



What is the Student Assistance Program?

The Pennsylvania Student Assistance Program (SAP) is a systematic team process used to mobilize school resources to remove barriers to learning. SAP is designed to assist in identifying issues including alcohol, tobacco, other drugs, and mental health issues which pose a barrier to a student's success. The primary goal of the Student Assistance Program is to help students overcome these barriers so that they may achieve, advance, and remain in school. While Student Assistance Programs exist in other areas of the country, the structure and operation of the program in Pennsylvania is a unique expression of an integrated model serving the needs of Pennsylvania families and students.

The core of the Student Assistance Program is a professionally trained team, including school staff and liaisons from community drug and alcohol and mental health agencies. SAP team members are trained to identify issues, determine whether or not the presenting issue lies within the responsibility of the school, and to make recommendations to assist the student and the parent. When the issue lies beyond the scope of the school, the SAP team will assist the parent and student so they may access services within the community. SAP team members do not diagnose, treat or refer to treatment; but they may refer a student to a liaison who may screen or assess for further community based services and support.

There are four phases to the student assistance process:

Referral - Anyone can refer a student to SAP when they are concerned about someone's behavior -- any school staff, a student's friend, a family member or community member. The students themselves can even go directly to the SAP team to ask for help. The SAP team contacts the parent for permission to proceed with the SAP process.

Team Planning – The SAP team gathers objective information about the student's performance in school from all school personnel who have contact with the student. Information is also collected from the parent. The team meets with the parent to discuss the data collected and also meets with the student. Together, a plan is developed that includes strategies for removing the learning barriers and promoting the student's academic and personal success to include in-school and/or community-based services and activities.

Intervention and Recommendations – The plan is put into action. The team assists in linking the student to in-school and/or community-based services and activities. The team might recommend a drug and alcohol or mental health screening or assessment.

Support and Follow-Up – The SAP team continues to work with and support the student and their family. Follow-up includes monitoring, mentoring, and motivating for academic success.

It is the parent's right to be involved in the process and to have full access to all school records under the applicable state and federal laws and regulations. Involvement of parents in all phases of the Student Assistance Program underscores the parents' role and responsibility in the decision-making process affecting their child's education and is key to the successful resolution of barriers.

For students receiving treatment through a community agency, the student assistance team, in collaboration with parents and the agency, can assist in helping plan in-school support services during and after treatment. The team's effectiveness in helping the student and the parent remove the barriers to learning and improve student performance depends on the training of the individual team members, maintenance of the student assistance team and process, level of administrative commitment and board support, active parent and student involvement and the available resources both in school and the community.

SAP in Pennsylvania is overseen by the PA Network for Student Assistance Services (PNSAS) Interagency and Regional Coordinators' team; comprised of representation from the PA Departments of Education (Safe Schools Office), Drug and Alcohol Programs (Division of Prevention and Intervention) and Human Services (Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services). SAP is based upon state guidelines, professional standards, and policies and procedures adopted by the local school board of directors. Professional training conducted by a Commonwealth Approved Training provider (CAT) is required for team members to ensure the appropriateness of the recommended services, effective interagency collaboration and compliance with state and federal laws protecting the privacy rights of parents and students. Guidelines for the SAP K-12 training system in Pennsylvania contain training standards and competencies to ensure SAP team professionals receive up-to-date professional training consistent with accountable standards and appropriate procedures.