

Student Assistance Programs

Reduce Barriers to Learning

By Pat Berry

Energies are spread thinly in today's schools. Just as efforts must be devoted to academic achievement, socio-emotional needs in students continue to grow. Student assistance programs (SAPs) are gaining strength in most states as a promising practice in helping students to overcome barriers to learning and to become more successful in school, while assisting schools in improving their overall climate.

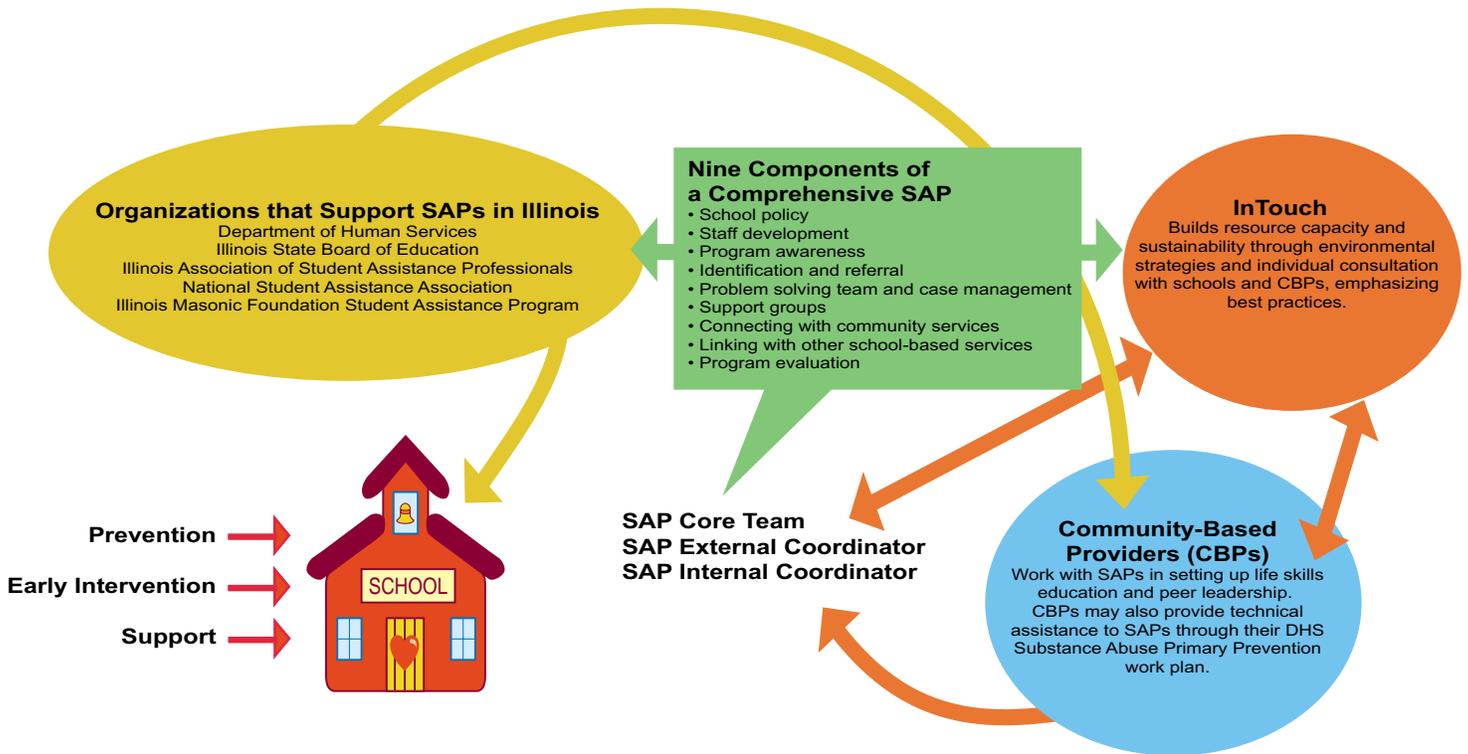
Student assistance programs emerged in the 1970s with a focus on dealing with substance use issues in the high school population. Over the next 30 years, SAPs became

a prominent practice throughout the United States in middle and elementary schools, while gaining a broadened focus on all barriers to learning that impact student success, including, among others, substance abuse, mental health problems, bullying and other forms of violence and family issues that impact school performance and relationships.

Student assistance programs provide a comprehensive framework for the delivery of K-12 *prevention, intervention* and *support* services, which are designed to reduce student risk factors, promote protective factors and increase asset



Connections Among Organizations Supporting Student Assistance Programs in Illinois



development. SAPs utilize a systematic process to mobilize school resources and connect the student and family with community resources when needed. Services are typically delivered through one of three approaches:

- An external SAP coordinator who is employed by an agency and works with the school primarily as an early interventionist.
- An internal SAP coordinator who works with prevention, early intervention, support groups and other forms of support.
- A SAP core team composed of trained school staff and liaisons from community support services.

Because each approach to service delivery has strengths and drawbacks, many schools have found a combination of approaches can offer the most comprehensive mode of service delivery.

The National Student Assistance Association established the Nine Components of a Comprehensive SAP in 1997, which serve as standards for the field. The components

include effective school policy, staff development, program awareness, identification and referral, problem-solving teams and case managers, support groups, connecting with community services, linking with other school-based services and program evaluation.

Frances Bacon stated, “Things alter for the worse spontaneously, if they are not altered for the better designedly.” Student and school needs change repeatedly; the most effective SAPs must continue to evolve, with sustainability being a process rather than a goal. The SAPs’ ongoing process of assessing need, planning and implementing strategies and evaluating for results crystallizes into SAPs achieving relevance while offering stability in the face of change. Connecting with organizations in the community and on the state and national levels can provide increased capacity for achievement in those efforts.

Berry is Student Assistance Coordinator for Madison and St. Clair Counties and President-Elect of the National Student Assistance Association.