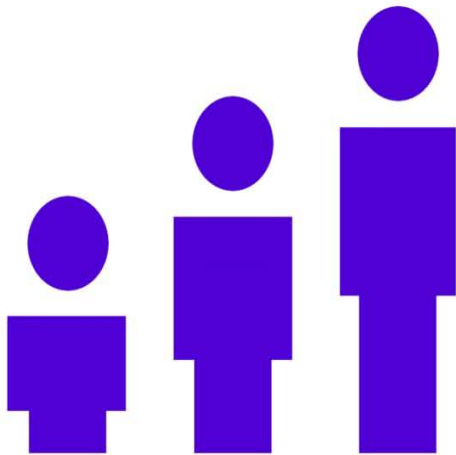


**CONNECTICUT SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKER
- SURVIVAL KIT -**



**WORKING
FOR THE
ADVANCEMENT
OF OUR CHILDREN**

A SELF-ADVOCACY RESOURCE GUIDE

Created by

CONNECTICUT ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS

2016



*ADOPTED FROM THE NEW YORK STATE
SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK SURVIVAL KIT*

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

The Connecticut School Social Work Task Force was convened to provide our school social workers with advocacy skills for the advancement of the profession. The following individuals comprised this task force:

Anthony Cianchetti, LCSW, School social worker, Wolcott School District

Nora Daly, LCSW, New Canaan School District

Esther Howe, DSW/PhD., LCSW, Professor, Southern Connecticut State University

Regina G. Karas, MSW, CAS, Retired, formerly of Regional School District #16 (Prospect and Beacon Falls)

Lambrine A. Sideriadis, PhD., LCSW, Retired, formerly of Middletown School District

Cover art and logo designed by Jon Sideriadis

It should be noted that the New York State School Social Worker Survival Kit was the inspiration to CASSW in adapting the following document. The Connecticut School Social Work Task Force has consulted with Michael T. Cappiello, LCSW, the Chair of the New York State School Social Work Task Force and we wish to express our gratitude to him for allowing us to adapt the New York State document for our state's needs. For more information regarding the New York State School Social Worker Survival Tool Kit, the document may be found at: <https://naswnys.org/wpcontent/uploads/2015/06/SSWToolkitJune2015FINAL.pdf>.

PREFACE

Our plan is to develop a document which will provide school social workers with self-advocacy skills and the tools with which to educate the communities in which they live and work. In highlighting the importance of school social work services and encouraging school social workers to provide anecdotal experiences illustrating their impact, it is hoped that this toolkit will facilitate the process of informing school district administrators, boards of education, elected representatives and the media of the necessity for and value of school social work services.

By increasing the visibility and understanding of school social work practice throughout Connecticut, it is expected that an expansion of access to school social work services throughout the state will evolve.

WHO ARE SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS?

Since challenging issues of poverty, substance abuse, community violence, emotional and physical health issues, early sexual activity and family conflicts are typically beyond the expertise of the classroom teacher, it is the school social worker who is trained to intervene with students struggling with these compelling social-emotional and psychological issues. It has been documented that when barriers to academic progress are addressed by the student receiving school social worker services, the processes of counseling, crisis intervention and prevention programs can facilitate students with the development of coping skills. Subsequently, opportunities for academic success may become a reality because of a school social workers' unique training in identifying solutions to multi-layered problems; their interventions often empower the at-risk student to become an achiever of academic skills.

School social workers bring a unique professional knowledge base and skill set to the school system and the pupil personnel services team. They are instrumental in furthering the mission of schools to provide a conducive setting for teaching, learning, and the attainment of competence and confidence. School social workers enhance a district's ability to meet its academic mission by maintaining and enhancing the mental, emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and social functioning of student learners.

School social work services promote the development of a school environment that supports a sense of belonging and connectedness, of positive relationships, and enhanced self-esteem and empowerment that benefit the student, the school, and the broader community.

School social workers are effective members of the interdisciplinary team of Pupil Personnel Service (PPS) professionals and bring their specialized skills, abilities, and a systems perspective to act as a consultant to teachers, parents and others to facilitate the understanding of how factors in the home, school, and community affect student learner outcome.

School social workers have master's degrees in social work. They have special expertise in understanding family and community systems and linking students and their families with community services essential to promoting student success. School social workers' training includes specialized preparation in cultural diversity, systems theory, social justice, risk assessment and intervention, consultation and collaboration, and clinical intervention strategies to address the mental health needs of students. They work to remove barriers to learning created as a result of poverty, inadequate health care, and neighborhood violence. School social workers often focus on providing supports to vulnerable populations of students at high risk for truancy and school dropout, such as homeless, foster, and migrant children, students transitioning between school and treatment programs and the juvenile justice system, or students experiencing domestic violence. They work with teachers, administrators, parents, and other educators to provide coordinated interventions and consultation designed to keep students in school and help families access the supports needed to promote student success.¹

WHAT DO SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS PROVIDE?

School social workers provide a wide range of services that include, but are not limited to:

- promoting a systems perspective that allows for identifying the impact of environmental, biological, cultural, demographic, emotional, and economic factors that interfere with student learning;
- utilizing assessment tools to evaluate and plan for individualized student educational plans, as well as transition services between grade levels and program placements;
- conducting psycho-social histories as a member of the pupil services team within a school district;
- offering classroom management strategies to teachers so as to maximize students achieving their full potential;
- developing crisis plans in response to identified needs;
- implementing intervention and prevention programs to enhance school climate, students' positive attitude to learning, social skills, and character education;
- partnering with community agency staff to support and coordinate resources for referring students and their families;

- promoting family strengths and assisting families to set up positive structures to support their children's education and well-being;
- identifying cultural needs of diverse school populations in support of their unique educational challenges; and,
- conducting functional behavioral assessments and designing behavior intervention plans to decrease student problem behaviors and increase appropriate school behavior and academics.

THE VALUE OF SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS

Engagement

School social workers are trained to consider the individual's unique set of social, emotional, biological, and cultural needs as well as their functioning or struggles within the school community. With the pressures on teachers to educate the whole child including their social interaction with peers in the classroom, they often turn to the school social worker, who specializes in student engagement. A significant premise of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development as part of their Whole Child Initiative in 2007 is that "each student is actively engaged in learning and is connected to the school and broader community."² For the socially isolated student who lacks positive experiences in peer relationships, the school social worker is available to observe the student in the classroom and provide the teacher with possible interventions for that student.

School social workers assigned by a school district to one or more schools become part of the fabric of their schools in their ability to be sensitive to students' needs. They seek to reduce barriers to learning and thus connect students to their classroom experience and school community in general. Typically, school social workers develop a process for school engagement by:

- Creating lunch groups to help the socially isolated student or those lacking social skills to interact with peers in a small group setting;
- Meeting with students individually or in small groups in the safety and security of the school social worker's office to help them cope with family changes, (e.g. divorce, death of a family member, separation of parents, or military parents' deployment away from home);
- Providing counseling services to both special education and regular education students to enhance self-concept and/or cope with peer conflicts as they impact the student's functioning in their school environment; and,
- Ensuring that a student is emotionally available to learning and participating in his/her classroom. This often involves providing teaching staff with strategies for students whose individual life situation distracts them from the learning process.

When cases of child abuse and neglect are disclosed by students, school social workers utilize their sensitivity to students and their family in their role of mandated reporters. Despite the disruption that may ensue from an established relationship with a family, the school social worker is there to support the student through this complex process. Ensuring the safety of the child is the priority and guiding teachers in their role as mandated reporters is also critical in facilitating timely reporting of an incident disclosed by the student. Working through the consequences of the reporting process also involves the school social worker assisting the family and the student in the social and emotional aftermath of these highly sensitive events.

Educating teaching staff on non-punitive approaches to student outbursts is often delegated to the school social worker who is contacted to assist with the de-escalation process. As most districts strive to reduce suspension rates, the student is often returned to the class once deemed to be functioning in a stable manner. The tendency for some teachers to embarrass a student in front of their peers or expect a public apology for the student's disruptive class behavior can sometimes trigger a repeat incident. If we are to reject punitive models in favor of positive intervention models, the school social worker must work with teachers and administrative staff towards facilitating a trauma sensitive school.³ We are beginning to hear trauma used to describe chronic adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and not just in reference to one traumatic experience.⁴

Recognizing that staff must also feel safe and supported so as to function at their highest level, social workers are sensitive to staff needs for creating safe and supportive student learning environments. Balancing teaching according to the common core standards without administrative budgetary support for textbooks and/or technology is a challenge when they are expected to implement scripted curricular lessons on a schedule.

As teachers are also expected to reach out to parents and establish parental rapport, they often rely on the school social worker to provide parent education workshops and other programs to engage parents in their child's educational process. The uninvolved parent becomes the focus of the school social worker's role in reaching out through conferencing and home visits to assess what factors may be impeding the completion of homework by a student or causing frequent absences and tardiness. Sometimes a parent's own feelings of academic inadequacies may interfere in their engaging in their child's education. Helping families feel comfortable in relating to the child's teacher and/or principal becomes the task of many school social workers who are trained in family systems theory and are comfortable in motivating families to become part of the school community. When parents lack transportation to school events or do not have the resources to support their child's participation in extra-curricular activities, it is the school social worker who finds resources to support these students.

Combating Absenteeism

Conducted by their School of Education's Center for Social Organization of Schools, the 2012 John Hopkins report on absenteeism differentiates chronic absenteeism from truancy and average daily attendance, the typical indices for reporting school attendance rates to the State. "Chronic absenteeism means missing 10 percent of a school year for any reason. A school can have average daily attendance of 90 percent and still have 40 percent of its students chronically absent, because on different days, different students make up that 90 percent."⁵

The researchers point out that school social workers are usually the key staff asked to address this issue with student's parents, especially since chronic absenteeism begins as early as Kindergarten. Helping parents to manage their child's school refusal and engaging parents may further deter a pattern of absenteeism from developing throughout the child's school career. School social workers are skilled in pointing out to parents the short and long-term effects of absenteeism and tardiness. Identifying family issues impeding school attendance is part of the social worker's role as they often connect the family to relevant community resources.

At the middle and high school levels, school social workers focus on engaging the student in recognizing those negative factors impacting their school attendance. In some cases, a student may not have been identified as having a learning disability and the student's struggle may take the form of non-compliant behavior and/or a negative attitude towards learning

In other situations, the school social worker will sort out with the student probable causal factors. Engaging the student in the process of identifying biological factors, such as chemical dependency and/or lack of sleep, environmental conditions, (e.g. homelessness or a bullying situation), academic, or

emotional issues will contribute to understanding what is motivating the absenteeism. In the case where the student refuses to be engaged in this exploration, the parents are brought into the process. If they are struggling to manage their child's absenteeism and communicate that the student is beyond their control, the social worker will connect the family to community resources and possibly file a Family With Service Needs request.⁶

Scientific Researched-based Interventions

School social workers assist the educational mission of their school and district through tiered interventions designed to meet the needs of all students. Scientific Research-based Interventions (SRBI) is the Connecticut framework for Response to Intervention (RTI) and is a comprehensive, multistep process that uses progress monitoring to determine how the student is responding to different types of services and instruction and provides tiered interventions of increasing intensity when necessary. While engaging the student with specific strategies and supports, SRBI is essentially a prevention model directed toward alleviating further academic failure for students requiring additional assistance. Through initial screening, universal supports and interventions proven to be successful through scientific inquiry, SRBI is the foundation for tracking and supporting student adjustment and achievement within the school setting. SRBI describes not only the use of evidence-based programs and interventions but also provides direction for the development and implementation of tiered instruction and student support services. Tier I describes those elements of school instruction and support that are universal in application and are provided for all students. Should a student or group of students continue to have needs in accessing their academics as a result of social-emotional or academic barriers to learning, the students receive Tier II interventions in addition to those already provided in Tier I. Throughout this period of intervention, ongoing evaluation is necessary to ensure the fidelity of intervention, measuring positive response to intervention and determining next steps. If a student continues to exhibit lagging performance in the desired goal area, Tier III interventions are then applied in addition to the Tier I and Tier II interventions. It is important that providing a support in higher tiers does not supplant those provided through earlier intervention, but is intended to be provided in addition to those supports already being provided. Determination for special education services can be made at any tier, and it is not necessary for a student to first be exposed to all three tiers if there is clear and compelling evidence that the student might qualify for services and protection under the IDEA. Special education services should continue to use a multistep process for meeting student needs that is consistent with SRBI.⁷

For school social workers, behavioral assessment will be critical in their contributions to SRBI implementation within their schools and districts. Behavioral assessment should define the type of behavior being targeted and the function that the behavior serves in the student's life. Assessment should include the influence of social, cultural, familial and ecological elements within the student's environment and result in a clear plan for sensitive and responsive intervention to reduce the barriers in social and academic functioning resulting from the targeted behaviors. While behavioral assessment should be closely linked to the interventions, it provides additional benefits to the school environment, such as improved school climate and culture, maintaining students in the least restrictive environment, decreased identification of behavioral disorders, and the over identification of males and people of color. Benefits of providing services within an SRBI model include cost effectiveness and early identification of emerging behavioral and developmental problems that respond to intervention more robustly when addressed early.⁸

Building Community Connections

School social workers are the "go to" people for community resources. Administrators, teachers, parents, students, and other staff seek advice and suggestions from the school social worker. Referrals are not just sought for students but are sometimes sought by co-workers for themselves. Physical health, mental health, and chemical dependency issues are ubiquitous. School social workers who have engaged staff become resources for the entire school community.

This role involves:

1. Maintaining current information of available community resources, ranging from mental health services and which insurance plans are accepted, dental and vision providers who accept Medicaid, food banks, parent education and support groups for those dealing with cancer, death, autism, etc.
2. Maintaining contact information and relationships with the staff at various community resources helps to facilitate referrals. Agencies are sometimes more responsive to the school social worker calling than to a parent calling.
3. Staying current on admissions criteria and procedures for mental health crisis assessments and hospitalization when needed. School social workers can facilitate the process when they have engaged the parent and student, trust has been established that what is being recommended is in the best interest of the student and family, and they know what to expect at the hospital or clinic. They are better able to predict when a referral for possible hospitalization is warranted and when it might only lead to a lengthy emergency room visit with a referral to an outpatient clinic as the discharge plan.

The list of community services and resources is not static. In many communities there has been an increase of food pantries and a decrease in mental health services, especially child psychiatric services, and other programs serving children such as Big Brothers Big Sisters. Making community connections starts with the challenge of engaging the family and student so that they are open to discussing their needs, motivated to address their concerns, become receptive to services and then linking them to the services that are currently available to address their needs. Removing barriers to accessing community services helps to insure that families are able to follow through with referrals. The intake process, however, can be lengthy and sometimes involves a series of contact people. Families often need continued support from the school social worker until their connection with the community service provider is more secure.

Provision of Mental Health Counseling

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) identifies school social workers as mental health providers, stating "the term 'school based mental health provider' includes a State licensed or State certified school counselor, school psychologist, school social worker, or other State licensed or certified mental health professional qualified under State law to provide such services to children and adolescents. 20 USC 2171. Sec. 4151 "⁹

It is well documented that "school systems rely on school social workers to assist children who exhibit a spectrum of social and emotional problems that range from minimally stressful, such as low self-esteem or impairments in peer relationships, to behaviors that meet the criteria for psychiatric disorders."¹⁰

The School Social Work Association of America suggests an alarming number of students in public schools are struggling with mental health needs.

Research indicates between 18-20 percent of students have mental health issues significant enough to cause impairment to major life functions (Dore, 2005), yet only one in five receives the necessary services (Kaffenberger, Seligman, 2007). Furthermore, certain students, including students with disabilities, students of color, and students from low income families, are at greater risk for mental health challenges, but are even less likely to receive the appropriate services (Vera, Buhin, & Shin, 2006). Students with untreated mental health issues may develop more significant problems which can greatly impact their educational experience and result in poor educational outcomes and possibly dropping out of school (Erford, Newsome, & Rock, 2007).¹¹

School social workers serve as the primary mental health providers for students and may be the only counseling professionals available to students and their families to initially identify and provide interventions for those issues. (Early&Vonk, 2001; Hennessy & Green-Hennessy, 2000; Kelly, Berzin, et al., 2010).¹²

School social workers serve as a resource to the principal and other educators, providing consultation and training on identifying students with mental health needs and a referral process when services are sought. Working more closely with individual students and their families, school social workers also create a bridge between the school and the community when linking such services. This coordination is critical in a successful school and community partnership to maximize limited resources, facilitate better service delivery, and maintain communication between partners.

When counseling services are included in a student's IEP, school districts can bill for Medicaid reimbursement for such services when delivered by a certified school social worker.¹³

School Social Workers Promote Safe Schools

Public Act 11-232, An Act Concerning the Strengthening of School Bullying Laws, requires schools to adopt a clear policy against bullying behaviors, outlines specific timelines and notification practices regarding the investigation of suspected bullying behavior, and the development and implementation of a safe school climate plan designed to address bullying behavior. Within these plans, districts are required to describe appropriate prevention and intervention strategies implemented within their schools. The law also requires that each school have a safe school climate committee which includes a parent of a current student; the purpose of the committee is to analyze investigations of bullying behavior in order to identify and address patterns within the school. The committee is also charged with the responsibility of reviewing the school's safe school climate plan and making recommendations for modification based on their understanding of the school's needs. The safe school climate committee is also responsible for educating students, staff and parents about issues related to bullying behavior.

Bullying is an issue school social workers are often called upon to respond to in part because of the significant impact bullying has on students' mental health. Involvement in bullying as a target, aggressor, or witness impacts students' thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes about themselves, and also affects their social competence, behaviors, and peer status.¹⁴ Students who are involved in bullying have been found to have higher rates of suicidal ideation and behavior¹⁵ and may be more prone to psychiatric disorders than children not involved in bullying.¹⁶

Bullying is often understood as an ongoing pattern of harassment and abuse that includes physical or verbal aggression that takes place over time with the intent to exert power and domination over another individual.¹⁷ Using this definition, about 23% of children are impacted by bullying.¹⁸ When violence and harassment are considered without the requirement of an ongoing pattern, prevalence rates have been noted as high as 55%.

School social workers are fundamental in all aspects of implementing safe school-requirements in schools. Key activities include:

- Leading employee education/professional development workshops on bullying prevention;
- Providing bullying prevention curriculum to students;
- Developing processes to monitor reports of bullying and harassment;

- Providing mental health services to students involved in bullying; and
- Facilitating restorative justice processes in the school community to maintain safe school environments.

School social workers often play a key role in compliance with federal and state laws regarding the reporting/ tracking of violent incidents in schools. Federal law requires each state to monitor public schools to determine which are considered persistently dangerous.

School social workers are typically aware of issues among their student body which may or may not be reportable and often hold additional pertinent information about relationships and psychological history about those involved that can enhance the investigation and reporting process. They are well equipped to handle serious situations and conduct issues, including crisis situations, and can implement recommendations such as counseling for both victim(s) and perpetrator(s).

The NASW Standards for school social work services states the role of a school social worker is to “seek to ensure that students are mentally, physically, and emotionally present in the classroom and to promote respect and dignity for all students.”²⁰ This charge is in sync with the planning, promotion and implementation of safe school initiatives. School social workers' extensive training in mental health, collaboration, multi-level assessment and intervention, policy development, crisis management, complex problem solving methods, community outreach and the ability to work within tight budgets and time constraints make them a reliable and versatile asset to school districts where they are often at the forefront of creating and implementing district safety plans. In some districts the leadership of school social workers in developing safe and efficient protocols for emergencies has led to their inclusion not only in building and district level safety plans, but also to membership on their district's emergency response crisis team.

School social workers typically hold an in-depth knowledge of the shifting dynamics among students. This understanding lends to a comprehensive and relevant approach to developing safety plans. School social workers hold expertise in providing mental health support and services that are critical in successful prevention of crises as well as during and after crisis incidents. Using a multi-tiered approach that is evidence based, school social workers are able to assess, intervene and follow up with students in need of support. The early detection of potentially violent behaviors addressed in both the district and school safety plans is a primary focus for school social workers. Successful school safety plans are contingent upon improving communication among students, families, school staff and the community as well as increasing a feeling of school connectedness and belonging. These concepts are the backbone of the school social workers' principles and expertise.

Aside from large scale incidents such as school shootings, which garner public attention and prompt legislation to be written, crises of varying degrees occur daily in our schools. A crisis can be a five year old who has tried to run away from school along with other defiant behaviors; flooding that has caused families to become suddenly homeless; a student who has threatened to blow up the school; a threat of suicide; the death of a student; the sexual assault of a student by another student. Schools are experiencing crises on a daily basis. School social workers are the certified and qualified mental health professionals in a school district who can expertly respond to potential and actual crisis situations through the provision of a range of services such as:

- Interviewing parents for a psychosocial and developmental history in order to gain insight into the student's behavior;
- Developing a behavior plan to keep the student safe in school and to engage the student in academic activities;

- Facilitating referrals for parenting services, outside therapy for the parent and the child, or to a mediation program for the parents if there is conflict between them that is contributing to the child's behavior, etc.;
- Conducting a risk assessment for suicidal behavior vs. self-injurious behavior without suicidal ideation, etc. and determining the appropriate intervention, whether it be a psychiatric evaluation at the nearest facility that provides emergency mental health evaluations or working with the family to establish an outpatient treatment plan;
- Designing re-entry services when a student returns to school from a hospitalization, residential program or suspension for aggression or threatening behavior toward others; and,
- Delivering counseling when there has been a death, especially by suicide.

School social workers are highly skilled in identifying needs, strengths and gaps in present functioning of school safety and the education and training needed to implement school-wide evidence-based programs and strategies that have proven effective in preventing violent and disruptive behaviors. School social workers have the collaborative skills necessary to ensure students, teachers, parents, administrators and community members are aware of warning signs of violence and can implement effective strategies in addressing the mental health needs of the students. In a school's efforts to promote safe schools, school social workers are a critical asset in creating a positive, successful learning environment.

THE DELIVERY OF SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK SERVICES IN THE STATE OF CONNECTICUT: POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

In recent years, school districts across Connecticut have proposed an array of budgetary and programmatic changes that impact the availability and delivery of school social work services, including the reduction of the number of school social workers employed by a district resulting in staffing ratios far above recommended practice standards or the total elimination of all school social work services and transference of those work tasks to other new or existing pupil personnel service providers whose education, training and scope of practice are not interchangeable with that of a certified school social worker. CASSW has identified and highlighted in this section a few key factors to consider when undertaking decision-making that will impact school social work services.

Distinguishing School Social Workers from other Pupil Personnel Service Providers

Each board of education in Connecticut must provide "related services" as part of the continuum of special services and programs available to students with disabilities to enable such students to benefit from instruction. In accordance to the Effective School Staffing Model, championed by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), and the School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA), school social workers play an instrumental role in supporting the mission of all schools to help students reach their fullest potential so they may become contributing members of society.²¹

School Social Worker Credentials

The following certificates and their requirements are required for employment by a Board of Education in the state of Connecticut:²²

Sec. 10-145d-564 Initial Educator Certificate requirements

To receive an initial educator certificate to serve as a school social worker, the applicant shall hold a master's degree in social work from a school of social work accredited by the Council on

Social Work Education, and have completed a course of study in special education comprised of not fewer than 36 clock hours, which shall include study in understanding the growth and development of exceptional children, including handicapped and gifted and talented children and children who may require special education, and methods for identifying, planning for and working effectively with special needs children in the regular classroom.

Sec. 10-145d-565. Provisional Educator Certificate requirements

To receive a provisional educator certificate for school social worker, an applicant shall present evidence of meeting the preparation and eligibility requirements for an initial educator certificate, as well as having completed within 10 years prior to application at least 30 months of successful service as a school social worker in a public school; one school year of successful service under the initial educator certificate, interim educator certificate or durational shortage area permit at an approved nonpublic school or a nonpublic school approved by the appropriate governing body in another state.

Sec. 10-145d-566. Professional Educator Certificate requirements

To receive a professional educator certificate for school social worker, an applicant shall present evidence of 30 school months of successful service under the provisional educator certificate, interim provisional educator certificate or provisional teaching certificate. (22)

School and Community Mental Health Agency Partnerships

There are initiatives, programs, and community resources that involve partnerships between schools and community providers that school social workers play an instrumental role in bringing together. Counseling services may be a component of such agreements to promote greater access, when warranted, to more intensive psychotherapy services that address issues beyond those directly related to improving student academic performance.

People sometimes have trouble distinguishing between what a school social worker does and what a clinician in a school-based mental health clinic does. Both may provide counseling services to children individually and in groups. Both may conduct outreach to and work extensively with parents, and the work of both often includes interacting with teachers and other school staff. The crux of the difference between the two is that the work of the school social worker is undertaken with the specific and primary intent of helping children to learn.

Reimbursement for Certified School Social Work Counseling Services

In Connecticut, Medicaid is operated by the Department of Social Services, the single state agency administering the Connecticut Medical Assistance Program. The School Based Child Health Medicaid program (SBCH) is the mechanism by which the Local Educational Agency (LEA) may seek Medicaid reimbursement for Medicaid-related health-care services when provided to an eligible student pursuant to the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP). The SBCH also provides a means for LEAs to seek federal reimbursement for expenditures related to administrative activities that are included in the SBCH provider agreement that are related to the state's Medicaid program. School social workers are able to bill Medicaid for mandated IEP counseling services, returning revenue to the district.²³

Staffing Ratios

All too often school social workers spend the majority of their time exclusively in the delivery of mental health counseling to students whose IEP stipulates those services, leaving little if any time to deliver a more comprehensive array of school social work interventions to create a safe and positive social and emotional learning environment that supports the Connecticut State Department of Education's expectations for student academic achievement. It is recommended by the NASW Standards for School Social Work Services that "the local education agency should establish and implement a school social worker-to-student population ratio to ensure reasonable workload expectations. The local education agency should provide school social work services at a level that is sufficient to address the nature and

extent of student needs. Appropriate ratios for school social work staff to students depend on the characteristics and needs of the student population to be served, as well as other resources in the local education agency and community available to address these needs.

Each local or state education agency should establish adequate levels and types of school social work services on the basis of comprehensive needs assessment data. School social work services should be provided at a ratio of one school social worker to each school building serving up to 250 general education students, or a ratio of 1:250 students. When a school social worker is providing services to students with intensive needs, a lower ratio, such as 1:50, is suggested."²⁴

SUMMARY

Nearly 117,000, 14.8 percent of the children in Connecticut, live in households under the poverty level, an increase from 12.6 percent in 2008.²⁵ The report by the education advocacy group America's Promise Alliance shows Connecticut's graduation rate went from 80.9 percent in 2003 to 85 percent in 2012. But it also notes that the graduation rate among economically disadvantaged students is at 70 percent.²⁶ Students from all socioeconomic backgrounds who experience housing instability, homelessness, food insecurity, family discord, social pressures, bullying, physical disabilities, mental illness, developmental disability, abuse or neglect are at-risk for academic and behavioral difficulties.

School social workers contribute to the academic mission of schools by fostering educational environments that are safe, have supportive, fair, and responsive policies, mitigate barriers to learning, and emphasize early intervention and positive behavioral interventions. School social workers provide a critical link between school, home, and the community, helping students improve their academic achievement and social, emotional, and behavioral competence. The long term ramifications of allowing the needs of academically vulnerable students to go unaddressed in terms of dollars and cents is exponentially more costly to us as a society than committing to retain adequate ratios of social workers to meet the student needs present in our schools today. The time to invest in our children's future is now.

ENDNOTES

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Appendix A: Effective School Staffing Model: Teaming School Counselors, School Psychologists, and School Social Workers

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA), the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), and the School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA) support the mission of all schools to help students reach their fullest potential so they may become contributing members of society. To accomplish this mission, schools must ensure every student has access to a rigorous curriculum and a team of highly qualified professionals such as effective teachers and strong school leaders who can help create safe and supportive school environments. Essential components to the educational team are school counselors, school psychologists, and school social workers who help students overcome individual barriers to learning. The presence of each of these personnel, and improved student access to the assistance they provide, are essential to ensuring school and student success.

ASCA, NASP, and SSWAA understand there are real challenges in providing students with the access to assistance they need. Budgetary constraints, local site management, cultural and community norms, personnel shortages in certain geographical areas, and confusion about professional roles may have an impact on local school district and state policies and hiring configurations. Because we acknowledge that the ideal staffing model may not always be achievable currently, ASCA, NASP, and SSWAA have established a strong working relationship through which we advocate together for shared policy priorities and a larger federal investment to support increased numbers of school counseling and mental health professionals.

One example of successful collaboration and advocacy is the Framework for Safe and Successful Schools, endorsed by over 100 organizations and scholars. This policy document stresses the importance of the supports and services that school counselors, school psychologists, and school social workers provide collectively, while highlighting the specific and unique skill set of each profession. We strongly encourage you to use this document to strengthen these best practices in your state and local school districts.

The national organizations collectively will continue to promote the unique roles of school counselors, school psychologists, and school social workers and will support state and local affiliate efforts toward appropriate hiring models that recognize the role and importance of each of these professionals.

ASCA supports school counselors' efforts to help students focus on academic, career and social/emotional development so they achieve success in schools and are prepared to lead fulfilling lives as responsible members of society. ASCA provides professional development, publications and other resources, research and advocacy to professional school counselors around the globe.

NASP represents more than 25,000 school psychologists who work with students, educators, and families to support the academic achievement, positive behavior, and mental health of all students. School psychologists work with parents and educators to help shape individual and system-wide supports that provide the necessary prevention, early identification, and intervention services to ensure that all students have access to the mental health, social-emotional, behavioral, and academic supports they need to be successful in school.

SSWAA promotes the profession of school social work to enhance the educational experience of students and their families. SSWAA offers continuing professional development, supports best practices through research and evaluation, and maintains a strong public policy and advocacy presence. SSWAA supports social workers in creating linkages among schools, families, and communities to address barriers to student success and in serving the mental health needs of children and their families through early identification, prevention, intervention, counseling and support.

Appendix B: School Social Workers: A Target of Privatization

School social workers are trained professionals who are uniquely qualified to work with school systems. They provide a consistent daily presence in schools to address crisis intervention, bullying and the other multiple issues that impede student learning. They are also an integral part of the newly mandated SRBI/RtI process. They are employees of schools/boards of education and work as part of the educational team. Social workers from private agencies will only service mandated students (billable hours) and needy students who are not in special education will not receive the services they need. School social workers do not follow the medical model - diagnosis and treatment - but rather work with the "total" child.

In addition, it is notable that of all the support services in schools, social workers have been targeted for privatization. Privatization undermines the services of school social workers by removing them from local and regional school boards.

School social workers are an integral part of the school system because they are employed by the local or regional board of education. School social workers must have a direct connection to the Board of Education in order to properly deliver services and follow system protocol. Privatization severs this necessary tie.

Non-profit agencies will seek to maximize billable hours, which will reduce the amount of time the school social worker has to perform the valuable (but not billable) services of consultation with teachers and administrators, working with families, prevention and early intervention, attending staff meetings and speaking to classes.

Only Board of Education school social workers can readily have full access to the student records needed to effectively serve the needs of students, especially when a student is in crisis.

Few, if any non-profit agencies have appropriate staff to perform school social work functions, nor can privatization offer school systems continuity of staffing.

Boards of Education would be forced to develop contracts, bid out services and then have no control over which social workers will be assigned to work in their schools.

Appendix C: Sample Template Letter to School Administrators to Promote Hiring of School Social Workers

Dear _____:

School social workers are essential to students, families, schools and communities. All too often students are experiencing family discord, mental health issues, lack of basic resources (food, clothing, and shelter), physical illness, trauma, developmental disabilities, peer issues, and a lack of social skills or varied forms of abuse/neglect. We know that most of these issues affect children of all socioeconomic statuses and all have detrimental effects on student learning and achievement.

School social workers represent one of the few resources in schools for addressing personal and social problems known to interfere with students' ability to learn and to help promote an environment for students to achieve their educational goals. School social workers are critical to bridge the relationship between the school, home, and community. In doing so, school social workers are able to work with students, families, faculty, and administration to improve students' academic achievement and social, emotional, and behavioral competencies.

School social work services ensure that students are mentally, physically, and emotionally present in the classroom, promote respect and dignity for all students and enhance the learning environment. This is achieved, in part, by providing

- Counseling and crisis intervention that address social, emotional, and mental health needs to ensure better school outcomes;
- Case management to coordinate delivery of and access to appropriate school social work services;
- Assistance to teachers in designing behavioral interventions and classroom management strategies;
- Home visits to meet the family of students in need of social work services in the home environment;
- Connections between students, families, schools, and communities to promote attendance and address causes of poor attendance. [Truancy is intrinsically linked to many of the problem issues present in schools today including poor academic performance and delinquent behaviors]; and,
- Prevention services, such as classroom lessons on topics in the social-emotional domain.

School social workers' unique person-in-environment approach and critical skill set are well suited to addressing truancy and its root causes, as well as the other social-emotional issues, thus enabling the school to continue its focus on the primary mission of effectively educating students. Securing such services in your school promotes prevention, prompt identification and intervention of conditions/ situations that impede academic achievement, promotes a safe and positive learning environment, and establishes access to a certified mental health provider for students in need.

If you have any questions or would like to learn more about the role of school social workers and how your students can benefit from access such services, please contact _____.

Respectfully,

Name, Credentials, Title

Appendix D: Sample Personal Letter to the Board of Education on Cuts to School Social Work Services

Dear Members of the _____ Board of Education:

As an educator in the _____ School District, I would like to respectfully request that you reconsider the elimination of school social workers from the budget. School social workers serve a unique and vital role in our schools that cannot be eliminated or replaced. Their extensive knowledge of education, school dynamics, the communities and cultures they serve are inherent to their unique training.

Within our schools, they support teachers by performing social, emotional and environmental assessments on students in need; consulting with teachers on the most effective strategies and participating in the creation of data driven interventions that directly impact student's academic performance and the classroom as a whole. They develop and implement school wide curriculum and programs that align with our NASW Standards and support student's emotional development, thus ensuring we proactively build a healthy school climate for ALL children. In addition, when the district is faced with a crisis, the school social workers' unique training, expertise and certification as a mental health provider allows them to provide counseling, crisis intervention, classroom strategies, and teacher support ensuring timely and successful outcomes.

School social workers have their greatest impact on those we have the most difficulty reaching. More of our children than we would like to admit come to school each day hungry, tired, unmotivated, angry, scared, and even abused. This is before they even set foot in our doors. There are many, who, as a result of these environmental stressors don't come to school at all. Our teachers work hard every day to educate children to their greatest potential, but many students in _____ District cannot achieve that potential because of these barriers, ultimately, affecting the entire student body and school community.

It is our school social workers who are uniquely prepared to identify the needs of at risk youth, provide services to address such needs, and act as the connective tissue to community supports. Based upon their relationships with the students, parents, and community providers, they have a great deal of insight into effective interventions. They successfully advocate through red tape to put supports in place outside of school and follow through. They create trust in a parent who may be fearful of the system due to prior negative experiences. They meet parents where they are emotionally and engage them in the process. They get consent forms signed, arrange for parents to come to conferences, or provide a child with a pair of glasses when needed. They support a parent with taking the difficult step of hospitalizing a child for mental illness, or redirecting a gang-recruited child into an afterschool or summer program and can offer a disenfranchised teenager a path to come back to school. They follow-up and follow through, so that community resources work effectively and school resources are not wasted.

School social workers perform, inside and outside of the school day, all of the "small steps" that build student strengths and help them to meet the school standards. These small steps result in big impacts on the health of our schools. This is a unique service that cannot be lost or compensated for by other means, especially in a district of our need and current level of crisis. Please support the reinstatement of school social workers to our budget.

Respectfully,

Name, Credentials, Title

Appendix E: Sample Testimony/Statement to the Board of Education

Hello, my name is _____ and I am here to testify about the proposed school social work cuts. It is often thought that school social workers maintain a role that is unilateral with community based mental health services. However, school social work is a specialized field in the area of education whose function is to assist students in meeting the learning standards. The services that school social workers provide align directly with the learning standards of the _____ School District. Services are designed to build social, emotional, and coping skills that allow students to perform to their highest academic level. What makes school social workers unique from their peers is that they are the only Pupil Personnel Service professionals who are also required to develop a knowledge base and skills in the broader areas of mental health and community services. This is an important distinction that has multiple positive outcomes in school districts, particularly in those which serve high-risk populations such as _____ School District.

Scientific Research Based Interventions

As you are aware, Connecticut is requiring its school districts to implement research-based intervention programs such as SRBI as a means of developing more efficient and effective means of targeting and supporting students at risk. SRBI encompasses both academic and social behaviors as both significantly impact the students' abilities to perform their best in school. School social workers currently serve a vital function on the SRBI team as they are able to provide a comprehensive and systems-based assessment of student need and develop specific interventions that target those needs. Their professional knowledge of community and family systems allows them to determine quickly what needs can best be met through outside resources, and they have the established community connections to swiftly implement these resources and establish family commitment. This ensures that district resources are not wasted on interventions that can best be met elsewhere, or interventions based on inaccurate assumptions regarding a student's mental health or behavioral needs.

Reimbursement for Services

School social workers are one of the few school professionals who can return funding to the school districts they serve because their counseling services are reimbursable by Medicaid.

School Violence

Due to their experience and expertise in the provision of mental health services and their extensive reach into the communities, school social workers are highly equipped to create interventions that address school violence. They are trained in culturally competent practice and are sensitive to the degree to which culture impacts beliefs and behavior. School social workers understand the link between family, community, and schools and are active in the communities in which they serve. They serve on youth boards, participate in local events and have formed connections with local agencies, churches, community centers and law enforcement, while working with them on ways to come together to address violence. Many have specific training in addressing gang violence and have built trusted relationships with students that allow them to avert violent acts on a regular basis.

Versatility

Our district is a diverse district, and each school has varied and specific needs. What makes school social workers distinct and cost-effective is that their broad knowledge base and practice allows them to tailor their curriculum and interventions to meet the populations in which they serve. They perform school needs assessments and can target their interventions and coordinate their responsibilities to make the biggest impact on that school's needs, whether it be school violence, attendance concerns, special education compliance, family involvement, or cultural understanding. School social workers are frequently involved in high-impact programs that address mandates for special education or for at-risk populations. They have the versatility to address prevention and intervention simultaneously, which results in fewer high-level (and high cost) interventions and referrals to special education. Many at-risk students are given a higher level of intervention based upon a lack of resources, understanding of environmental factors or

appropriate creative plans to meet their needs. With their combined clinical skills, knowledge of culture and community, and connection to resources, school social workers are uniquely able to create programs and services in school that address the whole child and envelop high risk students in a school culture of positive behaviors that impacts everyone. This strengthens at-risk students, connects them to their peers and identifies students in need earlier, so that high level interventions can be prevented or lessened.

Attendance

Children who do not attend school regularly not only suffer academically, but are proven to be at a significantly higher risk of delinquency and violence. School social workers are regularly tasked with attendance monitoring and engagement with truant students. It is a vital job function of many of our school social workers, and current research shows a high correlation between absenteeism and dropout rates.

IEP Counseling

School Psychologists and school social workers have a vital partnership in the schools because they combine the school psychologist's educational evaluative skills with the school social worker's expertise in systems and community supports to address the needs of the whole child. School social workers are able to bill Medicaid for mandated IEP counseling services, returning revenue to the district.

As you can see, I have iterated for you the broad spectrum of vital tasks performed by school social workers, and as such, I respectfully request you recognize their critical importance in the district, and therefore, reevaluate the district's budget.

Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully,
Name, Credentials, Title

Appendix F: Sample Letter to the Editor Regarding Proposed Cuts to School Social Workers

The _____ District Board of Education's proposed elimination of school social workers in the district as a cost saving measure would remove a vital safety net for its students. School social workers contribute to the academic mission of schools by fostering educational environments that are safe; have supportive, fair, and responsive policies; mitigate barriers to learning; and emphasize early intervention and positive behavioral interventions. School social workers provide a critical link between school, home, and the community; helping students improve their academic achievement and social, emotional, and behavioral competence.

A common misperception is that the services performed by school social workers can be assumed by guidance counselors, school psychologists or other pupil personnel services (PPS) providers. However the training of school social workers and their unique role as the interface between the student, the school, and the community cannot be replicated. In addition, mental health counseling services provided by school social workers are in certain circumstances reimbursable by Medicaid, thus offering the opportunity to bring in revenue to the district.

While I recognize the tough fiscal decisions the district is currently facing, the long term ramifications of allowing the needs of academically vulnerable students to go unaddressed in terms of dollars and cents is exponentially more costly to us as a town than committing to retain adequate ratios of social workers to meet the student needs present in our schools today. The time to invest in our children's future is now. I strongly urge these decisions to be made with consideration of best practices in education and with the well-being of students as the highest priority.

Respectfully submitted by,

Name, Credentials

Address & Contact information

Appendix G: Sample Letter to the Editor Promoting School Social Workers

Name
Address

Dear _____:

School social workers are essential to students, families, schools and communities. All too often students are experiencing family discord, mental health issues, lack of basic resources (food, clothing, and shelter), physical illness, trauma, developmental disabilities, peer issues, and a lack of social skills or varied forms of abuse/neglect. We know that most of these issues affect children of all socio-economic statuses, and all have detrimental effects on student learning and achievement.

School social workers represent one of the few resources in schools for addressing personal and social problems known to interfere with students' ability to learn and to help promote an environment for students to achieve their educational goals. School social workers are critical to bridge the relationship between the school, home, and community. In doing so, school social workers are able to work with students, families, faculty, and administration to improve students' academic achievement and social, emotional, and behavioral competencies.

School social work services ensure that students are mentally, physically, and emotionally present in the classroom, promote respect and dignity for all students and enhance the learning environment. This is achieved, in part, by providing: counseling and crisis intervention, case management, addressing psychosocial needs to ensure better school outcomes, assistance to teachers in designing behavioral interventions and classroom management strategies, home visits, liaison between the school and community resources to meet students' needs, and prevention services such as classroom lessons on topics in the social-emotional domain.

School social workers' unique person-in-environment approach and critical skill set are well suited to addressing social-emotional issues thus enabling the school to continue its focus on the primary mission of effectively educating students. Securing such services in your school promotes prevention, prompt identification and intervention of conditions/situations that impede academic achievement, and ensures a safe and positive learning environment.

While school districts are tasked with tough fiscal decisions, the long term ramifications of allowing the needs of academically vulnerable students to go unaddressed in terms of dollars and cents is exponentially more costly to a town than committing to retain adequate ratios of social workers to meet the student needs present in schools today. In light of this, school social workers also generate revenues for school districts through such items as general state aids, Medicaid reimbursement, and promotion of free-reduced lunch applications to eligible families where otherwise school districts may be burdened with the costs of unpaid fees, and attaining and administering grants through the Department of Public Instruction and other organizations. These grants fund programs and services that the school district would not otherwise be able to provide.

In accordance to the National Association of Social Work, school social work services should be provided at a ratio of one school social worker to each school building serving up to 250 general education students, or a ratio of 1:250 students. According to the National Mental Health Association, less than 1 in 5 of the 12.5 million children in need of mental health services actually receive them. The Child Health and Development Institute of Connecticut, the Sandy Hook Advisory Commission and the Keep the Promise Coalition all have endorsed expansion of school social work services to address the mental health needs of school children. As you may know, the Avon Public School District Administration fired all

four of their school social workers and replaced them with school psychologists over the summer, despite public outcry.

At a time when school safety and security is on all of our minds, please know that school social workers are part of the answer to secure schools.

Respectfully,

Connecticut Association of School Social Workers