on our website.” Another example of using the school’s website was stated by P5, “Our high school counselors have a wonderful school counseling website that offers everything from college admissions to the SAP process.” A third example was from P7

regarding the website: “I also have a section on my school counseling website about SAP for parents to learn more information.” Interestingly, P8 shared, “our best way of communicating with parents is the Facebook page” which was not an avenue brought up by any other participants.

Approximately 7 out of 11 participants mentioned using brochures to educate parents about SAP, while P7 and P10 also described using a monthly newsletter in their communication. P6 talked about how having brochures on hand in case parents stop by unexpectedly, “I have the brochures that we try to update yearly especially K to four [grade] and I will have parents coming down or after they meet with their teacher on the parent teacher conference.” P7 was the only school counselor who mentioned using the full complement of resources: website, texts, brochures, and newsletters. Communicating with parents using electronic and paper resources as a means of educating parents about SAP has been useful for some participants, although some discussed the educational effectiveness of formal SAP events.

**Formal Events.** When asked about whether their school did any formal events regarding parent education and SAP, eight participants mentioned a back-to-school night or an open house event. P2, P4, and P8 all discussed a back-to-school night where they were in attendance and could educate parents about the SAP. P4 explained how SAP is incorporated into their back-to-school night, “They do a back-to-school night every year. They explain what the Student Assistance Program is, what it looks like through the district.” About half the participants, 6 out of 11, mentioned an open house event where they educate about SAP, for example P10 said, “When we have open house, I usually

have a little table outside my office with brochures about my services and the SAP process.” P7 mentioned that she and the school social worker set up a table at open house with a PowerPoint presentation to help educate parents. Participants 3 and 11 both described grade-specific events, 7th grade orientation and kindergarten screenings respectively, where they meet and educate parents about SAP.

The problem addressed in this basic qualitative study was that students were not receiving the recommended professional services through the SAP in the study county. Therefore, the purpose was to explore school counselors’ perspectives about practices being used to educate parents and encourage parent involvement in SAP referrals. Theme 1 addresses the problem and purpose of the study by describing the practices being used to educate parents about SAP, which include face-to-face meetings, phone calls, emails, texts, school website, outside personnel, and formal events.

***Theme 2: School Counselors Perceive a Variety of Strategies Used to Involve Parents Regarding SAP Including Face-to-Face Meetings and Phone Calls, Personalized Communication, SAP Liaison Calls and Emails, Texts, and the School Website***

In Theme 2, participants described the various ways in which they attempt to involve parents in the SAP process. Parent involvement strategies can often include face-to-face meetings and phone calls, personalized communication, SAP liaison calls and emails, and use of the school’s website. Throughout the interviews, participants explained the strategies that are used to involve parents in the SAP process and to encourage their participation throughout the referral process.

**Face-To-Face Meetings and Phone Calls.** All school counselors in this study discussed their use of phone calls to involve parents in SAP. P5 explained how they try to keep an open channel of communication with the parents, “I call [parents] like, ‘just want to give you a heads up, this is going on’, they just appreciate being let in to their kid’s lives, making that more an open channel.” Some schools use that open channel to keep parents aware of their child’s progress, so that when the counselor calls home, the parents are ready to get involved, “I normally call home and just talk to the parents and usually they’re aware of it [SAP referral] 90% of the time, they’re aware of this phone call happening because teachers have been in communication with them or our principal has been in communication with them” according to P6. Some SAP teams will share the responsibility of calling home, and the individual team members will take turns contacting parents. P7 explained how their SAP team delegates the communication, “Somebody on our SAP team is appointed the initial contact and they’re going to reach out to the family and explain what SAP is and ask if they would like to participate and then we’ll send home the parent permission forms.”

P3 and P10 described a slightly different approach that does not include the SAP team’s involvement when it comes to contacting parents. They described a process in which only the school counselors call parents to involve them in the SAP referral. P3 explains, “Most of the time it is me or the other counselor that reach out, very rarely is it the principal or anybody else”. Phone calls and face-to-face meetings with parents were discussed by all participants as effective ways to involve parents in the SAP process.

Moreover, interviewees also shared the importance of personalized communication to enhance their involvement strategies.

**Personalized Communication.** When participants discussed strategies for getting parents involved in the SAP process, 7 out of 11 described the importance of having personalized communication. P9 summarized the concept of personalized communication with the statement, “Parents need to trust you. If you don't have that trust, you're not getting anywhere. Like ‘nobody's going anywhere. We'll figure it out. We'll get there’.” P2 talked about recognizing that each individual family has its own specific needs, and the only way to understand the full picture is to get to know them. P2 concluded with, “These families just need to feel loved and supported, and in that moment, if you can get them to buy in.” Parents appreciate that school counselors share their child’s progress and make a concerted effort to involve them in the SAP. P5 explained that getting to know the child, their needs, and the family unit has been valuable because “Building that bridge for them is a huge part of making them open to the SAP process”. In fact, P9 explained how they establish the parent relationship long before SAP is ever discussed, “That relationship is really established prior to presenting the SAP process to the parent. And I think that makes a difference...So we're already developing and establishing relationships with the parents. We promote doing everything we can prior to an outside SAP referral.”

A few participants (P7 and P10) explained how they try to involve parents in the SAP by framing it as supportive services rather than punitive or disciplinary. When describing their communication, P7 stated, “I make it very, very clear to my students that



I'm not here to be punitive and punish you, I'm here to support you and help you work through things. That has been huge for the kids too.” In a similar statement about focusing on support versus discipline, P10 said, “These are people and they're here to help you. It's not a bunch of scary people trying to get anyone in trouble or take kids away or give more consequences or discipline.” The importance of building a rapport with families was echoed from P4, P5, P6, and P7 as a necessary component for getting parents involved and accepting of the SAP. P6 summarized it as, “A lot of our families know that we will do anything to help them.” Throughout the interviews, participants discussed the various communication tools they use to build rapport and trust with parents, including emails, texts, and the school’s website.

**Emails, Texts, and the School Website.** When asked about methods used to involve parents in the SAP, 5 out of 11 interviewees mentioned using emails, texts, or the school’s website. Adobe Sign was used by P3 as a means of getting a parent signature on the SAP referral, because Adobe Sign will send out email reminders every ten days. They found it helpful that Adobe Sign would routinely remind parents over email that the SAP referral needed their signature. P4 explained that reaching out to parents via email was also done by the administration, “Our administration is really involved, so they're always copied on the emails.” Participants 3, 6, 7, and 11 also mentioned sending home newsletters and directing families to the school’s website as involvement strategies, in addition to emails and calls home regarding SAP.

The problem addressed in this basic qualitative study was that students were not receiving the recommended professional services through the SAP in the study county.

Therefore, the purpose was to explore school counselors' perspectives about practices being used to educate parents and encourage parent involvement in SAP referrals. Theme 2 addresses both the problem and purpose of the study by describing the ways in which school counselors involve parents in the SAP. The involvement strategies included: face-to-face meetings, phone calls, personalized communication, emails, texts, and school website.

***Theme 3: School Counselors Perceive Various Challenges Regarding Educating and Involving Parents in SAP Referrals Including Parents' Understanding of SAP, Attitudes, Beliefs, Dispositions, SAP Refusal, Lack of Involvement, Logistics, and Faculty Dispositions***

In Theme 3, participants described the array of challenges experienced while trying to educate and involve parents in the SAP. The challenges included parents' understanding of SAP, attitudes, beliefs, dispositions, SAP refusal, lack of parent involvement, parent logistics, and faculty dispositions. School counselors' challenges arose throughout the study as participants shared some of the reasons why they struggled educating and involving parents in the SAP process.

**Parent Understanding of SAP, Attitudes, Beliefs, and Dispositions.** When participants were asked about the challenges of getting parents educated and involved their child's SAP referral, their answers were numerous and diverse. Three participants (P8, P9, P10) noted that parents' lack of understanding of the SAP was challenging for them. P10 expressed, "A lot of people think it's a referral process only for students who are having behaviors and they're disruptive and they're not attending school, and it's

really much more than that.” Lack of SAP understanding can also lead parents to false assumptions and fear that their child might be taken away from them. P9 explained this particular challenge, “People think that if my kid tells you something, someone is going to come in and take them away from me.” Lack of understanding was also underscored by P8, “I don't think people understand SAP and that it can provide so much more than just mental health services.” Parents’ lack of understanding about the SAP, as some participants suggested, might stem from differing attitudes, beliefs, and dispositions surrounding SAP and mental health services.

Parental attitudes, beliefs, and dispositions towards the SAP arose in 8 out of 11 participant interviews. Asking school counselors about their challenges educating and involving parents in the SAP brought up repeated terms like “stigma”, “label”, “past traumas”, and “judge”. P3 mentioned the stigma surrounding the SAP, “It [SAP] has a very negative stigma, I don't know if parents are worried of like ‘Oh, what does that mean that they're getting referred for this program? Is something wrong?’.” Some interviewees shared that parents worry that their child will be labeled as insufficient, or that the referral will stay on their permanent record. P8 explained their challenge, “Our parents are more embarrassed or in denial of providing support for their children. ‘My kids don't need that. I can take them to the counselor on their own’.”

Conversations with school counselors also revealed varying degrees of parental misunderstanding and acceptance of mental health services. P2 described their experience with the cultural gap, “And then trying to bridge those cultural gaps where mental health isn't important to some people. And it's not relevant to some cultures and not everybody

sees mental health the same.” Another example of mental health misunderstanding was raised by P3, “They don't even acknowledge that therapy exists because they think that you're brainwashing their child. I've had people tell me that it's offensive to them because it's saying that they can't parent and get their own resources for their child.” In P7's community, mental health is addressed by getting one's anger out on the football field or fighting it out if someone talks badly about you.

Attitudes, beliefs, and dispositions regarding the SAP can also be deeply rooted in the community. A few participants described parents' hesitancy to accept SAP referrals due to past traumas or poor experiences with the school district. In P5's community, “I've had a lot of parents communicate to me their bad experiences with school and I know that stigma and thought process has really hindered a lot of things because they don't trust schools.” Another SAP hesitancy factor discussed was that the families themselves may already be in crisis mode, thus creating resistance to added meetings, calls, or emails about SAP. P2 spoke about families in her district, “It's those tough families who have a lot going on, who don't want people in their business, who are not willing or can't get off of work...These families are typically in crisis too, and the last thing that they want to do is have all these meetings.” Some participants however, shared examples of parents who were initially against the SAP referral, but who eventually learned more about it and changed their dispositions. P4 discussed an example of a parent who was hesitant to accept the SAP referral at first, “I think there was a hesitant of being judged and a label being put on the kid, but it wasn't for those purposes, and I think once she was through the process and understood how we could help at school in a positive way, that got her to

be on our team.” Attitudes, beliefs, and dispositions can affect the SAP process in many ways, including SAP refusal, low involvement, and parent logistics.

**SAP Refusal, Low Parent Involvement, Logistics, Faculty Dispositions.** When a parent refuses to sign the SAP referral or does not respond to the school’s outreach, the referral cannot proceed. As a result, the student cannot receive the necessary services that would have been available had the referral been signed. P2, P3, P5, and P11 all mentioned the challenges that they have experienced when trying to get referrals signed by parents. P2 shared, “If a parent denies it [SAP referral] or does not want their child to participate, we are more limited in what we can do.” In a similar statement, P10 added, “Those students where we know that they absolutely need help, it seems like those are the ones that we struggle to get permission from...two of our highest needs kids are the ones we've been struggling to get permission for about two months now.” When P5 cannot get a parent signature for the SAP referral, they try to support the student in other ways, “If we can't get parents to sign off on things, just so we can keep track of the student, we have the multi-tiered system of supports within our schools so that I can address academic and behavioral supports within the building.” Lack of parent involvement hinders the SAP process too and can create other challenges as a result.

Almost every participant mentioned their challenges with low parent involvement. Some of the challenges included parents not answering the phone, not calling back, not responding to emails, or to letters sent home. P1 implied that the high number of SAP referrals in their school might be due to low parent involvement. P1 explained the statement, “Half of the time the parents don't respond...Sometimes we have students that

want counseling services, but they can't get a paper signed and returned or have their parents come out to the school for the meeting.” P3 explained that once they make three or four attempts to contact the parents to get a signature, they stop reaching out. P11 mentioned that being met with repeated parent resistance to their efforts can make it challenging to keep trying. They explained, “As a professional you will become more resistant to making multiple phone calls because when you meet so much resistance or animosity in your communication, you're less likely to continue to make those phone calls.” In fact, P7 described an experience in which they went to a family’s home to get the SAP referral signed, and “they still didn’t answer the door”. Low parent involvement can be rooted in logistical issues as well, which can create a different set of challenges for school counselors.

Logistics play a significant part in the challenges that school counselors face when trying to educate and involve parents with the SAP. P1, P4, and P6 described the logistical challenge they have faced when a family does not have the right insurance and therefore the child cannot receive SAP services. Another logistical issue brought up by P2, P4, P5, and P6 is that parents’ work schedules can limit their ability to attend in-school meetings with school counselors or the SAP liaison. Furthermore, parents who have changed their phone numbers or email addresses make it almost impossible to be contacted, according to P7 and P10. When P10 could not reach a parent using an old phone number on file, they reached out to the child’s emergency contact, “That emergency contact was a big factor in getting the parent in here to fill out paperwork and sign permission because they [emergency contact] were also concerned.” The logistical

challenges can be difficult for the faculty as well, which can sometimes lead to poor faculty dispositions regarding SAP.

Participants 3, 5, and 7 discussed the challenges that they often have with faculty dispositions and the SAP. P3 explained their experience the first time they held a SAP team meeting, “The minute I said ‘parent’ and ‘involvement’, their [the SAP team] mouths were on the floor and they were going to run out of the room.” Similarly, P5 described a scenario from her first year in the district when they struggled getting teacher buy-in to a SAP-related positive behavior program, thus making it harder to get parents involved in SAP. In terms of overall awareness and knowledge of SAP, P7 explained, “Most of them [teachers] are very unaware of the SAP process and are not very well educated on it, and probably should not be the ones calling home because they’ll misspeak on the SAP program.”

The problem addressed in this basic qualitative study was that students were not receiving the recommended professional services through the SAP in the study county. The purpose was therefore to explore school counselors’ perspectives about practices being used to educate parents and encourage parent involvement in SAP referrals. Theme 3 addresses both the problem and purpose of the study by highlighting certain challenges that school counselors experience when trying to educate and involve parents in the SAP. The challenges included parents’ understanding of SAP, attitudes, beliefs, dispositions, SAP refusal, lack of parent involvement, parent logistics, and faculty dispositions.

## **Thematic Results for Research Question 2**

### ***Theme 4: School Counselors' Recommendations for Improving Parent Involvement in the SAP Process Include Improved SAP Education for Parents, Students, and Community, More Formal Events Promoting SAP, Added Information on School Website, Increased Personnel and Training, and More Dedicated Time Provided for School Personnel***

In Theme 4, school counselors shared their recommendations for improving parent education and involvement with the SAP in order to increase referral approvals. When asked to reflect on their recommendations and needs to better address their concerns with parent education and involvement in the SAP, their responses were thoughtful, diverse, and detailed. The participants' recommendations included improved SAP education for parents, students, and the community, more formal events promoting SAP, added information on the school's website, increased personnel and training, and more dedicated time provided for school personnel.

**Improved SAP Education for Parents, Students, Community.** When school counselors were asked for their recommendations to increase parent education and involvement in the SAP, 8 out of 11 recommended improved SAP education for students, parents, and the community. Participants 1, 4, and 5 suggested focusing SAP education on the students to make them more aware of the program and its support services. P3 suggested making students an integral part of the process, "I think at any age, kids are part of the process, where this isn't something we're doing to them, we're doing it with them." Moreover, P5 expressed the need to teach students how to process emotions and



behaviors, which is at the root of the SAP, “Kids that I have that go from zero to 100 on anger- we're not giving them any tools beforehand to really work with.” P5 went on to suggest, “Going into the classroom on a monthly basis and providing different lessons on respect, conflict resolution, those different topics really does help and it also says, ‘we're all on the same playing field now’.” P1 recommended that teaching the students about SAP could potentially result in educating the parents as well, “Maybe if we brought more attention to our SAP program and educated the students more, naturally parents would be more interested in it.”

P1, P4, P5, P6, and P11 all suggested that SAP education be directed towards the parents as a means for increasing their education and involvement. Educating the whole family about the SAP and mental health was suggested by P4, “I think just educating families around mental wellness, ‘what does that look like for a kid?’ is so different than just saying they have this label. It's like, how do we help them?”. On P11’s wish list, they wished that parents could “truly understand what SAP has to offer ahead of time”, which was followed up with, “I guess that's on me to teach them that.” A few interviewees recommended the need for open conversations with parents, making them aware of SAP early in their child’s education, having the administration on board to also teach about SAP, and making it part of the community conversation.

Educating the community about the benefits of the SAP was discussed by P4, P5, and summarized by P8, “Community professionals promoting and speaking of the benefits of SAP, like when a student goes to the pediatrician about feeling anxious, maybe offering ‘have you considered the school SAP program?’- just professionals in the

community advocating for it.” Sharing information about the SAP to all stakeholders was recommended by P5, P8, and P10 as a means of increasing overall parent education and involvement. While almost all interviewees agreed that education was a critical factor affecting parent education and involvement, there was also mention of adding more formal SAP events and improving information on the school’s website.

**More Formal Events and Improved School Website.** While P1 recommended educating students about the SAP, they also suggested having a more formal in-school activity to promote the SAP program. They went on to explain, “I think that helping students know that it’s available is very important because when you have low parent involvement, these students are really parenting themselves.” P1, P5, P8, and P10 all agreed that parents could benefit from an evening event where they could come to the school and learn about the SAP. When P8 was asked for their recommendations for increasing parent education and involvement in the SAP, they suggested promoting it at high school football games because of the large turnout for those events. P8 explained their idea in more detail, “We have talked about promoting SAP at local football games. That’s a big community event at our school district. Everyone attends, get the community involved, this will kind of help.”

Four interviewees (P1, P4, P5, P6) proposed adding more SAP information to the school’s website as a way to increase parent education and involvement. It was suggested that having more resources available on the website would allow parents to educate themselves on their own time, without needing to attend a meeting, event, or make a phone call. P6 discussed the need for parents to have streamlined simplified access to

SAP website information, “I could see where the parents just want to have those hyperlinks on that Friday communication to get you from point A to point B.” To that end, P5 suggested making the SAP resources more apparent on the website, “Like, what is the process for getting that [service] set up? And just kind of being more forthcoming with that information.” Having more formal events and an enhanced school website were two recommendations that would likely call for more personnel involvement.

**Increased Personnel.** When asked about their recommendations for increasing parent education and involvement in the SAP, 6 out of 11 school counselors suggested adding more personnel. P2 and P3 both expressed the need for more personnel to help with parent outreach, with P2 stating, “Put people! Schools need people.” Some participants (P4, P6, P9) suggested needing more outside personnel to assist with school-based counseling. P4 explained the lack of resources, “Sometimes we don't have a resource. We don't have family behavior resources and they don't have another person to come to our school.” P4 also shared that, due to lack of personnel, it can take a month for a student to get a psychological evaluation, which is a long time to wait for critical services. Similarly, P6 struggled with families also waiting a long time for school-based therapy, and without enough therapists, students are not getting the SAP services they need. P5’s recommendation was to use a case management model for SAP, as they had experienced at a higher-staffed school district, “They [another district] have a larger [SAP] team and they do a case management model which is super. I think that's really the only way to do SAP because it can't go all on one person.”

On a slightly different note, P7 thought that it would help relieve their own time constraints and pressure by having a separate school employee responsible for SAP, “If there were somebody who could give all of their time to it, I think a huge part of that parent engagement, parent education piece would fall into place.” P7 went on to say that SAP takes up a large part of their day and requires extra work hours, which takes time away from other school counselor duties. Along with added personnel, it was also suggested that there be additional SAP training for faculty and staff.

**Increased Training for Personnel.** Out of 11 school counselors, five recommended having more dedicated SAP training for faculty and staff. P3 suggested more training for the SAP team members on the importance of parent involvement strategies. It was the hope of P8 that, with more faculty and staff SAP training, it would result in them “Having a deeper understanding of the purpose of SAP and having better and more consistent communication with the parents.” The sentiment was echoed by P10 and P11, who also expressed that sometimes SAP is shrouded by a “veil of mystery” (P10) because only the SAP team truly understand the whole program. In recommending more SAP training for faculty and staff, P11 summarized by saying, “If every staff member had the same level of understanding and communication for SAP, I think it would help because if you know what it is, then you're more likely to tell somebody ‘We have something that can help you and that's called SAP.’ When parents hear positive said about it, they're more likely to be involved and participate.”

A few participants (P7, P8) shared that they themselves would have liked more SAP training early in their careers, because it had never been addressed in their graduate

classes. P7 explained their experience, “SAP is usually not something that we are ever trained on in our [graduate] programs. So, we come to our schools as new counselors, and we’re expected to run a program that we were never trained on.” A few of the participants discussed having attended the county’s mandatory 3-day SAP training but still felt insufficiently prepared to run the program or lead a SAP team meeting. Their requests were to have more SAP training during onboarding at their schools, and the time with which to adjust to their new role as school counselors.

**More Dedicated Time for School Personnel.** Throughout the interviews, participants shared their recommendations for improving parent education and involvement in the SAP to increase referral approvals. A common thread throughout most of the conversations was the need for more dedicated time to accomplish their core job responsibilities. Almost every school counselor recommended increased SAP education for students, parents, and the community, but educating people requires added time. Some interviewees (P1, P4, P5) suggested providing more classroom lessons for students regarding mental health and emotional wellness tools, which would require time for lesson planning and instructing. P5 explained one of their time challenges, “It’s hard to get that personalized touch, but I think that’s what needs to happen, it’s just those check-ins with parents saying, like, ‘what do you need, where do you feel the struggle is?’” Participants 1, 5, 8, and 11 suggested more formal SAP events, while P1, P4, P5, and P6 proposed having more SAP-related information on the school’s website. Both the planning of formal events and developing of website content would likely require school counselors to further divide up their time, taking more time away from their job duties.

While recommendations for increased parent education and involvement in the SAP were shared across many participants, they would all likely require additional time for planning, prepping, outreach, and meetings.

Six interviewees recommended adding more personnel to help educate and involve parents in the SAP, which could free up their time to focus on their main counselor duties. Moreover, many participants noted that the lack of time in their schedules affected how many students they could meet with and counsel daily. Lack of time proved to be a common denominator for almost all participants, whose extra duties also included carpool, cafeteria, dismissal, clubs, and hallway duty. P7 stated, “If there were somebody who could give all of their time to it [SAP], I think a huge part of that parent engagement, parent education piece, would fall into place... it [SAP] is so much work and it's a part of my job that I'm not a huge fan of because it is so much work for me.” Similarly, P9 referred to the need for sustained resources to make up for the gap in time that they are not able to provide students during the day, “The funding needs to continue, and we need to have people to help these kids beyond what we can do in the school day like case management, family based, outpatient therapy- bridging that gap is very important.” Adding personnel would help distribute school counselors’ responsibilities, which could provide more dedicated attention to educating and involving parents in the SAP. P3 explained how the added personnel could help with time constraints, “I feel like just having more of that [SAP team] support can overall help with the parent contact.” Providing more time for school counselors to address SAP-related

education, training, teaching, and planning was a consistent recommendation from the majority of interviewees.

### **Discrepant Cases**

Discrepancies within the data can occur in qualitative research, given that we are seeking personal experiences and perspectives from different participants (Saldana, 2021). I kept track of the interview process by using a reflective journal and research log to account for discrepancies and ensure validity and accuracy of the results (Su et al., 2021). Most of the participants' responses were fairly similar, as they described many comparable perspectives, challenges, and recommendations. One school counselor however, P9, expressed surprisingly different perspectives about educating and involving parents in SAP. P9 had been in her role for twenty-two years, nineteen of which were spent in the same school. Out of approximately 400 students, P9 only had 16 SAP referrals for the year, all of which had received parent approval without much difficulty. In contrast to other school counselors in the study, P9 spoke about SAP as a very positive experience, and one that parents were willing to be part of voluntarily. Unlike many participants, P9 shared very few negative perspectives about SAP and described supportive principal involvement throughout SAP. In fact, P9 could not immediately think of any suggestions for bettering the SAP process when initially asked about her recommendations.

Discrepancies can be viewed as an opportunity to explore other facets of the study that may need further explanation and research (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The discrepant case in the study led to more questions and potential ideas for future research. A follow

up interview asking P9 to discuss her strategies, school culture, and parent approaches could yield promising results. One might question whether the years of experience in her role or the tenure at her school accounted for such positive SAP perspectives. The findings from further interviewing P9 might to help other schools implement similar methods for bettering their SAP process and outcomes. Understanding and disseminating P9's successful approaches for educating and involving parents in SAP could help increase student access to professional services across the county.

### **Evidence of Quality**

Additional steps in the data analysis process were taken to ensure accuracy and credibility. In qualitative research, “multiple minds bring multiple ways of analyzing and interpreting data” (Saldana, 2021, p. 53). Raw data, including recordings and transcripts, were shared with my committee including the data analysis process used to derive codes, categories, and themes, thus providing for interrater reliability (Saldana, 2021). Member checking was used throughout the transcription and data analysis processes to help ensure credibility and validity. Participants were emailed a draft summary of the findings and asked for their input. After a 7-day waiting period, if I had not received a response, a follow up emailed was sent. Member checking served to establish reliability of the data analyses, which are described in the following section.

### **Systemic Process**

When conducting qualitative research, attention to systematic and structured processes is vital to the study's success. According to Ravitch and Carl (2021), “intentional, systematic data analysis is crucial to conducting valid and rigorous studies”



(p. 219). Firstly, data analysis must be carefully handled to protect participants' privacy in accordance with IRB policies through confidentiality practices and participant anonymization. Therefore, after each interview the participant was assigned a numerical pseudonym, and any identifying information was removed as a means of anonymizing their responses. The interview's mp3 audio file was uploaded and transcribed to a Word document, after which this basic qualitative data analysis used the 5 phases of data analysis outlined in Yin (2016) that included: (a) compiling, (b) disassembling, (c) reassembling, (d) interpreting, (e) and concluding. I used qualitative content analysis employing a priori coding, a form of deductive coding, based on the conceptual framework, and open descriptive coding, a form of inductive coding. To account for credibility and validity throughout the transcription and data analysis processes, member checking and bracketing were used continuously throughout the study (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Reflexivity was addressed through the use of a reflective journal, to serve as a continuous reminder to check for biases or subjectivity that could interfere with the interview and data. As researchers, if we are not actively and critically monitoring ourselves for biases and positionality, then we put our study at risk for quality and credibility (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Another method to ensure we are not imposing our own experiences and emotions into the data is to use bracketing. Berkovic et al. (2020) suggested using an ongoing bracketing routine to check ourselves for impartiality, assumptions, to abide by the interview protocol, and to maintain one's role as the researcher (and not a medical expert or friend, for example).

### **Member Checking**

Participant validation, otherwise referred to as member checking, is a qualitative research strategy that reinforces the validity and thoroughness of one's data. Member checking is a process in which the researcher communicates their findings back to the interviewee, to ensure that their transcript was interpreted and analyzed accurately (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). If the interviewee disagrees with the researcher's findings, then the participant has the opportunity to offer their opinion for corrections. For this study, member checking occurred after the data analysis and involved emailing each interviewee my findings from their interview along with their original interview transcript. They were given one week to respond to my outreach and offer corrections or suggestions on what they read. Member checking occurred continuously throughout the study, as participants took time to read, reflect on, and respond to the findings and transcripts they received from me. There were no participants who asked for changes or edits to their responses.

### **Reflective Journal**

A reflective journal was used in this study to keep track of any questions, ideas, thoughts, and challenges to ensure the development of proper research habits and researcher reflexivity throughout the interview process. The reflective journal was used throughout the interview process to maintain researcher reflexivity and to note any experiences or biases that might negatively affect accuracy and credibility (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The reflective journal was also be used to note any follow up questions for the participants that would serve to enhance the data (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Su et al.

(2021) also used reflective journaling throughout their research, during data analysis, and among the various research coding teams. Any notes taken during the interview were done professionally, causing the least amount of distraction to the participant. I reminded each participant about the importance of their confidentiality, that they would be given a numerical pseudonym for anonymity purposes, and that there would be no identifying factors anywhere in the study.

### **Summary of Findings**

The problem addressed in this basic qualitative study was that students were not receiving the recommended professional services through the SAP in the study county. The study's purpose was to explore school counselors' perspectives about practices being used to educate parents and encourage their involvement in SAP referrals. Four themes emerged from the data analysis of this study. The four themes that emerged are (a) school counselors perceive a variety of strategies used to educate parents regarding SAP including face-to-face meetings and phone calls with teachers and school counselors, emails, texts, school website, brochures, outside personnel, and open house/back to school nights, (b) school counselors perceive a variety of strategies used to involve parents regarding SAP including face-to-face meetings and phone calls, personalized communication, SAP liaison calls and emails, texts, and the school website, (c) school counselors perceive various challenges regarding educating and involving parents in SAP referrals including parents' understanding of SAP, attitudes, beliefs, dispositions, SAP refusal, lack of involvement, logistics, and faculty dispositions, and (d) school counselors' recommendations for improving parent involvement in the SAP process

include improved SAP education for parents, students, and community, more formal events promoting SAP, added information on school website, increased personnel and training, and more dedicated time provided for school personnel.

The research problem that was addressed in this basic qualitative study was that students were not receiving the recommended professional services through the SAP in the study county. Guided by Epstein's PM, this study investigated school counselors' perspectives, challenges, and recommendations about practices being used to educate parents and encourage parent involvement in SAP referrals. Epstein's framework of overlapping spheres of influence and the PM highlight effective evidence-based research practices to increase parent involvement through strategically designed partnerships between parent, school, and community.

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore school counselors' perspectives about practices being used to educate parents and encourage parent involvement in SAP referrals. To answer the two research questions and further understand the study's phenomena, I interviewed eleven K-12 school counselors from the study county using semistructured interviews. Inclusion criteria for the participants included school counselors who were (a) active certified K-12 public school counselors in the study county, and (b) had experience educating parents and encouraging their involvement in SAP referrals. In this section, I summarize the findings to this study's problem, purpose, and RQs in conjunction with the conceptual framework and current research literature.

### **Findings for Research Question 1**

What are K-12 school counselors' perspectives about the current practices being used to educate parents and encourage their involvement in SAP referrals in one western Pennsylvania county? Two themes emerged from these data. In Theme 1, school counselors perceived a variety of strategies used to educate parents regarding SAP including face-to-face meetings and phone calls with teachers and school counselors, emails, texts, school website, brochures, outside personnel, and open house/back to school nights. In Theme 2, school counselors perceived a variety of strategies used to involve parents regarding SAP including face-to-face meetings and phone calls, personalized communication, SAP liaison calls and emails, texts, and the school website.

In Theme 1, school counselors described the strategies most often used to educate parents about the SAP which focused mainly on face-to-face meetings and phone calls with teachers and school counselors. To a lesser degree, participants also used electronic communications, brochures, outside personnel, and formal events to educate parents about SAP. The PM clearly explains that communicating with parents using a "regular schedule of useful notices, phone calls, newsletters, and other communications" (Epstein, 2010, p. 85) is at the heart of the framework's Type 2 Communicating. Moreover, the PM illustrates the student's potential role as a "courier and communicator" of school policies and programs between home and school. Once a student has been educated about the SAP, they could then potentially educate their parents about it as well. Both Barnett et al. (2023) and Carlson et al. (2021) underscore the importance of communicating on a routine basis with families using multiple methods to best support the child. The method

and frequency of communications with families should therefore be designed to work for all stakeholders with the most beneficial outcomes for the students.

Theme 1 also demonstrated that the majority of participants in this study use formal events, such as back to school night and open house, as avenues to educate parents about SAP. However, only one school counselor used the event explicitly to discuss SAP with families, while the others described more passive approaches such as sitting at a table or handing out brochures. The PM's Type 1 Parenting describes the use of "neighborhood meetings to help families understand schools and help schools understand families" as a means to increasing involvement (Epstein, 2010, p. 85). Olubiyi et al. (2019) explained how varying family engagement activities has been found to increase the family's commitment and participation in their child school life. Therefore, varying the kinds of formal events that are planned and the activities chosen for those events might have a greater and more lasting impact on parent involvement in the SAP.

In Theme 2, school counselors described the strategies most often used to involve parents about the SAP which centered mainly on face-to-face meetings and phone calls, personalized communication, and SAP liaison calls and emails. To a lesser extent, participants also mentioned the use of emails, texts, and the school website as ways in which they involve parents in the SAP. The PM's framework focuses on six types of involvement, three of which were used for this study: Parenting, Communicating, and Collaborating with Community.

Because involvement plays such a pivotal role in the overlapping spheres of influence framework, the PM has proven to be beneficial across all stakeholders:

students, parents, and community (Epstein et al., 2011; Epstein, 2010, 2018). Mehta et al. (2019) echoed the importance of parent involvement and encouraged schools to diversify involvement opportunities for families as a way to meet the needs of their unique populations. Varying the times for meetings or phone calls, using multiple outreach methods, in- or out-of-school parent groups, and considering the use of a case management model were all suggested as alternatives to traditional formal events (Mehta et al., 2019).

Consideration of the parent's role and level of involvement within the school environment is recommended as a means of establishing clear expectations from all stakeholders (Hill, 2022; Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020). Depending on a family's cultural background, some may assume a minimal involvement role and that the boundary between home and school be respected to keep parents at a distance (Hill, 2022; Su et al., 2021). Nevertheless, Hill (2022) recommends that parents involve themselves both academically and emotionally in schools to ensure their children develop the necessary dispositions for success, both cognitively and socioemotionally.

In Theme 2, the majority of school counselors expressed the importance of personalized communication as a fundamental component to positive parent involvement. Whether they were talking with students directly, learning about their backgrounds, meeting with parents face-to-face, or calling home to discuss a child's progress, participants agreed that personalization had been the key to getting parents involved in the SAP. At the core of the PM are the overlapping spheres of home, school, and community, with the student located at the center. The PM indicates the benefits that can

arise from using personalized communication among stakeholders, including shared respect, responsibility, and trust towards one another. McCabe (2021) explained the concept of ‘shared understanding’ between professionals and their patients, describing the importance of attending closely to the patient’s words, perspectives, and experiences. Jaynes (2018) and Newman et al. (2019) also found similar results in their research, and that the power of personalized communication, active listening, and empathy resulted in increased parent involvement and student success. Regular, personalized outreach helped school counselors in this study bridge the gap between school and home, and they used those opportunities share positive news about the child’s growth and development. If, down the road, the school counselor needed to speak to a parent about a SAP referral, their relationship had already been established from prior outreach and parents were more willing to become involved.

Researchers have shown that students are more likely to share their emotions and struggles with people they trust and respect. Fox et al.’s (2022) study determined that adolescents aged 13-17 were more likely to disclose self-injurious thoughts and behaviors with those whom they had established a trusting relationship. Biddle et al. (2014) and Sekhar et al. (2022a) both concluded that parent involvement and awareness in conjunction with a trusting relationship among stakeholders, resulted in cumulative positive effects of the SAP referral. The benefits and long-term gains of building personalized communication with stakeholders could help establish trusting and respectful relationships that could in turn lead to increased parent involvement in the SAP.



School counselors discussed their perspectives about the various ways that are used to educate and involve parents in the SAP process. They explained that the most common strategies for educating parents included face-to-face meeting and phone calls, outside personnel, electronic communication, brochures, and formal events. Participants shared that parent involvement strategies included face-to-face meetings and phone calls, conversations with the SAP liaison, personalized communication, electronic outreach. Theme 3 emerged regarding school counselors' perspectives on the challenges they face when trying to educate and involve parents in the SAP.

### **Findings for Research Question 2**

What are K-12 school counselors' recommendations for improving parent involvement in order to increase SAP approvals? Two themes emerged from these data. In Theme three, school counselors perceived various challenges regarding educating and involving parents in SAP referrals including the parents' understanding of SAP, attitudes, beliefs, dispositions, SAP refusal, lack of involvement, logistics, and faculty dispositions. In eight of 11 interviews, parental attitudes, beliefs, and dispositions towards the SAP were discussed as a main challenge. School counselors struggled to educate and involve parents in the SAP due in part to the parents' attitudes and beliefs surrounding SAP and mental health in general. Interviewees expressed multiple times that parents' lack of understanding and unwillingness to participate in SAP was likely due to a systemic issue stemming from the community's mindset.

The PM's Type 6 Collaborating with Community illustrates that the overlapping spheres have far reaching capabilities that can strengthen or weaken the system as a

whole. Ben-Tov and Romi (2019) described parent association and awareness with the school as “alertness” and their data indicated that low alertness predicted a direct, significant and negative relationship with children’s success. Likewise, high levels of alertness predicted the opposite: a significant and positive relationship towards the child’s success. If alertness can be nurtured through effective involvement strategies between home, school, and community, perhaps the community can evolve towards a better understanding of SAP. Diamond et al. (2022) described both the risk factors and protective factors that stemmed from families, and emphasized the societal value of an educated, supportive home life to help children succeed.

Another challenge that emerged in Theme 3 was a fairly consistent negative community mindset towards mental health and professional services. In Sekhar et al.’s (2022b) research studying the details of over 350,000 SAP referrals from 2013 to 2018, they found that there existed an overarching perception of stigma and shame related to help seeking behavior among students. Their recommendations included addressing local and statewide stigma reductions and awareness messaging regarding SAP and mental health support. Moreover, in Sekhar et al.’s 2023 study analyzing 1000 SAP teams across the state, they identified a considerable lack of SAP communication to parents, families, and students across Pennsylvania.

A challenge that arose from Theme 3 was the lack of parent involvement and difficulty reaching parents, which often led to SAP referral refusal. According to the PM, we cannot assume that the school, family, and community partnerships will simply occur on their own without significant effort from stakeholders. Rather, successful partnership

activities must be specifically and intentionally designed to engage, energize, and motivate stakeholders' participation (Epstein, 2010). Epstein recommended scheduling conferences with every parent at least once per year, weekly or monthly folders sent home, regular mailings, phone calls, emails, and frequent community activities all integrating the importance of maintaining and nurturing partnerships (Epstein, 2010; Epstein et al., 2011). By increasing and diversifying the modes of parent communication, this may in turn make parents more open to becoming educated and involved in the SAP.

According to Kass et al. (2023), parents are more accepting of mental health discussions regarding their children when it is conducted by someone with whom they have an established relationship. Therefore, nurturing trusting and respectful relationships between home and school should be the prime focus for administrators, teachers, and school counselors to increase parent involvement (CDC, 2023a). Parent involvement, according to Su et al. (2021) and Kelty and Wakabayashi (2020) can be affected by factors such as parents' motivations, and socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, and as such it is important to consider the parents' viewpoints when pursuing their involvement. Because faculty and staff are in unique positions to identify a student's internalizing or externalizing behavior issues, a trusting and respectful relationship between home and school should be properly nurtured as a highly valuable asset (Marsh & Mathur, 2020).

In Theme 4, participants shared their recommendations for increasing parent involvement in the SAP process. Their suggestions included improved SAP education for parents, students, and the community, more formal events promoting SAP, added information on the school website, increased personnel and SAP training, and more

dedicated time provided for school personnel. The school counselors' recommendations align directly with the PM because of their focus on uniting home, school, and community stakeholders. Epstein's (2010) research has shown, decade after decade, the benefits of strong home-school-community connections, "when parents, teachers, students, and others view one another as partners in education, a caring community forms around students and begins its work" (p. 81). More specifically, the PM's Parenting, Communicating, and Collaborating with Community involvement types all touch on the participants' recommendations for increased parent education and involvement.

Increasing SAP education for parents can result in a deeper understanding of school policies and programs, better monitoring and awareness of their child's mental and behavioral development, and more effective communication between home and school (Epstein, 2010, 2018). Similarly, increasing SAP education for students can result in a greater understanding of school policies and programs, more positive beliefs and attitudes towards mental health, expanded tools to make informed decisions, and an awareness of their role as a courier and communicator for their parents (Epstein, 2010, Epstein et al., 2021). And finally, educating the community about SAP can serve to build awareness about programs, services, resources, and opportunities in the community, increase interactions among community members, schools, and families, and facilitate a shared interest among mentors, volunteers, and business partners (Epstein, 2010; Epstein et al., 2011). Research has shown that educating stakeholders about SAP can lead to increased rates of professional treatment services and lower child suicide attempts (Sekhar et al., 2021, 2022a). According to Weissinger et al. (2023), their research

confirmed that a student's home environment and family relationships were closely related to the child's mental health and suicide risk. Their valuable research connecting SAP referrals to family profiles established, for the first time, a direct relationship between positive parenting, parent involvement, and student wellness in Pennsylvania.

In Theme 4, participants recommended more informative formal events focusing on SAP which could increase SAP education, awareness, and parent involvement. School counselors discussed the overall need for more community-wide SAP education that could take the form of formal events and enhancements to the school's website. In order to encourage parent engagement and to reach families who are less involved in school, the PM framework recommends that schools consider organizing activities and events at various times and places. In fact, 'good programs' will look different at each site, as each school tailors their practices to meet the needs, interests, time, and grade levels of their students and families (Epstein et al., 2002). One of the principal themes in Kelty and Wakabayashi's (2020) family engagement research, was the importance of providing inclusive opportunities for family engagement, meeting families where they are. Likewise, Robertson et al. (2019) determined that expanding the definition of 'family' to include caregivers, extended relatives, and guardians in conjunction with more diverse engagement strategies proved successful for students' overall well-being. The community school model research conducted by Olubiyi et al. (2019), concluded that family engagement activities lead to improvements in family commitment and participation in school life. Given the PM framework and supporting research evidence, providing more

inclusive opportunities for families to become educated and involved in the SAP may prove beneficial for student success.

When asked for recommendations to increase parent education and involvement in the SAP process, the majority of participants suggested hiring more personnel. Researchers have shown that without sufficient personnel within a school, school counselors experience burnout, exhaustion, lower productivity, and higher turnover rates (Brewington & Kushner, 2020; Fye et al., 2020; Kim & Lambie, 2018). School counselors with multiple job demands such as paperwork, parent conferences, coordinating standardized testing, substitute teaching, and scheduling student classes are at a greatest risk for burnout (Fye et al., 2020). Theme 4 brought forth the current state of school counselors' multitude of responsibilities and their recommendations for added personal to share the load.

Epstein's PM calls for a five-step action plan that any school can follow to strengthen the home, school, and community partnerships. Step 1 indicates the creation of an action team (AT) consisting of at least three teachers, three parents, one administrator, one member of the community, two students, and any combination of the school counselor, school psychologist or school social worker (Epstein, 2010). Given the extent of staffing required for the AT, simply hiring more personnel might seem like a straightforward solution. However, according to the National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] (2024), 83% of US schools reported having trouble hiring non-teacher positions (i.e. school counselors) for the 2023-2024 school year. Moreover, 49% of US schools reported feeling understaffed with their mental health professionals in the 2023-

2024 school year (NCES, 2024). Even though hiring additional personnel may be a necessity for the PM's five-step plan to succeed at increasing parent education and involvement in the SAP, given the current hiring challenge for schools, they may need to expand their relationships with the community to address hiring issues.

The PM framework highlights collaborating with the community as an essential factor within the framework of overlapping spheres of influence. NCES (2024) reported that during the 2023-2024 school year, there was a 45% increase of schools using a "community school" model or "wraparound services" model to help students access professional services. Using the model strategy, schools reached out to their community, such as government agencies and local nonprofits, to help support students' needs and bridge the gap of professional services (NCES, 2024). Kelty and Wakabayashi (2020) determined that community involvement in the schools was essential to nurturing and supporting family engagement. Moreover, Geesa et al. (2020) explained that "programs related to collaboration with stakeholders, partnerships with community members, and training with pre- and in-service practitioners are needed for student success" (p. 878). The solution to easing schools' hiring challenges may come from establishing more community partnerships in order to better serve families with SAP education and involvement opportunities.

In Theme 4, participants also asked for increased training opportunities for themselves and for the faculty about SAP, parent engagement strategies, and general mental health awareness. Step 3 of the PM action plan, Identifying Starting Points, suggests a needs analysis to gauge where the AT should begin their efforts. It requires the

AT to assess the current state of partnerships among stakeholders to determine present strengths, needed changes, expectations, sense of community, and goals of the partnership improvement action plan (Epstein, 2010). It is at this point that they can effectively determine what kinds of trainings are needed, to whom they should be directed, and what precisely needs to be learned.

Sekhar et al. (2023) determined from their research on SAP teams across Pennsylvania, that there was an unmet need for further training around mental health. Another research study, analyzing SAP referrals, also recommended additional training on mental health practices specifically for parents, students, and the community (Sekhar et al., 2022b). Overall, stakeholders may be aware of mental health, but they might not know how to go about getting help for themselves or someone else. In research conducted by Stuckey et al. (2021) using focus groups of parents and adolescents, they found that neither group could clearly describe the steps necessary to take if their peers or child were depressed. Using the PM and evidence-based research as guideposts, school counselors could determine the training needs of all stakeholders to better educate and involve parents with the SAP. Providing trainings requires additional time and resources, both of which were brought up by the participants in this study and permeated throughout Theme 4.

Theme 4 addressed participants' needs for more dedicated time to accomplish their core job responsibilities. They shared that much of their time was spent on duties outside of counseling students including clerical work, substitute teaching, coordinating state testing, and setting up students' schedules. The extra duties made it more difficult



for them to find time for phone calls, meetings, education, and outreach. Step 2 of the PM action plan describes the need for time and support from leadership, “The action team must also be given sufficient time and social support to do its work. This requires explicit support from the principal and district leaders to allow time for team members to meet, plan, and conduct the activities” (Epstein, 2010, p. 89). This will most likely require administration to prioritize adequate planning and prep time for the AT.

One school of thought to begin addressing the multiple roles and obligations of school counselors, is to focus on it early in their graduate school studies and employment onboarding. Fye et al. (2020) suggested taking the time upfront to help pre-service school counselors prepare, “To lessen organizational stressors, as early as graduate school, counselor educators and supervisors should allow space in the learning process for students to learn the various counseling and related duties expected of school counselors” (p. 247). Similarly, Geesa et al. (2022) proposed early collaborations at the college level between the educational leadership department and the counseling department to build mutual understanding and a shared curriculum that prepares students for their future partnerships together.

Theme 4 brought forward the importance of making the time to engage with students and build rapport with families. Participants in this study had varying years of experience as school counselors and years working in the district, but they all shared one common goal: build rapport with students and families to best support each one appropriately. However, building relationships with families takes time to establish a foundation of trust and respect (Abreu et al., 2020; Bryan et al., 2020; Hoover & Bostic,

2021) It can take years to build sufficient trust and respect with families before a parent willingly signs the SAP referral for their child. Some participants described their challenges coming into a new school, new district or new community and feeling as though were at a relationship-building disadvantage. Participants mentioned needing more time to counsel students, make phone calls to parents, hold meetings with the SAP team and SAP liaison, converse with teachers, and attend in-school events.

Of all 11 school counselors in this study, only one seemed to have enough time in their day to address all the aspects of the job and also had the lowest number of SAP referrals. Having been in the role and school for 22 years, she had developed an effective strategy: meet with every parent and child during kindergarten registration and continue regular communication and check ins until they graduate fifth grade. This counselor also described the successes of “more intimate conversations” with parents, versus a large mass SAP education approach. This discrepant case stood out among the rest who struggled with time constraints resulting from extra duties, substitute teaching, frustrating failed communication attempts to parents, and little to no support from administration. However, despite time constraints, most participants still remained diligent in their efforts to educate and involve parents in the SAP process and build rapport with families.

After years of strenuous pandemic isolation and other contributing factors, schools experienced a radical rise in student mental health concerns once classes resumed. In response to nationwide school needs for more mental health resources, the Biden-Harris administration announced on May 9th, 2024, their plan to significantly increase access to school-based mental health services (U.S. Department of Education,

2024). Their plan included almost doubling the investment in the U.S. Department of Education’s School-Based Mental Health Services and Mental Health Services Professionals grant programs, adding investments through the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act to “improve the mental health and well-being of students and educators; and offering new mental health and well-being trainings and resources for schools and educators” (U.S. Department of Education, 2024, p. 1). The press release also stated that schools are in the best position to reach a large number of students to provide mental health education, prevention, services, and early intervention.

The result of these changes and the release of funds for schools to hire and train more mental health professionals, could result in additional school counselors, social workers, and psychologists. With more personnel on hand, Geesa et al. (2022) proposed the possibility of “more regularly scheduled time with individuals, small groups, and classrooms to implement the school counseling curriculum” (p. 880). Having more personnel in schools could potentially free up school counselors’ schedules to devote more time to helping educate and involve parents in the SAP.

### **Project Deliverable**

In Section 3, I describe a deliverable project based upon my study findings, conceptual framework, and literature review that coincides with my RQs and study purpose. The deliverable project is a white paper, specifically designed to educate and encourage stakeholders to consider implementing the recommendations that emerged from my findings. The recommendations will focus on creating an AT for change, improving SAP education and formal events, and increasing SAP PDs, personnel, and

dedicated time. The white paper will be presented to school stakeholders at their town hall and school board meetings throughout the study site, and will include the following recommendations for increasing parent education and involvement in the SAP:

1. Create a SAP AT to be the focal point task force for change.
2. Improve ongoing systemic SAP education and formal events for parents, students, and the community by initiating a common language and destigmatization of SAP and mental health,
3. Improve ongoing SAP PDs, enhance personnel, and provide more SAP-dedicated time in the staff schedule.

### **Conclusion**

Section 2 included the details of my qualitative research design, methodology, participants, data collection, data analysis, summary of findings, and project deliverable. There were four themes that emerged from the data analysis in response to the two research questions. I connected the four themes to participant responses and current peer-reviewed literature, as well as to the conceptual framework. Epstein's PM was used as the conceptual framework for my study which denotes the overlapping spheres of influence and the six types of involvement that occur across the spheres of home, school, and community. The PM also served to provide direction throughout the data analysis process. Successful partnerships, according to Epstein (2010), must be specifically and intentionally designed to engage, energize, and motivate stakeholders' participation.

The emergent themes revealed the need for increased SAP education, SAP events, and SAP PDs to improve parent education and involvement in the SAP process. The

themes aligned closely to the PM conceptual framework by highlighting the need for increased involvement across the three spheres: home, school, and community. The PM's evidence-based research indicates that the more involvement that can occur across the spheres of influence, the better the results for a child's success (Epstein, 2010; Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020). More specifically, the PM's six types of involvement specify which stakeholders to focus on and how to achieve success through evidence-based best practices. Schools that can improve and develop dedicated involvement strategies among home, school, and the community have shown to have lower incidences of student behavior problems, absenteeism, mental health issues, and dropouts (Diamond et al., 2022; Sekhar et al., 2022a; Weissinger et al., 2023). The PM's six types of involvement strategies across the three spheres of influence focus on the potential for increasing parent education and involvement in SAP, thereby increasing SAP referral approvals for students.

Given the themes that emerged and their alignment to the PM framework, the most appropriate project genre for this doctoral project was a white paper. White papers are used to inform and persuade stakeholders to consider the problem alongside potential solutions given the findings and current empirical literature. In this next section, I will explain how the existing problem relates to my study's findings, and the development of a white paper providing recommendations to stakeholders on potential strategies for improving parent education and involvement in SAP.

### Section 3: The Project

The problem that was addressed in this study was that students were not receiving the recommended professional services through the SAP in the study county. The gap in practice regarded getting parents more involved in the SAP process to ultimately accept their child's referral. To investigate this problem, I conducted a basic qualitative study and interviewed 11 K–12 school counselors to understand their perspectives about parent education and involvement in the SAP process. Moreover, I asked for their recommendations to increase parent education and involvement in the SAP, which could be used to ultimately inform study site leadership. I began the data analysis process by using a priori coding, based on the PM conceptual framework. I then conducted open inductive coding to determine codes, categories, and themes from the data. Using my findings in Section 2, a white paper was developed to inform and persuade study site stakeholders on the recommendations to improve parent education and involvement in the SAP process. The data analysis from school counselor interview findings led to the identification of four themes that focused on (a) various ways participants educate parents about SAP, (b) strategies used to involve parents in SAP, (c) challenges when attempting to educate and involve parents in SAP, and (d) participant recommendations for increasing parent education and involvement in SAP. I used Senge et al.'s (2012) systems thinking in education to outline my recommendations for change. The findings that emerged from the data analysis led to the development of a white paper that includes the recommendations supported by my study. The recommendations in the white paper consist of creating a task force with a unified vision to improve SAP education and

formal events for all stakeholders, strengthen SAP professional developments (PD), increase personnel, and provide more dedicated time to personnel.

In Section 3, I address the goals of the white paper and illustrate how the deliverable project will be used to inform and persuade stakeholders about the recommendations to increase parent education and involvement in the SAP process. I explain my rationale for the white paper, followed by a literature review of current scholarly research that supports the project deliverable. Finally, I synthesize the study findings and demonstrate the recommendations through the white paper. In Section 3, I also address the alignment of the study's problem, purpose, conceptual framework, and findings to the white paper goals. To conclude, I describe the white paper, the evaluation plan, and implications for social change.

### **Description and Goals of a White Paper**

According to Granada (2022), the goals of a white paper are to inform and persuade stakeholders about the research findings and to present evidence-based suggestions to address the findings. Based on the findings in this study, a white paper was designed to inform and encourage local stakeholders about the existing problem and potential recommendations for improvement. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore school counselors' perspectives about practices being used to educate parents and encourage parent involvement in SAP referrals. As a result of the participants' corresponding recommendations, four thematic concepts emerged to serve as the basis for the white paper. The goal of the white paper is to inform and persuade stakeholders regarding participants' recommendations for increasing parent education

and involvement in SAP. Included in the white paper is a description of the current problem at the study site as well as the research findings. Current scholarly literature is provided to support the following recommendations as described in the white paper: (a) create an AT to serve as the focal point task force; (b) improve ongoing systemic SAP education and formal events for parents, students, and the community by initiating a common language and destigmatization of SAP and mental health; and (c) improve ongoing SAP PDs, enhance personnel, and provide more SAP-dedicated time in the schedule.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for the white paper was grounded in Senge et al.'s (2012) systems thinking and the five disciplines for change. Senge et al. explained, "The discipline of systems thinking is the study of system structure and behavior" (p. 124). He proposed that if one thinks about schools as systems, one comes to see that each system is intricately affected by the others. Therefore, if something is changed in one area of the system, it will almost invariably affect other parts of the system. Individual systems as part of a larger school system might be teachers, administrators, students, parents, and community members. Each individual system is complex and deeply connected to others, and thus when considering initiating change to any system, it is necessary to examine the effects of said change as a whole. To understand how, when, and why change occurs, Senge et al. proposed the five disciplines: personal mastery, shared vision, mental models, team learning, and systems thinking.



Personal mastery involves being honest with one another about the strengths and weaknesses of the current reality, and where one wants to set one's sights. A shared vision is a "future you want to create together" (Senge et al., 2012, p. 87) as stakeholders, guided by a shared set of values, goals, principles, and practices. Mental models attempt to reveal and understand assumptions and attitudes that shape the way people think about situations from different viewpoints (i.e. parents, teachers, students). Team learning aims to get all team members thinking and acting together effectively in concert for the betterment of the system. And finally, systems thinking acknowledges that problems are not solved in isolation, but rather by looking at all parts of the system and how they affect each other. Systems thinking and the five disciplines were used for the white paper as they aligned to my problem, purpose, research questions, and findings due to their ability to address change theory in individual systems (home, school, and community) that in turn affect the larger school system. In the next section, I explain the reasons for choosing to use a white paper genre to suggest changes that support school counselors' recommendations for increasing parent education and involvement in SAP.

### **Rationale**

For my research, I completed a basic qualitative study to explore school counselors' perspectives about the practices being used to educate parents and encourage parent involvement in SAP referrals. My study was guided by two research questions:

- RQ1. What are K–12 school counselors' perspectives about the current practices being used to educate parents and encourage their involvement in SAP referrals in one western Pennsylvania county?

RQ2. What are K–12 school counselors' recommendations for improving parent involvement in order to increase SAP approvals?

The study findings revealed four themes in response to the RQs: (a) participants perceive various ways used to educate parents about SAP; (b) participants perceive various strategies used to involve parents in SAP; (c) participants perceive significant challenges when attempting to educate and involve parents in SAP; and (d) participants recommend an increase in SAP education, formal events, trainings, and personnel to improve parent education and involvement in SAP.

In light of the four themes that emerged from the data analysis in Section 2, the research project genre, a white paper, was well suited to address the themes, as well as stakeholder recommendations. The white paper will be used to share information about parent education and involvement in the SAP and provide recommendations for improving parent education and involvement in SAP based on the study findings and current research literature. A white paper is a document presented to stakeholders that addresses an existing problem and provides informational and persuasive recommendations for improvement (National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement [NAFSCE] (n.d.). Moreover, a white paper is designed with the stakeholders in mind using accessible language to help them understand the problem and fulfill the recommendations successfully (EAB, n.d.).

I chose to use a white paper for my research project genre because the findings suggested a need to improve current methods being used to educate and involve parents in the SAP. Despite their current education and involvement methods, school counselors

are still facing challenges obtaining parental SAP referral approvals. Therefore, I will utilize the white paper to systematically present the study's problem, purpose, and findings to educate and encourage stakeholders regarding the recommendations within the study. The results of the white paper may lead to positive social change by improving parent education and involvement in SAP, thereby increasing SAP referral approvals, and connecting more students to professional services.

### **Review of the Literature**

In this section, I describe the white paper project and present current research literature to further support the themes that emerged from Section 2. The literature review will serve to reinforce my decision to use the white paper genre to fulfill my doctoral study project and address the study's problem. The problem addressed in my study was that students at the study site were not receiving the recommended professional services through the SAP. The white paper will be used to inform and encourage stakeholders about the existing problem and potential recommendations to address the problem as determined from my research findings. The recommendations will serve to address a gap in practice with regards to educating and involving parents in the SAP. Therefore, the literature review is focused on white papers in education pertaining to parent involvement, parent education, PDs, and mental health education. Furthermore, the literature review will also serve to demonstrate relevant peer-reviewed research regarding the recommendations within the white paper and will focus on best practices for creating a task force, parent education strategies, formal event planning, and PDs for school personnel.

Research for the literature review began with a search for peer-reviewed literature published within the past 5 years. I used the Walden University library and electronic databases such as ERIC, SAGE, Education Source, and ProQuest to search for relevant articles about white papers in education with a specialized focus on parent education and involvement strategies, designing formal educational events, and effective PDs. I used those databases to also search for research articles published within the past 5 years regarding parent education and involvement, mental health education, strategies for destigmatizing mental health, effectively designing educational events, effective PDs for mental health awareness, and the use of volunteers to ease time constraints on school personnel. The key words used to search included *white paper genre, white papers in education, policy recommendation education, parent involvement, parent engagement, parent education, guidance counselor communication, mental health schools, mental health education, mental health awareness, behavioral health school, formal school events, school event planning, effective school event, communication with parents, communication with community, professional development, professional development mental health, adult learning, volunteers in schools, use of volunteers in school, time management in schools, and finding time in education*. In the following section, the literature review is divided into white papers, creation of an AT, parent education and involvement, PD, and personnel.

### **White Papers**

A white paper was chosen as the project genre for this study because of the educational and encouraging style that is reflected in a white paper and to address the

findings of the study. White papers have long been used to help advertise solutions to problems, without the use of heavy academic terminology (Hallgarten, 2024). White papers were originally rooted in government policy but are now used in many other areas with regards to policy and problem-solving strategies (Granada, 2022). The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore school counselors' perspectives about practices being used to educate parents and encourage parent involvement in SAP referrals. The purpose of this white paper is to educate stakeholders on the recommendations based on the findings of this study.

White papers are often used to disseminate problem-solving solutions to different aspects of school reform. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2022) uses the following definition for good mental health: “a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community.” In a white paper promoting the importance of parent involvement in education, Axford et al. (2019) suggested developing an action plan with families and “providing parenting and family learning programmes that support emotional well-being as well as the development of skills to support their child’s learning” (p. 154). The National Network of Partnership Schools (2023) explained in their posit paper on Action Teams for Partnership that involving the school, family, and community creates a welcoming school environment and boosts engagement from all stakeholders.

The Research for Action PACER policy brief (Jenkins & Duffy, 2016) provided multiple case studies describing schools that had devised economically sound strategic

ways to better connect schools to communities. Additionally, researchers describe strategies for expanding into areas such as families as partners, engaging instruction, safe schools, and positive youth development. In the CDC (2019) document entitled *Parents for Healthy Schools: A Guide for Getting Parents Involved from K–12*, three critical components of parent engagement are illustrated: connecting, engaging, and sustaining. The document focuses on the need for school districts to connect and build positive relationships with parents, to engage them by offering a variety of activities, and to sustain engagement by overcoming challenges (CDC, 2019). Similarly, Paterson (2024) described more specific ways that families, schools, and communities can create stronger partnerships such as community gardens, parent volunteers, educational field trips, and student-led community projects.

Long (2023) explained in her white paper that although educators would like to have more parent involvement and decades of research have proven that family engagement is fundamental to a child’s achievement, it is still not considered an “essential component” of a child’s education. Moreover, the importance of engaging with families from day one of their child’s educational career cannot be overlooked (Long, 2023). Reflecting on the current state of post-COVID mental health in the United Kingdom, Granada’s (2022) white paper outlines their four recommendations for improving mental health PD. Their suggestions outlined the need for clear and consistent understanding of mental health and its role in school, ongoing professional development, training that focuses on increasing confidence, and an emphasis on examining one’s own well-being (Granada, 2022). The white paper was developed using the following

recommendations and will be expanded upon further in the literature review: (a) creation of an AT, (b) improved SAP and mental health education for stakeholders, and (c) improved SAP PDs for school personnel.

### **Creation of an Action Team**

The study findings revealed the challenges that school counselors experience when trying to educate and involve parents in the SAP. Some of the participants requested additional help from stakeholders in order to distribute SAP responsibilities more evenly across the team, rather than have it fall mainly on one or two people. Recommendations from Theme 4 suggested the need for an AT to serve as the focal point for addressing the recommendations. Epstein's (2010) PM indicates that schools should design Action Teams for Participation so that home, school, and community stakeholders can all be included in the efforts. According to Epstein and Boone (2022), the AT should be composed of the collective minds of teachers, staff, administrators, parents, community members, and students. Community members can include business partners, interfaith leaders, and members of the community's civic organizations (Epstein, 2010, 2018). The goal of the AT is to serve as a representative committee whose members share a common vision for improving parent education and involvement in the SAP.

### **Creating a Shared Vision**

Senge et al. (2012) discussed the concept of establishing a shared vision when preparing to implement change in any system. He also encouraged teams to explore the current mental models within the different systems that make up the larger system. Senge et al. (2012) focused on asking oneself how one arrived at this current mental model and

if the model needs to be adjusted to achieve the team's common vision. The AT should follow a sequential path of visioning, problem solving, decision-making, action taking, and policy development to create and sustain positive social change (Chauncey & Simpson, 2020). Morris et al. (2020) explained the connection between a school's mental models and its evolution into a school's culture. According to Morris et al. (2020), school culture is "the collective values and beliefs of school staff, encompassing how these are enacted in practice" (p. 803). When examining effective school leadership, Day et al. (2020) explained that taken in isolation, leadership alone cannot create positive school improvement. Rather, they suggested leading change through a set of common values and employing context-specific strategies to create and sustain positive school culture (Day et al., 2020; Jones, 2022). A respectful, encouraging relationship must first be developed, according to Brigman et al. (2022), after which point the problems can be identified as a team, in agreement with one another. Research has shown that for an AT to effectively increase parent education and involvement, they will need to collaborate using an inclusive mindset that focuses on stakeholders' participation, engagement, motivation, and commitment (Day et al., 2020; Morris et al., 2020; Pavlidou & Efstathiades, 2021).

### **Needs Assessment**

The National Association for School Psychologists [NASP] (2023) and the National Center for School Mental Health [NCSMH] (2024) agree that school mental health programs can improve academic performance and social-emotional competence, while lowering absenteeism, substance abuse, and disciplinary referrals. In order to best assist families with education and involvement, Viola et al. (2020) underscored the value



of performing a needs assessment among stakeholders (students, parents, school counselors, etc.) to determine specific needs and interests. This in turn can help align priorities to the common vision, goals, and responsibilities within the AT. A needs assessment can be achieved through phone interviews, surveys, questionnaires, and focus groups (Finan et al., 2018). These data collections will help the AT determine starting points by highlighting the system's strengths, needed changes, and expectations for increasing education and involvement for parents (Epstein, 2010; Epstein & Boone, 2022). By understanding where to start, the AT can then determine next steps for expanding education for parents, students, and the community.

### **Post Assessments**

Performing a needs assessment can help establish the AT's starting points, while an outcomes evaluation can ascertain whether the AT's action plan was successful. The more we know about the action plan's successes or failures, the easier it can be to finetune future actions, decisions, and policies (Vongsachang et al., 2020). Viola et al. (2020) employed a 12-item self-reporting measure for parents using a 5-point Likert-type response scale to collect data. Additionally, Viola et al. (2020) also followed up their presentation with a one-month phone call to check in with parent participants. Through their findings, researchers clearly determined that their parent education program had indeed achieved its goals and objectives (Viola et al., 2020). To identify the effectiveness of their mindfulness-based intervention program, Grunewald and Foley-Nicpon (2023) asked teachers, parents, and students for their feedback, although assessment specifics were not mentioned. The feedback they received from stakeholders allowed Grunewald

and Foley-Nicpon (2023) to break down the program's strengths and weaknesses into more specific levels: individual, intervention, and system. Similarly, Fisher and Crawford (2020) noted the Priestley change model in their study, which breaks change down into three locations: individual, structural, and cultural. The value of feedback should not be overlooked due to its significant importance within the AT's action and reaction loop. The NASP (2023) also utilize feedback, but they use it to determine gaps in services and support to identify funding sources, uses, restrictions, and availability. Once the AT has established a shared vision and collective direction, they can then put their parent education and involvement plan into play.

### **Educating and Involving Parents**

When seeking to educate and involve parents, students, and the community, research has shown that there are multiple successful ways to do so. Although education and involvement has evolved throughout the years, research has shown there to be some best practices strategies. The way in which school culture is developed and nurtured can result in effective education and involvement from all stakeholders (Morris et al., 2020; Pavlidou & Efstathiades, 2021).

### ***Parent Education and Involvement***

As students begin their kindergarten year and move from elementary to middle to high school, parent roles also evolve. It has been found that as their children move into middle school and high school, some parents have trouble identifying their new role in their child's educational journey (Hill, 2022). While many elementary schools highly encourage parent involvement, research has shown that parent involvement declines as

the child moves up in grades (Finan et al., 2018; Hill, 2022). Without a strong education and involvement system between school, home, and the community, parents might not be receiving crucial information about school programs and child development (Posey-Maddox & Haley-Lock, 2020). Therefore, a strong two-way communication policy of newsletters, emails, texts, and in-person communication between home and school can help pave the way to student success (Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020).

An efficacious parent education program informs and empowers them with the core knowledge they need to help their child become emotionally and academically successful (Viola et al., 2020). According to Butler et al. (2019), their recommendations for parent education programs highlighted the need for continuity and progression, language accessibility, tailoring to parents' needs, and consistent high quality. Sim et al. (2022) determined in their study that higher levels of parent education about child development led to more parental engagement and more acceptance of their child's psychosocial health-related quality of life. In their parent and educator focus group study, Kelty and Wakabayashi (2020) found that parents requested more education on: child development, adolescence, college planning, English language support, and mental health. Increasing parent education and involvement can lead to higher self-efficacy and advocacy for their child, which in turn leads to a better understanding of their child's anxiety, depression, behavior, and academics (Hill, 2022; Viola et al., 2020). To conclude, rather than telling stakeholders what we think they should know, it would behoove us to ask each other what we need, how we can help, and actively listen to what is (or is not) being shared.

### ***Logistical Barriers***

Despite the efforts being made to education and involve parents, many schools and districts struggle getting families to engage due to conflicting schedules, availability, and other barriers. According to Finan et al. (2018), parents were more likely to attend an education session at school when there was on-site childcare, light meals and refreshments, and clear advertisements about the sessions. Furthermore, when sessions were held during different days and times to accommodate parents' schedules, there was higher turnout and parent involvement (Finan et al., 2018; Viola et al., 2020). In addition to providing childcare, food, and schedule flexibility, several studies also determined that providing online parent education sessions led to greater parent education and involvement likely due to scheduling flexibility, confidentiality, and learning styles (Finan et al., 2018; Sim et al., 2022). In a study by Fisher and Crawford (2020), their findings corresponded with others' research on parent involvement, "Schools must develop strategies for parental involvement that work with the specific population of the school" (p. 9). Parent involvement will also look different for low-income, at-risk schools and it is in all stakeholders' best interest to develop and sustain a welcoming, trusting, and culturally sensitive community (Epstein et al., 2021; Fisher & Crawford, 2020). A potential method for building bridges between home and school would be to increase parent volunteer opportunities, especially in middle and high school, allowing parents the opportunity to share their knowledge and expertise with students and faculty (Hill, 2022; Yulianti et al., 2020). By interlacing our home, school, and community resources under one roof, and adding value to parent participation, schools can offer their students real-

world education, conversations, and experiences from people in their own community (Hamlin & Li, 2019).

### ***Cultural Barriers***

The more we can educate and involve parents in their child's educational and emotional development, the more likely they will all come to trust the school, the system, and the policies. School leaders who create a caring and trusting atmosphere and consistently share and communicate with stakeholders build a stronger foundation for student success (Smith et al., 2020; Yulianti et al., 2020). However, it is imperative to consider the stakeholders' cultural beliefs and values as they pertain to educational involvement. Considering parents' cultural backgrounds and the complex communities we serve can affect what kinds of educational programs and involvement to provide and what to expect from families (Finan et al., 2018; Yulianti et al., 2020).

In some instances, parents might not attend events such as “Coffee with the Principal” or “Grandparents Day” if it does not align with their culture, beliefs, or schedule (Butler et al., 2019; Vongsachang et al., 2020). As such, we should be cautious about misinterpreting a family's lack of involvement by paying closer attention to their individual characteristics and needs (Radez et al., 2021). When asked about ways to help families become more engaged in school, Kelty and Wakabayashi (2020) received this response from a concerned parent, “Put the family first. The parents are the first teacher, parents are always learning and teaching their family; give families information to help empower their families” (p. 8). Another study found that parents were more likely to hear from schools only under negative circumstances, therefore it was suggested to add more

positive messaging to parents about their children (Jones, 2022). Epstein and Boone (2022) and Smith et al. (2020) both agreed that nurturing strong family-school collaborative teams can help breakdown cultural barriers and increase student academic success.

### ***Mental Health Barriers***

As we design education and involvement programs for stakeholders that pertain to mental health and wellness, it is critical to also consider barriers that could impede a successful program. Radez et al. (2021) found that, for children and adolescents seeking professional mental health services, barriers were mainly due to “mental health stigma and embarrassment, a lack of mental health knowledge and negative perceptions of help-seeking...a preference for relying on themselves when facing difficulties, and issues with committing fully to the process of help-seeking/accessing” (p. 208). Similarly, Vongsachang et al. (2020) found that parents had similar barriers to accepting and seeking professional services for their children, along with mistrust in the system, pride, and fear of being judged as inadequate parents. A possible solution would be to educate parents on the concepts under the mental health umbrella, such as: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationships skills, and decision making (Grunewald & Foley-Nicpon, 2023). Demystifying the stigma of mental health by putting it into tangible language and scenarios could help build more comprehensive community awareness.

Despite the barriers presented in their research, Radez et al. (2021) also suggested strategies for reducing barriers such as an extensive school and community-wide destigmatization of mental health by educating and involving students, families, faculty,

and community. Potential evidence-based solutions for educating stakeholders include using intensive outreach through advertisements at school events, on community boards, in medical offices, by community leaders, and through student-led activities or events (Epstein et al., 2021; Finan et al., 2018; Hill, 2022; Vongsachang et al., 2020).

Grunewald and Foley-Nicpon (2023) for example, infused mindfulness-based interventions into schools providing students strategies for pausing during a challenging moment and choosing a healthy reaction to a situation. These mindfulness lessons were then brought home to families by the students, who shared their new knowledge and coping strategies (Grunewald & Foley-Nicpon, 2023).

Improving stakeholders' understanding and knowledge of mental health and professional services could lead to increased self-help skills, coping strategies, and overall mental health demystification and acceptance (Finan et al., 2018; Guerrero et al., 2022; Hamlin & Li, 2019; Yulianti et al., 2020). In addition to educating and involving people in a community-wide dissemination of mental health awareness, research has shown that it can only be fully achieved with sufficient service providers and effective PD training for school faculty (Butler et al., 2019; Grunewald & Foley-Nicpon, 2023).

### **Professional Development**

PD in schools comes in all shapes and sizes, and it can occur throughout the school year or during the summer. Much research has been done examining the effectiveness of different kinds of PD based on audience characteristics, speaker style, length, location, and other influencing factors. PD for teachers and faculty is most effective when it addresses the unique needs and individual concerns of the organization

(Grunewald & Foley-Nicpon, 2023; Sancar et al., 2021). To create and sustain a positive school culture, it is important to take a holistic approach to professional development, especially if we are looking to make positive social change through systemic improvements (Avery et al., 2021). Sancar et al. (2021) and Brigman et al. (2022) both agree that PD opportunities are meant to bring faculty together in a supportive work environment to enhance knowledge and practices that will affect students and their families, both directly and indirectly.

### ***Make It Clear and Personal***

According to Popova et al., (2022), PD opportunities that focus on sharing knowledge and acting together as a group enhance organizational culture, making it easier to implement sustainable change. Effective PDs make it clear to the participants about the reason for the PD, the significance of their attendance, learning goals and objectives, and how it pertains to their own career development (Champine et al., 2022). It is imperative to a PD's success and implementation, that participants be able to recognize a direct personal connection to the material being presented. As such, Brigman et al. (2022) described the teacher workshop model as a series of six steps: an engaging warm-up, 'asking before telling' so participants can share their thoughts, an introduction to the information and new skills, personalization and practice of new skills, processing and summarization, and evaluation from audience members.

### ***Mental Health Focused PD***

A PD that focuses on training school personnel about mental health awareness and programs needs to be context-specific and focused on the faculty's needs (Sancar et



al., 2021). Ideally, at the PD's close, faculty should feel as though they have gained the necessary skills, knowledge, and self-confidence pertaining to mental health awareness and programs. Grunewald and Foley-Nicpon (2023) explained that individual beliefs and values on mental health may cause challenges during the PD or among the faculty, and they explain that it may take repeated efforts and practice to internalize the value of implementing mental health awareness programs in the school. Incentivizing teachers to be part of PD opportunities, according to Popova et al. (2022), can be an advantageous way to build rapport and trust, while learning about the topic together. Researchers have shown that providing faculty with career incentives, real life examples and enactments, face-to-face trainings and follow-ups have proven to be successful motivational tools for PDs (Avery et al., 2021; Goodman et al., 2024). In addition, Popova et al. (2022) suggested providing time for attendees to practice their newly gained skills in order to feel confident speaking to the mental health awareness programs with parents and students. A PD's success can and should be measured in multiple ways to gain insights from participants, speakers, and organizers. Researchers have shown that collecting post-assessment feedback from PD attendees are critical to the determining the PD's effectiveness, efficiency, and overall impact (Brigman et al., 2022; Champine et al., 2022; Epstein et al., 2021). Moreover, attendee feedback adds value and insight for future planning, areas of interest, opportunities for growth, and dissemination.

### ***Transferring the Learning to Families***

Ideally, PD on mental health awareness and programs will enable personnel, who interact most often with students and parents, to feel confident referring students to the

program. Parents entrust their children to the schools' teachers and staff, and families tend to be more receptive to teachers' communication and feedback regarding their child (Grunewald & Foley-Nicpon, 2023). Establishing an equitable partnership between home and school lays the foundation for positive and productive relationships (Epstein et al., 2021). Amod (2022) suggested that nurturing the parent-child-school communication through good news updates about the child can often make the more difficult conversations easier to navigate. Arming school personnel with knowledge through PDs can help them become advocates of mental health awareness programs to encourage parents' communication with the school (Champine et al., 2022). A faculty that is informed about mental health awareness and programs may result in families being more willing to become involved, sign the consent forms or meet with a school counselor.

### ***Train-the-Trainer***

PD on the topics of mental health awareness and programs should be part of a holistic preventative strategy to increase mental health awareness for school, home, and community stakeholders. If time or resources limit a full-scale district-wide PD, they can also be accomplished through a train-the-trainer model. For a successful train-the-trainer PD, department leads are provided the initial training, after which they pass that knowledge onto their departments (Guerrero et al., 2022). Using smaller group sessions can often be a helpful teaching method, allowing participants the time to communicate ideas and address challenges as a team, building morale and trust. Moreover, the PD sessions could eventually be open to parents, students, and community members, led by trainers and trainees. Guerrero et al. (2022) found that the train-the-trainer model helped

school staff and parents become more familiar and comfortable identifying symptoms of child trauma. Champine et al. (2022) also found that using a train-the-trainer model with diverse stakeholders helped establish a trauma-informed community who could identify and respond to potential signs of child trauma. Outside organizations can also be helpful to bring in trainers to free up school personnel from the added responsibilities of leading PDs. Goodman et al. (2024) found that using AmeriCorps Members as small group interventionists and behavior coaches in schools and community organizations resulted in a positive feedback and results from participants. By expanding PDs to include schools, parents and the community, stakeholders can establish a common equitable language regarding mental health awareness and programs.

### *An Educated Community*

Through effective PDs, the creation of a common equitable language among all stakeholders regarding mental health awareness and programs can help parents when seeking help for their child. When children show signs of mental health concerns, behavior problems, bullying, or substance abuse, parents can rely on knowledgeable school personnel to direct them to the right resources (Amod, 2022; Yulianti et al., 2020). According to Smith et al. (2020) “family-school interventions are related to student benefits across academic and social-behavioral outcomes: communication, home-based involvement, and behavioral support” (p. 279). Therefore, the path to getting parents help for their child should be a safe and straightforward path towards teachers, school counselors, school psychologists, nurses, and social workers. Sheridan et al. (2019) used a meta-analysis to analyze 117 intervention studies and concluded that “family-school

interventions enhance children's social-behavioral competence and mental health... Social-behavioral skills enable young students to interact prosocially in social settings, engage adaptively in academic environments...thus, they are widely considered precursors to achievement” (p. 310-311). PDs that include a wide range of school personnel such as administrators, secretaries, librarians, and paraprofessionals expand a child's community of care with the hope of building more acceptance around mental health awareness and programs (Amod, 2022; Sheridan et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2020). Increasing stakeholders' knowledge and skills has the potential to make mental health a safe, destigmatized, and empowering topic to get children the help they need.

In this literature review, I examined the use of white papers in education as a means of supporting positive social change and explained how the findings of my study align with the creation of a white paper. The literature review also examined the four themes that emerged from my study which transformed into three recommendations to increase parent education and involvement in the SAP: (a) creation of an AT to spearhead the movement towards change, (b) more education focusing on best practices to share information, reduce barriers, and increase awareness regarding mental health, and (c) the use of PD among school personnel to gain knowledge for themselves, and for sharing with families. The literature review is also aligned to the study's conceptual framework, problem, and purpose. In the next section, I describe recommendations for the creation of an intervention program for increasing parent education and involvement in the SAP.

### **Project Description**

The problem that was addressed in this study was that students at the study site were not receiving the recommended professional services through SAP. After the data from this project study were analyzed, it was determined that school counselors perceived the (a) various ways participants educate parents about SAP, (b) strategies used to involve parents in SAP, (c) challenges when attempting to educate and involve parents in SAP, and (d) participant recommendations for increasing parent education and involvement in SAP. Based on the study's findings, it was determined that a white paper would be the most appropriate genre to use for this doctoral project in order to outline recommendations for stakeholders. The three recommendations proposed in the white paper:

1. Create a SAP AT of stakeholders to serve as the focal point for implementing the white paper recommendations to increase parent education and involvement in SAP.
2. Improve SAP education for parents, students, and the community using evidence-based practices and formal events to disseminate information about mental health and the SAP program.
3. Improve upon ongoing PDs regarding SAP and mental health, including strategies to communicate with parents, enhance personnel, and allow for more SAP-dedicated time in the schedule.

I am also recommending that the AT and subsequent stakeholders involved perform an annual assessment of the recommendations, to determine what is working and

what needs to be improved. Once I receive approval to share my findings and recommendations with the study site stakeholders, I will meet with school counselors, principals, teachers, parents, and community members to formally present the study findings and recommendations for creating an AT focused on increasing parent education and involvement in the SAP. I will explain the steps needed to create the SAP AT including the necessary stakeholders, education, support, and resources needed to initiate the SAP AT. Moreover, I will explain the conceptual framework and its intended design as means for making positive systemic changes within an organization. I will also share the research-based practices that support the creation of an AT, strategies for educating parents about mental health awareness and programs, and best practices for effective PD designed to empower personnel with knowledge and skills regarding SAP.

### **Needed Resources and Supports**

The needed resources and supports to successfully accomplish the project include time to meet with stakeholders including school counselors, social workers, psychologists, teachers, principals, parents, and community members. In order to bring the stakeholders together, I will request school email addresses and send an e-mail inviting each of them to meet and discuss the research findings and present my white paper project. In the e-mail, I will include a summary of the research findings and the suggested recommendations for increasing parent education and involvement in SAP. If I am granted permission at the study site to present my project, I will introduce the main components of the project, including research findings and the white paper. To enhance the presentation, I will use PowerPoint slides and informational handouts to explain the

project and implementation plan. The stakeholders in attendance will receive a paper copy of the white paper, as well as an emailed version and the PowerPoint slideshow. If the project is approved by the stakeholders to proceed, I will then ask school personnel to make copies of the white paper and distribute them to faculty and staff.

### **Potential Barriers**

A potential barrier could be the challenge of contacting all stakeholders and receiving sufficient positive responses to substantiate holding a general meeting. The opportunity to discuss the white paper and disperse it among stakeholders may likely be contingent upon site administrator approval and school policies. A possible barrier could be accessing enough representatives from the wide range of stakeholders such as school counselors, teachers, social workers, parents, principals, and staff. Depending on availability in everyone's schedule, another potential barrier might be trying to find a time for everyone to meet in person. Scheduling can be especially difficult during the summer months when school is not in session. Another possible hurdle could be language-based, in which case I would be sure to have the white paper translated into as many languages as necessary. And finally, there is a chance that administrators may not be interested in the white paper and may choose not to meet with me at all. If this occurs, it will my responsibility to present my project to them by demonstrating the problem, purpose, and potential positive outcomes that could result from the white paper.

### **Implementation Proposal**

Upon completion of my doctoral study, I will deliver the white paper to study site administrators. If the site administrators approve of the white paper distribution, I will

disseminate the white paper summary to study site school boards, superintendents, and community leaders. Approval and distribution should take approximately two weeks to complete and if requested, I will be available to present the white paper to interested parties. I will schedule presentations with stakeholders who show interest in learning more about the project and its implementation by sending an executive summary and the white paper their emails. I will recommend that any interested stakeholder, including school counselors, social workers, psychologists, principals, teachers, parents, and community members be welcomed to the AT. Due to the geographical size of the study site, there may be the need to have multiple ATs across the county. In fact, districts and schools may choose to adopt the action plan and recommendations in their own way. My presentation to interested stakeholders will include the PowerPoint presentation of the white paper in addition to a summary of the study's problem, purpose, conceptual framework, literature reviews, findings, and recommendations for addressing parent education and involvement in SAP.

Once the white paper recommendations are accepted, I will meet with the superintendents or principals to help develop an AT. The team should include a variety of stakeholders whose contributions and suggestions will help customize the project. Leadership should ensure that the AT have dedicated time to plan and conduct the project. To begin, they will use the white paper recommendations to design a needs assessment strategy to collect information from the community and thus determine starting points. I suggest that the team frequently refer to the study's findings and the white paper recommendations to guide the AT and the implementation process. Allowing



the AT ample time to collect needs assessment data and thus determine a path forward will require time and resources. I will recommend that they meet over the summer, with principal approval, such that they can begin implementations at the start of the school year. This too will allow stakeholders to become knowledgeable in the project, understand the steps required for educating the community, and receive PD before the school year begins. I also recommend that the AT meet regularly (i.e. biweekly or monthly) throughout the school year to evaluate the project and determine its effectiveness. It will take time for parents, teachers, faculty, and community members to take in all the information being shared to then disseminate SAP and mental health awareness information. I will also recommend that school personnel meet regularly throughout the school year with the AT, to revisit PD goals and enhance knowledge and skillsets. Table 10 reflects the timeline for implementation of the project and Table 11 reflects the roles and responsibilities for individuals involved with implementing the recommendations from the white paper.

**Table 10***Timetable for Implementation of Project*

Recommendations	Timeframe
Email executive summary and white paper to study site leadership and administration.	1 week
Present white paper recommendations to the study site leadership and administration.	2 weeks
Incorporate feedback and update the white paper recommendations as needed based on meeting with leadership.	1 week
Develop a PowerPoint presentation and informational handouts for in-person meetings with wider group of stakeholders.	3 weeks
Present PowerPoint and handouts to wider group of stakeholders.	2 weeks
Modify the PowerPoint to coincide with feedback from presentation.	1 week
Facilitate the creation of a SAP AT that includes representative stakeholders such as parents, teachers, school counselors, social workers, psychologists, and principals.	3 weeks
Co-create needs assessment with AT and disperse to all stakeholders.	3 weeks
Co-create a PD presentation and schedule to focus on mental health awareness and programs for school personnel.	3 weeks
Co-analyze needs assessment data and determine what methods will be used for education and involvement purposes.	3 weeks
Assign speakers and presenters for the school personnel PD	2 weeks
Hold follow-up PD with school personnel to reinforce skills and answer questions.	Bi-monthly
Leadership will support the AT and PD by providing ample time to address AT planning needs.	Monthly
All stakeholders will be encouraged to participate in ongoing assessment and feedback to finetune pilot project.	Ongoing

**Table 11***Roles and Responsibilities of Participants*

Participant	Role and responsibility
Researcher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Present white paper recommendations and executive summary to administration and leadership stakeholders.</li> <li>• Make adjustments to the white paper based on suggestions from administration and leadership stakeholders.</li> <li>• Present updated white paper recommendations to stakeholders, including school counselors, social workers, school personnel, parents, and principals.</li> <li>• Design the white paper recommendation PowerPoint presentation and handouts for all audiences.</li> <li>• Assist with the creation of SAP AT.</li> <li>• Co-create a needs assessment and shared vision with the AT for the SAP intervention.</li> <li>• Co-facilitate the dissemination of the needs assessment to all stakeholders.</li> <li>• Co-create a SAP PD curriculum that addresses the areas of greatest need as determined by the needs assessment.</li> <li>• Co-assist in determining PD presenters and other responsibilities for the SAP PD</li> <li>• Co-facilitate monthly SAP PDs and AT meetings</li> <li>• Co-create a post-assessment evaluation tool.</li> </ul>
Administration and leadership stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer white paper suggestions for improvement after PowerPoint presentation from researcher.</li> <li>• Disseminate executive summary and white paper to principals to encourage participation and interest.</li> <li>• Co-facilitate the creation of a SAP AT.</li> </ul>
Principals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer white paper suggestions for improvement after PowerPoint presentation from researcher.</li> <li>• Co-facilitate the creation of a SAP AT composed of key stakeholders from home, school, and community.</li> <li>• Work alongside SAP AT to establish momentum and strategies.</li> <li>• Provide sufficient planning and prepping time for SAP AT to meet monthly.</li> <li>• Provide sufficient time for bimonthly SAP PDs with school personnel, led by SAP AT.</li> </ul>
SAP Action Team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Represent key stakeholders (home, school, community).</li> </ul>

Participant	Role and responsibility
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Co-create a needs assessment and shared vision for the team and intervention.</li> <li>• Help to disseminate needs assessment throughout home, school, and the community.</li> <li>• Co-analyze needs assessment results to determine directional phases for SAP intervention.</li> <li>• Co-create a SAP PD curriculum that addresses the areas of greatest need as determined by the needs assessment and is appropriate for different audiences, including school personnel, parents, and community members</li> <li>• Present SAP PDs bimonthly to school personnel, parents, students, and community members.</li> <li>• Meet monthly to plan, prep, and assess SAP intervention including determining PD presenters and other necessities for the SAP PD.</li> <li>• Co-create a post-assessment evaluation tool and analyze results throughout school year.</li> </ul>
School counselors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be active members of the SAP AT initiative.</li> <li>• Co-create and co-facilitate SAP PDs, needs/post assessments, analysis of results alongside the SAP AT.</li> <li>• Be present and participatory at the SAP PDs.</li> <li>• Continue to work with parents and teachers to encourage SAP referrals and approvals.</li> </ul>
Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attend and participate in the bimonthly SAP PDs.</li> <li>• Actively engage in the SAP PD curriculum and share knowledge with parents and students as needed.</li> <li>• Offer post-assessment feedback to SAP AT.</li> <li>• If using Train-the-Trainer model, ensure that all department heads are sufficiently knowledgeable to be subsequent trainers.</li> </ul>
Parents, students, community members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attend and participate in the bimonthly SAP PDs.</li> <li>• Actively engage in the SAP PD curriculum and share knowledge with other parents, students, and community members as needed.</li> <li>• Help to share the benefits of SAP and the significant contributions it can make towards successful student outcomes.</li> </ul>

### **Project Evaluation Plan**

The white paper will be used to inform and persuade study site administrators concerning educating and involving parents in the SAP and is based on the study's findings. The recommendations were determined based on the study findings, conceptual framework, and scholarly literature review. A formative evaluation survey of the project will be co-created by the AT and distributed to all stakeholders at the end of the school year. The AT should focus their formative assessment on stakeholder feedback and experiences related to all stages of the intervention. An online survey could consist of short answer questions regarding the professional development, ease of implementation, quality and quantity of information, and reflections on the projects impact to educate and involve parents in the SAP. The annual Pennsylvania SAP data will also serve as a valuable formative evaluation tool to determine whether more parents accepted SAP referrals for their children. The stakeholder survey data will be collected and analyzed by myself and the AT.

The overall goal of the white paper is to communicate the three recommendations based on the study findings, which were to: (a) create a SAP AT of stakeholders to serve as the focal point for implementing the white paper recommendations to increase parent education and involvement in SAP, (b) improve SAP education for parents, students, and the community using evidence-based practices and formal events to disseminate information about mental health and the SAP program, and (c) improve upon ongoing

PDs regarding SAP and mental health, including strategies to communicate with parents, enhance personnel, and allow for more SAP-dedicated time in the schedule.

The goal of the white paper is to inform and persuade stakeholders at the study site to enhance and expand mental health and SAP awareness in order to increase parent education and involvement in the SAP. With guidance from the white paper, stakeholders can create an AT to address the community's needs and employ evidence-based strategies for increasing mental health awareness, including a demystification and acceptance of the SAP. Key stakeholders in the process will comprise school counselors, faculty, administration, parents, students, and community members. Administrators and leadership also will have significant roles at the beginning of the project to initiate the white paper recommendations. Once the AT has been designated it will then be important for the administration to allow for planning time, professional development, and encourage a progression towards positive change. With the infusion of a more positive school culture surrounding mental health awareness and the SAP, stakeholders will be able to address more mental health concerns from parents and direct them towards school counselors. Teachers, who are in contact with parents most often, will be critical stakeholders by providing parents and students with SAP information, as well as general knowledge about mental health. Community members and leaders will also be vital stakeholders, outside of school walls, as they support the messaging of mental health awareness and the SAP program. All of the stakeholders will be key components to creating a more positive school culture and embracing a common language of acceptance around the issues of mental health awareness and SAP.

**Key Stakeholders**

There are a number of stakeholders who will benefit from the implementation of this project, both directly and indirectly. Stakeholders include school counselors, social workers, psychologists, school faculty, administrators, parents, students, and community members. These stakeholders will be affected both directly and indirectly from the white paper recommendations that include the creation of an AT, the increase of mental health and SAP education and outreach, and the infusion of more specific mental health knowledge and awareness through PD opportunities. Due to the geographical size of the study site, districts or schools will implement the pilot project uniquely based on their community's needs, thus benefiting from a context-specific implementation. The following is a description of stakeholders who stand to benefit most directly from the pilot project.

**Parents and Students as Stakeholders**

Parents may stand to benefit from the pilot as they become more educated and involved in the SAP. Due to the nature of the pilot's purposeful representative composition of the AT, not only will parents be beneficiaries of the pilot, but they will also be actively included as part of the planning and implementation. By increasing parent education and involvement in the SAP, using recommendations from the white paper, parents may be more likely to accept their child's SAP referral. Students who receive SAP referral approval will have more access to professional services, and potentially improve their overall mental health and wellness. By making parents key stakeholders within the school and their child's education, we can help destigmatize and

demystify mental health awareness and programs. Parents can help other parents become more accepting and educated on the topic as well, allowing more SAP referral approvals and increased access to professional services.

### **Teachers and Personnel as Stakeholders**

Increasing and enhancing PD regarding mental health awareness and SAP, can help to increase student access to professional services. Teachers and personnel can become more skilled at identifying potential mental health concerns in students. As teachers and personnel become more comfortable with the topics, they may be more inclined to talk to parents about their concerns and provide possible solutions. By giving teachers and personnel the tools they need to become advocates of mental health awareness and SAP, we actively expand a student's community of care. Because teachers and personnel are often considered the bridge between home and school, they can also cultivate the connection between home and school counselors. The pilot could potentially improve communication between home and school thus making for more comfortable conversations throughout the year. The effects of increased communication could be examined using longitudinal data that could be mapped year over year. Early identification of a struggling child by teachers and personnel can help that child progress sooner towards overall success. When teachers and personnel collaborate in a professional and trusting school culture, all stakeholders stand to benefit from the outcomes.



## **Project Implications**

### **Implications for Social Change**

It was determined that the white paper genre would best address the study problem which was that students were not receiving the recommended professional services through the SAP in the study county. Parent refusal to SAP referrals was limiting their child's access to critical behavioral and mental support services offered by the school. Despite school counselors' efforts to educate and involve parents in SAP, study findings revealed that there still existed a gap in practice. Based on the data in this basic qualitative study, lack of parent education and involvement in SAP were determined to be contributing factors to low SAP approvals. Participants shared their current strategies for educating and involving parents in SAP, along with the many challenges and recommendations they perceived about the situation. As a result, three recommendations emerged for the white paper: creation of a SAP AT, increased education and awareness of mental health and SAP, and enhanced PD for school personnel.

First, the creation of a SAP AT can help distribute SAP responsibilities among multiple stakeholders, thereby lightening the school counselors' schedule. The inclusion of home, school, and community stakeholder representation on the AT can help identify the community's immediate SAP needs and disseminate information more easily. Increasing education and involvement opportunities using evidence-based practices found within the white paper can serve to reach more families and children. Enhancing ongoing systemic PDs for school personnel can contribute to a more engaged, motivated, and knowledgeable staff which can also help ease school counselors' schedules. Early

identification and intervention of students of concern can result in early outreach to parents. This project has the potential to increase student access to professional services provided both in school and in the community. Increased access to mental health and behavioral health services could offer students more success for their futures.

### **Importance of the Project in the Larger Context**

This pilot project has the potential to increase stakeholders' education and involvement in mental health awareness and programs, ultimately destigmatizing and demystifying SAP services. When stakeholders are more knowledgeable, school counselors may have an easier time communicating with parents and getting their cooperation and buy-in. The majority of interviewees mentioned the countless hours spent trying to reach parents to get the SAP referral approved. A successful pilot project might give school counselors more time back in their days to help students and connect them with professional services. In the long-term, a community that is more willing to accept mental health awareness and professional services could potentially lower suicide rates, absenteeism, substance abuse, behavioral issues, and many other issues.

### **Conclusion**

In Section 3, I discussed the purpose of the white paper, I used peer-reviewed literature to support the study findings which helped synthesize my findings with the white paper recommendations. In this section I also provided a description of the recommendations as seen through a conceptual framework and provided a detailed explanation of how the white paper would be introduced and disseminated to stakeholders. If the pilot project were to be accepted, I then expressed how I would use

PowerPoint presentations and hard copies to share with those involved. This was followed by a description of the project which included a timeline of implementation, stakeholder roles and responsibilities, and a project evaluation plan along with the positive social change implications.

The goal of the white paper is to inform and persuade stakeholders at the study site to enhance and expand mental health and SAP awareness in order to increase parent education and involvement in the SAP. The white paper goals align to the purpose of my research project which was to explore school counselors' perspectives about practices being used to educate parents and encourage parent involvement in SAP referrals. Based on the study's problem, purpose, conceptual framework, data findings, and recommendations, the white paper goals are to: (a) Create a SAP AT of stakeholders to serve as the focal point for implementing the white paper recommendations, (b) improve SAP education for parents, students, and the community using evidence-based practices and formal events to disseminate information about mental health and the SAP program, and (c) improve upon ongoing PDs regarding SAP and mental health, including strategies to communicate with parents, enhance personnel, and allow for more SAP-dedicated time in the schedule.

In Section 4, I discuss my research project's strengths and limitations, in addition to recommendations for alternative approaches regarding educating and involving parents in the SAP. I express personal thoughts about my learning throughout the research project as well as my evolution as a scholar practitioner. And finally, I conclude with a reflection

on the importance of the study, implications, applications, and thoughts about future areas of research.

#### Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

In this section, I discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the project that I designed based on the findings from my basic qualitative study. The purpose of my study was to explore school counselors' perspectives about practices being used to educate parents and encourage parent involvement in SAP referrals. This basic qualitative study sought to close a gap in practice by getting parents more involved in the SAP process to ultimately accept their child's referral. Epstein's PM was used as a conceptual framework for the study, guided in part by her framework of overlapping spheres of influence, to investigate critical partnerships between home, school, and the community.

As a group, school counselors' responses resulted in four thematic concepts that became the basis of and recommendations for the white paper. Data findings resulted in school counselors' perceptions of (a) various methods used to educate parents about SAP, (b) various strategies used to involve parents in SAP, (c) challenges associated with educating and involving parents in SAP, and (d) recommendations for improving parent education and involvement in SAP. The white paper was designed to propose evidence-based recommendations for improvement based on findings from the research study. As a result, all the themes, findings, and recommendations that originated from this project are supported by findings in the existing literature. The goal of the white paper is to inform and persuade stakeholders to enhance and expand mental health and SAP awareness in order to increase parent education and involvement in the SAP.

In this section, I discuss the study's strengths and limitations, alternative approaches, and project development and evaluation. Additionally, I reflect on my

personal scholarly experiences, the importance of the work, and implications for social change. To conclude, I discuss the potential for future research ideas and directions regarding the important task of increasingly educating and involving parents in SAP.

### **Project Strengths and Limitations**

This research project had a number of strengths and limitations. To begin, one strength of the project was that it focused solely on school counselors from the study county. Participants shared their perspectives from various grade levels (i.e., elementary, middle, and high school). Due to the nature of their roles, gaining perspectives from school counselors who work directly with parents, students, and SAP was a critical component of data authenticity. Another strength was the school counselors' geographic diversity, in that they represented different districts across the county, resulting in a wide range of perspectives. The differences in years of experience, grade levels, and geographic locations resulted in rich, qualitative data. Qualitative research is an effective method for collecting data that cannot be easily quantified in numbers, but rather is reflective of people's experiences and perceptions (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). An additional strength was that I conducted one-on-one semistructured interviews over Zoom. In this interview setting, I could more easily grasp personal perceptions and interpretations that might not have come across as thoroughly over email. Participants were able to speak candidly about current practices, challenges, and recommendations for increasing parent education and involvement in SAP.

The transition of study findings into white paper recommendations is yet another strength of the project. White papers are designed to inform and persuade the audience by

identifying problem areas and proposing solutions based on empirical evidence. The white paper I created can help provide solutions for schools and districts to include (a) the creation of a SAP AT of stakeholders to serve as the focal point for implementing the white paper recommendations to increase parent education and involvement in SAP; (b) improving SAP education for parents, students, and the community using evidence-based practices and formal events to disseminate information about mental health and the SAP program; and (c) improving upon ongoing PDs regarding SAP and mental health, including strategies to communicate with parents, enhance personnel, and allow for more SAP-dedicated time in the schedule.

Limitations of this project include the fact that only one viewpoint was used in this study, that of 11 school counselors in the study county. By purposely sampling only one of many school personnel involved in SAP, I might have left out important perspectives on the subject. Another limitation was that all participants were from the same county, which limits findings to only one geographical area, potentially omitting critical data. Another limitation might be that a number of the school counselors interviewed had less than 3 years of job experience, and as such, selecting and interviewing participants with a wider range of experience might also lead to different findings. And finally, there was the limitation caused by potential personal bias. Because I am a former K–12 educator and current faculty member in higher education, there was a chance that my personal thoughts and opinions could influence the research process. In preparation, I was careful to bracket my biases by taking precautions such as audio recording, reading transcripts repeatedly, following IRB recommendations, doing a

practice interview, and working closely with my two committee members. I also used my research journal and notes throughout my study, to avoid interfering or misinterpreting participants' perspectives.

### **Recommendations for Alternative Approaches**

The problem in my research study focused on parent education and involvement in SAP. Alternative definitions for parent education could be caregiver educational sessions or workshops, while alternative definitions for involvement could be parent engagement or caregiver engagement. SAP stands for student assistance program, and alternative terms might be *mental health awareness program*, *mental and behavioral health awareness program*, *student trauma program*, or *early intervention program*. Possible implications to increase parent education and involvement in SAP might include (a) educational sessions for families transitioning from elementary into middle school and from middle school to high school, (b) establishing a peer-to-peer coaching program using student leaders, and (c) purchasing and implementing the Rachel's Challenge program to help create a community of kindness and common language of caring.

### **Scholarship, Project Development and Evaluation, and Leadership and Change**

My journey through qualitative research planning and implementation helped me gain firsthand experience with the qualitative method using semistructured interviews. My overall goal was to create positive social change by exploring a problem and gap in practice that were relevant and evidence-based—low SAP referral approvals and parent education and involvement in SAP. Peer-reviewed empirical literature and Epstein's conceptual framework guided my study's progression. Under the guidance of Walden



University's IRB and professors, I practiced research ethics and safety protocols. I gained knowledge and experience by designing the project and interview questions, conducting interviews, and organizing and analyzing interview data. Throughout the project, I acquired invaluable knowledge with regards to conducting qualitative research and gained new perspectives on the experiences of school counselors.

As part of my research study, I collected data from 11 one-on-one interviews with school counselors. I had an eye-opening experience delving deeply into school counselors' perceptions in educating and involving parents in SAP. The participants often spoke from the heart, sharing challenges about their jobs, responsibilities, and hardships they were facing at their schools and districts. Their perspectives in the study may help their school create an action plan to increase parent education and involvement in SAP. In so doing, this may also increase SAP referral approvals, allowing more students access to professional services. The study's findings can benefit all stakeholders by sharing the perspectives of school counselors, the challenges they face, and strategies for helping them improve parent education and involvement in SAP.

Throughout my experience, I acquired research experience that I would like to use in my future career as both a research practitioner and educator. I am certified in the state of Pennsylvania to teach science education, and I am passionate about mental health awareness and helping students connect to professional services. After learning more about school counselors' challenges, I would like to possibly move into a leadership role that can help generate and sustain social change to improve SAP referral outcomes.

### **Reflection on Importance of the Work**

This qualitative research project is meaningful on both a small and large scale. As a professional educator, I gained a greater understanding and respect for school counselors, including the strategies used to educate and involve parents in SAP. As a result of my research, I personally experienced the deeply layered issues of mental health awareness and programs that face not only school counselors, but also communities and counties. To investigate my research problem, I needed to plan my project systematically by using an exhaustive literature review and then a carefully planned methodology that all aligned to the problem, purpose, and conceptual framework.

It was critical to the study that I make consistent efforts to ensure that it was ethical and producing data that were both valid and reliable. My multistep and detailed data analysis process was thorough, and it instilled a more complete view of qualitative research. I can conclude that my experience as a student and researcher has been a positive experience, and I look forward to using my knowledge in future career endeavors.

### **Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research**

The findings of my qualitative research project allude to numerous changes and improvements that can be addressed at the study site. As a group, school counselors agreed on specific recommendations for all stakeholders in order to work towards improving parent education and involvement in SAP. Stakeholders can use the white paper recommendations to enhance mental health education and awareness so that parents are more likely to approve their child's SAP referral and their child can receive

professional services. Epstein's conceptual framework established the pivotal foundation for building and maintaining partnerships between home, school, and the community. Based on data, I recommend that school counselors' needs be met through the creation of a SAP AT composed of representative stakeholders, increased education and outreach about mental health awareness and SAP programs, and sufficient ongoing PD to sustain the pilot project throughout the school year. I also recommend that leadership provide school counselors and the AT with ample time and resources to put the white paper recommendations into practice. Future research possibilities could include adding a quantitative data component to the project and expanding the white paper recommendations to other counties in Pennsylvania. If a site adopts the white paper recommendations, another research area might be to determine whether implementing the proposed recommendations influenced parent SAP approval rates. The implications, applications, and directions of this research project have the capacity to create positive, systemic social change.

### **Conclusion**

The problem addressed in this study was that students were not receiving the recommended professional services through the SAP in the study county. Using a basic qualitative research design, I purposefully sampled 11 school counselors, interviewed them, and audio-recorded the interviews using Zoom. Participants met the inclusion criteria by being active K–12 public school counselors in the study county who had experience working with parents and SAP. Epstein's PM was used as a conceptual framework to explore school counselors' perspectives. Data were analyzed using a priori

and open coding, resulting in four thematic concepts. The findings from the study became the basis for three recommendations that were presented using a white paper. The following recommendations for the study site were determined using peer-reviewed scholarly sources and a purposeful change conceptual framework: (a) create a SAP AT of stakeholders to serve as the focal point for implementing the white paper recommendations to increase parent education and involvement in SAP; (b) improve SAP education for parents, students, and the community using evidence-based practices and formal events to disseminate information about mental health and the SAP program; and (c) improve upon ongoing PDs regarding SAP and mental health, including strategies to communicate with parents, enhance personnel, and allow for more SAP-dedicated time in the schedule. The goal of the white paper is to inform and persuade stakeholders at the study site to enhance and expand mental health and SAP awareness in order to increase parent education and involvement in the SAP.

To conclude, understanding school counselors' perspectives about educating and involving parents in SAP is a critical component to getting students professional services. Moreover, acknowledging the challenges that school counselors face when trying to get the SAP referral approved by parents can help to identify the system's overarching issues and concerns. The participants' voices can and should be shared with stakeholders to initiate conversations and open communication pathways. The data revealed a need to improve the way in which parents are educated and involved in SAP referrals. School counselors need access to resources and support from across the school and district. The study findings can open conversations about how all stakeholders can contribute to the

betterment of student success in the short and long term. Ongoing systematic PD opportunities for school personnel to gain a better understanding of mental health awareness and programs have the potential to positively impact social change. Further research will be needed to understand the impact of the pilot project implementation using assessments to determine the direction of future endeavors.

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Appendix A: White Paper

**School Counselors' Perceptions of and Recommendations for Increased Parent  
Involvement in Student Assistance Program Referrals: A White Paper**

By

Joanna Harrington-Diorio

## **School Counselors' Perceptions of and Recommendations for Increased Parent Involvement in Student Assistance Program Referrals: A White Paper**

By

Joanna Harrington-Diorio

### **Introduction**

Major depression, anxiety, and suicide among American youth has risen abruptly over the last few decades. Contributing factors to youths' declining mental health have been linked to social, environmental, and economic aspects mainly at home and school (CDC, 2022; Runkle et al., 2023). In 2021, 42% of American students felt persistently sad or hopeless, while 29% experienced poor mental health (CDC, 2023b).

The Student Assistance Program (SAP) was established by the Pennsylvania government in 1991 to help identify students from kindergarten to 12th grade who were experiencing problems due to substance abuse and mental health challenges (Pennsylvania Network for Student Assistance, n.d.). The overall goal of the SAP is to identify and help struggling students so they can succeed academically, graduate, and lead successful lives. From 2013 to 2018, SAP referrals in Pennsylvania increased 24% (Sekhar et al., 2022a). In the 2022-2023 school year alone, 100,438 SAP referrals were made in Pennsylvania schools, of which 40,202 were discontinued due to parent refusal (Pennsylvania Safe Schools Online, n.d.). These data indicate that approximately 40% of Pennsylvanian students are not receiving the SAP assistance they need. During the same

time period in this study's county, 3622 students were referred to the SAP, of which 1065 were discontinued due to parental refusals or missing written permission (Pennsylvania Safe Schools Online, n.d.). The report also cites lack of parent participation as the greatest influence on referral approvals, although there is little to no data explaining the reason behind a parents' SAP refusal (Pennsylvania Safe Schools Online, n.d.).

Parent refusal to SAP referrals limits their child's access to critical behavioral and mental support services offered by the school. Researchers have noted the value of preventative strategies and trainings for school personnel and parents as methods for decreasing mental health related suicides among Pennsylvanian students (Biddle et al., 2014; Weissinger et al., 2023).

Based on this current research study, it is evident that despite efforts to involve parents in the SAP process, there is still a need for more parental involvement to increase the likelihood that their child will receive critical professional services. This study was significant because the findings provided information to support formulating recommendations that will help school counselors and stakeholders fill a gap in

practice to increase parent involvement in a child's SAP referral.

Considering what we already know about student mental and behavioral wellness, and the positive influence of parents, there are significant steps that can be taken to instill positive social change. The creation of a SAP action team (AT) comprised of diverse stakeholders (counselors, parents, teachers, administrators, etc.) to lead the SAP education and involvement efforts is a necessary first step. A needs assessment will be required initially to evaluate specific gaps that the AT should address, including educating and involving the community and school personnel in a system-wide SAP education movement. A rise in parent involvement may lead to an increased acceptance rate of SAP referrals, that could result in improved student access to professional mental and behavioral health services.

The white paper is a result of a qualitative study conducted with 11 school counselors in the study county. The study's purpose was to explore school counselors' perspectives about practices being used to educate and encourage parent involvement in SAP referrals. Interview audio recordings were transcribed and analyzed using deductive and inductive data analysis techniques. The study resulted in three recommendations, and in this white paper I describe the current problem, provide the three recommendations, and

conclude with a discussion on the educational and social-emotional benefits of the interventions and future research recommendations.

### **Problem Defined**

The problem that was addressed in this basic qualitative study was that students were not receiving the recommended professional services through the SAP in the study county. Eleven school counselors were interviewed and asked for their perspectives and recommendations regarding educating and involving parents in SAP referrals. Their responses were analyzed for thematic ideas, and results of the study determined that school counselors perceived (a) a variety of strategies used to educate parents regarding SAP, (b) a range of approaches used to involve parents in SAP, (c) various challenges when attempting to educate and involve parents in SAP referrals, and (d) recommendations for improving parent education and involvement in the SAP process.

By gaining a deeper understanding of school counselors' perspectives, reviewing current research literature about the topics, and synthesizing the findings with scholarly sources, the development of key focus areas emerged to address the study problem and purpose. The following recommendations were derived from the

study's findings and evidence-based literature: (a) Create a SAP AT of stakeholders to serve as the focal point for implementing the white paper recommendations to increase parent education and involvement in SAP, (b) improve SAP education for parents, students, and the community using evidence-based practices and formal events to disseminate information about mental health and the SAP program, and (c) improve upon ongoing PDs regarding SAP and mental health, including strategies to communicate with parents, enhance personnel, and allow for more SAP-dedicated time in the schedule.

This white paper was designed to address school counselors' needs to increase parent education and involvement in SAP referrals. The recommendations from the study contain evidence-based practices and approaches to help increase parent education and involvement in SAP.

**Recommendation #1: Create a SAP Action Team of stakeholders to serve as the focal point for implementing the white paper recommendations to increase parent education and involvement in SAP.**

The study findings revealed the many challenges that school counselors experience when trying to educate and involve parents in the SAP. Therefore, the first recommendation is the creation of a SAP AT to serve as a focal point for

addressing the recommendations. It will be critical that the AT establish a shared vision for the intervention, that they perform a needs assessment, and that post assessments be used to determine efficacy and forward directions. Epstein's (2010) Partnership Model (PM) encourages schools to design Action Teams for Participation so that home, school, and community stakeholders can all be included in the efforts. The PM recommends that the AT include the collective minds of teachers, staff, administrators, parents, community members, and students (Epstein & Boone, 2022). Community members can include business partners, interfaith leaders, and members of the community's civic organizations (Epstein 2010; Epstein & Boone, 2022). The goal of the AT is to serve as a representative committee who share a common vision for implementing the intervention to improve parent education and involvement in SAP.

**Recommendation #1: Create a SAP Action Team of stakeholders to serve as the focal point for implementing the white paper recommendations to increase parent education and involvement in SAP.**

*Creating a Shared Vision.*

Senge et al. (2012) discussed the concept of establishing a shared vision when preparing to implement change in any

system. He also encouraged teams to explore the current mental models within the different systems that make up the larger system. Senge et al. (2012) and Epstein et al. (2011) both suggest asking ourselves how we arrived at this current mental model and whether those models need to be adjusted to achieve the team's shared vision.

The AT should follow a sequential path of visioning, problem solving, decision-making, action taking, and policy development to both create and sustain positive social change (Chauncey & Simpson, 2020). Morris et al. (2019) explained the critical connection between a school's mental models and their evolution into the school's culture. According to Morris et al. (2019), school culture is "the collective values and beliefs of school staff, encompassing how these are enacted in practice" (p. 803). When examining effective school leadership, Day et al. (2020) explained that taken in isolation, leadership alone cannot create positive school improvement. Rather, they suggest leading change through a set of common values and employing context-specific strategies to create and sustain positive school culture (Day et al., 2020; Jones, 2022).

Creating a respectful, encouraging relationship must first be developed, according to Brigman et al. (2022), after which point the problems can be identified as a team, in agreement with one another. Researchers have

shown that for an AT to effectively increase parent education and involvement, they will need to collaborate using an inclusive mindset that focuses on stakeholders' participation, engagement, motivation, and commitment (Day et al., 2020; Morris et al., 2019; Pavlidou & Efstathiades, 2021).

**Needs Assessment.** The National Association for School Psychologists [NASP] (2023) and the National Center for School Mental Health [NCSMH] (2024) agree that school mental health programs can improve academic performance and social-emotional competence, while lowering absenteeism, substance abuse and disciplinary referrals. In order to best assist families with education and involvement, Viola et al. (2020) underscore the value of performing a needs assessment among all stakeholders (students, parents, school counselors, etc) to determine specific needs and interests. This in turn can help align priorities to the shared vision, goals, and responsibilities within the AT. A needs assessment can be achieved through phone interviews, surveys, questionnaires, and focus groups (Finan et al., 2018). These data collections will help the AT determine intervention starting points by highlighting the system's strengths, needed changes, and expectations for increasing SAP education and involvement for parents (Epstein, 2010; Epstein & Boone, 2022).

By understanding where to start, the AT can then determine next steps of the intervention for expanding education for parents, students, and the community.

**Post Assessments.** Conducting post assessments can help evaluate the intervention's outcomes and determine whether the AT's action plan was successful. The more we know about the action plan's successes or failures, the easier it can be to finetune future actions, decisions, and policies (Vongsachang et al., 2020). Viola et al. (2020) provided post assessment surveys to parents using a 5-point Likert-type response scale to collect data. Additionally, Viola et al. (2020) followed up their presentation with a one-month phone call check-in with parent participants. To identify the effectiveness of their mindfulness-based intervention program, Grunewald and Foley-Nicpon (2023) asked teachers, parents, and students for their feedback. The responses they received from stakeholders allowed Grunewald and Foley-Nicpon (2023) to break down the program's strengths and weaknesses into more specific levels of attention: individual, intervention, and system. Similarly, Fisher and Crawford (2020) noted the Priestley change model in their study, which breaks change down into three locations: individual, structural, and cultural. The NASP (2023) also utilize feedback, however they use it to determine gaps in services and support to identify funding sources, resources, restrictions, and availability. The value

of feedback should not be overlooked due to its significant importance to the

**Recommendation #2: Improve SAP education for parents, students, and the community using evidence-based practices and formal events to disseminate information about mental health and the SAP program.**

AT's intervention strategies. Once the AT has established a shared vision and collective direction, they can then put their parent education and involvement plan into play.

**Recommendation #2: Improve SAP education for parents, students, and the community using evidence-based practices and formal events to disseminate information about mental health and the SAP program.**

When seeking to educate and involve parents, students, and the community, researchers have shown that there are multiple ways to do so successfully. Although education and involvement have evolved over the years, researchers have determined certain best practice strategies. The way in which school culture is developed and nurtured can result in effective education and involvement from all stakeholders (Morris et al., 2020; Pavlidou & Efstathiades, 2021).

***Parent Education and Involvement.*** As students begin their kindergarten year and move from elementary to middle to high school, parent roles also evolve. It has been found that as their children move into middle school and high school, some parents have trouble identifying their new role in their child's educational journey (Hill, 2022). While many elementary schools highly encourage parent involvement, researchers have shown that parent involvement declines as the child moves up in grades (Finan et al., 2018; Hill, 2022). Without a strong education and involvement system between school, home, and the community, parents might not be receiving crucial information about school programs and child development (Posey-Maddox & Haley-Lock, 2020). Therefore, it is suggested that a strong two-way communication system of newsletters, emails, texts, and in-person communication between home and school be employed to improve student socio-emotional and academic success (Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020).

An efficacious parent education program informs and empowers them with the core knowledge they need to help their child become emotionally and academically successful (Viola et al., 2020). According to Butler et al. (2019), their recommendations for parent education programs highlighted the need for continuity and progression, language accessibility, tailoring to parents' needs,

and consistently high quality. Sim et al. (2022) determined in their study that higher levels of parent education about child development led to more parental engagement and more acceptance of their child's socio-emotional health-related quality of life. In their parent and educator focus group study, Kelty and Wakabayashi (2020) found that parents requested more education on: child development, adolescence, college planning, English language support, and mental health.

As such, for this intervention program to be successful, it is strongly recommended that all stakeholders be asked what they need from the AT and intervention. Moreover, it will be crucial to actively listen to their responses with an open mind, so as not to influence or dissuade stakeholders from sharing honestly. A context-specific parent education and involvement program can lead to higher self-efficacy and advocacy for their child, which in turn can lead to a better understanding of their child's anxiety, depression, behavior, and academics (Hill, 2022; Viola et al., 2020).



**Logistical Barriers.** Despite the efforts being made to educate and involve parents, many schools and districts struggle getting families to engage due to conflicting schedules, availability, and other barriers. According to Finan et al. (2018), parents were more likely to attend an education session at school when there was on-site childcare, light meals and refreshments, and clear advertisements about the sessions. Furthermore, when sessions were held during different days and times to accommodate parents' schedules, there was higher turnout and parent involvement (Finan et al., 2018; Viola et al., 2020). In addition to providing childcare, food, and schedule flexibility, several studies also found that providing online education sessions led to greater parent education and involvement likely due to scheduling flexibility, confidentiality, and learning styles (Finan et al., 2018; Sim et al., 2022). In a study by Fisher and Crawford (2020), their findings corresponded with others' research on parent involvement, "Schools must develop strategies for parental involvement that work with the specific population of the school" (p. 9). Parent involvement will also look different for low-income, at-risk schools and it is in all stakeholders' best interest to develop and sustain a welcoming, trusting, and culturally sensitive community (Epstein, et al., 2011; Fisher & Crawford, 2020).

A potential method for building bridges between home and school would be to increase parent volunteer opportunities, especially in middle and high school, allowing parents the opportunity to share their knowledge and expertise with students and faculty (Hill, 2022; Yulianti et al., 2020). By interlacing our home, school, and community resources under one roof, and adding value to parent participation, schools can offer their students real-world education, conversations, and experiences from people in their own

**Increasing parent education and involvement can lead to higher self-efficacy and advocacy for their child, which in turn leads to a better understanding of their child's anxiety, depression, behavior, and academics (Hill, 2022; Viola et al., 2020).**

community (Hamlin & Li, 2019).

**Cultural Barriers.** The more we can educate and involve parents in their child's educational and emotional development, the higher the potential for building trust in the school, systems, and policies. It has been found that school leaders who create a caring and trusting atmosphere and consistently share and communicate with stakeholders build a stronger foundation for student success (Smith et al., 2020; Yulianti et al., 2020).

However, it is imperative to consider the stakeholders' cultural beliefs and values as they pertain to educational involvement. Considering parents' cultural backgrounds and the complex communities we serve can affect what kinds of educational programs and involvement to provide and what to expect from families (Finan et al., 2018; Yulianti et al., 2020).

In some instances, parents might not attend events such as "Coffee with the Principal" or "Grandparents Day" if it does not align with their culture, beliefs, or values (Butler et al., 2019; Vongsachang et al., 2020). As such, we should be cautious about misinterpreting a family's lack of involvement by paying closer attention to their individual characteristics and needs (Radez et al., 2021). When asked about ways to help families become more engaged in school, Kelty and Wakabayashi (2020) received this response from a concerned parent, "Put the family first. The parents are the first teacher, parents are always learning and teaching their family; give families information to help empower their families" (p. 8). Another study found that parents were more likely to only hear from schools under negative circumstances, therefore it was suggested to add more positive messaging to parents about their children (Jones, 2022). Epstein & Boone (2022) and Smith et al. (2020) both agree that nurturing strong family-school collaborative teams can help breakdown

cultural barriers and increase student academic success.

***Mental Health Barriers.*** As we design education and involvement programs for stakeholders that pertain to mental health and wellness, it is critical to also consider barriers that could impede a successful program. Radez et al. (2021) found that, for children and adolescents seeking professional mental health services, barriers were mainly due to "mental health stigma and embarrassment, a lack of mental health knowledge and negative perceptions of help-seeking...a preference for relying on themselves when facing difficulties, and issues with committing fully to the process of help-seeking/accessing" (p. 208). Similarly, Vongsachang et al. (2020) found that parents had similar barriers to accepting and seeking professional services for their children, along with mistrust in the system, pride, and fear of being judged as inadequate parents.

**The way in which school culture is developed and nurtured can result in effective education and involvement from all stakeholders (Morris et al., 2020; Pavlidou & Efstathiades, 2021).**

It has been suggested that the intervention program could break down the concepts of mental health into

smaller chunks, such as: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationships skills, and decision making (Grunewald & Foley-Nicpon, 2023).

Demystifying the stigma of mental health by putting it into tangible language and scenarios could help build more comprehensive community awareness and acceptance.

Despite the barriers presented in their research, Radez et al. (2021) also suggested strategies for reducing barriers such as an extensive school and community-wide destigmatization of mental health by educating and involving students, families, faculty, and community. Potential evidence-based solutions for educating stakeholders include using intensive outreach through advertisements at school events, on community boards, in medical offices, by community leaders, and through student-led activities or events (Epstein & Boone, 2022; Finan et al., 2018; Hill, 2022; Vongsachang et al., 2020). Grunewald and Foley-Nicpon (2023) for example, infused mindfulness-based interventions into schools providing students strategies for pausing during a challenging moment and choosing a healthy reaction to a situation. These mindfulness lessons were then brought home to families by the students, who shared their new knowledge and coping strategies (Grunewald & Foley-Nicpon, 2023).

It has been proposed that improving stakeholders' understanding

and knowledge of mental health and professional services could lead to increased self-help skills, coping strategies, and overall mental health demystification and acceptance (Finan et al., 2018; Guerrero et al., 2022; Hamlin & Li, 2019; Yulianti et al., 2020). In addition to educating and involving people in a community-wide dissemination of mental health awareness, researchers have shown that it can only be fully achieved with sufficient service providers and effective professional development (PD) training for school personnel (Butler et al., 2019; Grunewald & Foley-Nicpon, 2023).

**Recommendation #3: Improve upon ongoing PDs regarding SAP and mental health, including strategies to communicate with parents, enhance personnel, and allow for more SAP-dedicated time in the schedule.**

The last recommendation is to increase and enhance PD for school personnel regarding mental health, SAP, and parental engagement strategies. Researchers have examined PD effectiveness based on audience makeup, speaker style, duration, and location, and found that PD for school personnel is most effective when it addresses the unique needs and individual concerns of the organization (Grunewald & Foley-Nicpon, 2023; Sancar et al., 2021). To create and sustain a positive school culture, it is important to take a holistic approach to professional development,

especially if we are looking to make positive social change through systemic improvements (Avery et al., 2021).

Sancar et al. (2021) and Brigman et al. (2022) both agree that PD opportunities should bring faculty

**Recommendation #3: Improve upon ongoing PDs regarding SAP and mental health, including strategies to communicate with parents, enhance personnel, and allow for more SAP-dedicated time in the schedule.**

together in a supportive work environment to enhance knowledge and practices that will positively affect students and their families, both directly and indirectly.

***Make it Clear and Personal.***

According to Popova et al., (2022), PD opportunities that focus on sharing knowledge and acting together as a group enhance organizational culture, making it easier to implement sustainable change. It has been suggested that effective PDs clearly state the purpose, goals, and objectives for the PD, the significance of participants' attendance, and how it pertains to their own career development (Champine et al., 2022). It is imperative to a PD's success and implementation, that participants easily recognize a direct personal connection to the material being presented. As such, Brigman et al. (2022) describe the teacher workshop model as a series of six steps: an

engaging warm-up, 'asking before telling' so that people can share their thoughts, an introduction to the information and new skills, personalization and practice of new skills, processing and summarization, and finally, evaluation from audience members.

***Mental Health Focused PD.*** A PD that focuses on training school personnel about mental health awareness and programs needs to be context-specific and focused on the faculty's needs (Sancar et al., 2021). Ideally, at the PD's close, faculty should feel as though they have gained the necessary skills, knowledge and self-confidence pertaining to mental health awareness and programs.

Grunewald and Foley-Nicpon (2023) explain that individual beliefs and values on mental health may cause challenges during the PD or among the faculty, and they explain that it may take repeated efforts and practice to internalize the value of implementing mental health awareness programs in the school. Incentivizing teachers to be part of PD opportunities, according to Popova et al. (2022), can be an advantageous way to build rapport and trust, while learning about the topic together. Researchers have shown that providing faculty with career incentives, real life examples and enactments, face-to-face trainings, and follow-ups have proven to be successful motivational tools for PDs (Avery et al., 2021);

Goodman et al., 2024). In addition, Popova et al. (2022) suggest providing time for attendees to practice their newly gained skills in order to feel confident when speaking with parents and students about mental health awareness and programs.

A PD's success can and should be measured in multiple ways to gain insights from participants, speakers, and organizers. Researchers have shown that collecting post-assessment feedback from attendees is critical to determining the PD's effectiveness, value, and overall impact (Brigman et al., 2022; Champine et al., 2022; Epstein & Boone, 2022). Moreover, attendee feedback adds significant insight for future planning, areas of interest, and opportunities for growth and dissemination.

***Transferring the Learning to Families.*** It is hopeful that PD on mental health awareness and programs will enable personnel, who interact most often with students and parents, to feel confident referring students to the SAP program. Parents entrust their children to the school's personnel, and families tend to be more receptive to teachers' communication and feedback regarding their child (Grunewald & Foley-Nicpon, 2023). Establishing an equitable partnership between home and school lays the foundation for positive and productive relationships (Epstein et al., 2021). Amod (2022) suggests that nurturing parent-child-school

communication through good news updates about the child can often make the more difficult conversations easier to navigate. Arming school personnel with knowledge through PDs can help them become advocates of mental health awareness programs to encourage parents' communication with the school (Champine et al., 2022). A faculty that is informed about mental health awareness and programs may result in families being more willing to become involved, sign the consent forms or meet with a school counselor.

***Train-the-Trainer.*** PD on the topics of mental health awareness and programs should be part of a holistic preventative strategy to increase mental health awareness for school, home, and community stakeholders. If time or resources limit a full-scale district-wide PD, it can also be accomplished through a train-the-trainer model. For a successful train-the-trainer PD, department leaders are provided the initial training, after which they pass that knowledge onto their departments (Guerrero et al., 2022). Using smaller group sessions can often be a helpful teaching method, allowing participants time to communicate ideas and address challenges as a team, building morale and trust. Moreover, the PD sessions could eventually be open to parents, students, and community members, led by trainers and trainees.

Guerrero et al. (2022) found that the train-the-trainer model helped school

staff and parents become more familiar and comfortable identifying symptoms of child trauma. Champine et al. (2022) also found that using a train-the-trainer model with diverse stakeholders helped establish a trauma-informed community who could identify and respond to potential signs of child trauma. Outside organizations can also be helpful to bring in trainers which free up school personnel from the added responsibilities of leading PDs. Goodman et al. (2024) found that using AmeriCorps Members as small group interventionists and behavior coaches in schools and community organizations resulted in positive feedback and results from participants. By expanding PDs to include schools, parents and the community, stakeholders can establish a safe, shared language regarding mental health awareness and programs.

#### ***An Educated Community.***

Through effective PDs, the creation of a safe, shared language among all stakeholders regarding mental health awareness and programs can help parents when seeking help for their child. When children show signs of mental health concerns, behavior problems, bullying, or substance abuse, parents can rely on knowledgeable school personnel to direct them to the right resources (Amod, 2022; Yulianti et al., 2020). According to Smith et al. (2020) “family-school interventions are related to student benefits across academic and social-behavioral

outcomes: communication, home-based involvement, and behavioral support” (p. 279).

The path to getting parents help for their child should be a dependable and straightforward path towards teachers, school counselors, school psychologists, nurses, and social workers. Sheridan et al. (2019) analyzed 117 intervention studies and concluded that “family-school interventions enhance children’s social-behavioral competence and mental health... Social-behavioral skills enable young students to interact prosocially in social settings, engage adaptively in academic environments...thus, they are widely considered precursors to achievement” (p. 310-311). PDs that include a wide range of school personnel such as administrators, secretaries, librarians, and paraprofessionals expand a child’s community of care with the hope of building more acceptance around mental health awareness and programs (Amod, 2022; Sheridan et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2020).

#### **Benefits of the Recommendations**

The three recommendations in this white paper will directly benefit the participating stakeholders, including school counselors, students, parents, teachers, and community members. The suggested interventions stand to welcome healthy conversations, education, and involvement in mental health awareness and SAP. School

counselors will have more time to counsel students and can spend less hours tracking down parents for SAP referrals. Parents will be more educated and involved in mental health awareness, SAP, and potential warning signs regarding their child. Moreover, parents will be more willing to accept the SAP referral enabling more children to receive the professional services they need to lead healthy lives. School personnel will all stand to gain vital knowledge through PDs about mental health awareness and SAP, serving as advocates for SAP and mental health awareness. And finally, the community will become more educated and involved in the SAP by gaining a better understanding of mental health awareness and programs such as SAP. Additionally, the interventions stand to help destigmatize and demystify mental health so that more people receive the help they need.

Stakeholders from home, school, and the community can all benefit from gaining a deeper understanding of

mental health and SAP, thereby building healthy partnerships among the three groups.

### **Summary**

The recommendations found within this white paper are based on a qualitative study. The three emergent recommendations include (a) the creation of a SAP AT to be the focal point of the intervention, (b) increased SAP and mental health education for all stakeholders, and (c) enhanced ongoing SAP PD for all stakeholders. Stakeholders can include school counselors, teachers, parents, students, school personnel, principals, and community members. It is up to the administration to initiate the recommendations from this white paper. Doing so can help address a gap in practice regarding educating and involving parents in SAP, thereby increasing student access to professional services. Students stand to potentially benefit immensely in their social, emotional, and academic successes.

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