School Social Work Association of America
Resolution Statement

School Social Workers' Role in Addressing Students'
Mental Health Needs and Increasing Academic Achievement

School social workers provide mental health services in schools and have specialized training to meet students' social-emotional needs. Schools often are one of the first places where mental health issues are recognized and addressed (Eklund, Meyer, Splett, & Weist, 2020; Lyon & Bruns, 2019). 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. (Kelly, Thompson, Frey, Klemp, Alvarez, & Berzin, 2015; Massat, Kelly, & Constable, 2016). In a 2008 survey of school social workers, only 11 percent of respondents reported all or most students on their caseloads received counseling or therapeutic services outside of school (Kelly, Berzin, et al., 2010), and recent survey work has indicated that school social workers often continue to be the main (or only) clinical contact that many students and families have (Kelly, et al., 2015; Thompson, Frey, & Kelly, 2019).

Training and qualifications of School Social Workers

SSWAA supports the NASW School Social Work Standards that recommend school social workers have master's degrees in social work. School social workers have special expertise in understanding family and community systems and linking students and their families with community services essential to promote student success (Kelly et al., 2015; Phillippo & Blosser, 2013; Shaffer & Fisher, 2017). 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 (Gherardi, & Whittlesey-Jerome, 2018; Richard, Monroe, & Garand, 2019; Teasley, Archuleta, & Miller, 2014). They work to remedy 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 dropping out of school, such as homeless, foster, and migrant children, students transitioning between school and treatment programs or 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 (Massat et al., 2016; Shaffer & Fisher, 2017).

The role of the school social worker as outlined in the SSWAA School Social Work National Practice Model includes:

- Provision of evidence-based education, behavior, and mental health services.
- Promotion of a school climate and culture conducive to student learning and teaching excellence.
- Maximization of access to school-based and community-based resources (Frey et al., 2012; Kelly et al., 2016; SSWAA, 2013).

The Critical Need for School-Based Mental Health Services

Research indicates between 18-20 percent of students have mental health issues significant enough to cause impairment to major life functions (Lyon & Bruns, 2019), yet only one in five receives the necessary services (Eklund et al., 2020; Kelly et al., 2015). 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 (Massat et al., 2016; Teasley, et al., 2017; 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 (Lyon & Bruns, 2019; Teasley et al., 2017; Wegmann, Powers, Swick, & Watkins, C. S., 2017)

School social workers design and implement school-based programs to promote a positive school climate among all students. They work with the entire student body to identify students in need of more intensive interventions and connect these students to additional services in the community where needed (Iachini, Berkowitz, Moore, Pitner, Astor, & Benbenishty, 2017; Kelly et al., 2016; Thompson et al., 2019). School social workers also 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 additionally 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 (Kelly et al., 2016; Massat et al., 2016; Thompson et al., 2019).

Implementing Multi-tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS)

The most effective way to implement integrated services that support school safety and student learning is through a school-wide multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS). In a growing number of schools across the country, response to intervention (RTI) and positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS) constitute the primary methods for implementing an MTSS framework. School social workers are well-positioned to help lead these efforts.

Effective MTSS requires:
- Adequate access to school-employed specialized instructional support personnel (e.g., school social workers, school counselors, school psychologists, and school nurses) and community-based services;
- Integration of services, including mental health, behavioral, and academic supports and school-based and community services;
- Adequate staff time for planning and problem solving;
- Effective collection, evaluation, interpretation, and use of data; and,
- Patience, commitment, and strong leadership. (Avant & Lindsey, 2015; Kelly, 2014; Kelly, Frey, Alvarez, Berzin, Shaffer, & O'Brien, 2010; Lucio, Campbell, & Kelly, 2020)

Integrating Services through Collaboration and a Multi-Disciplinary Approach

Many professionals within a school help to support students' positive mental health. These include school social workers, school counselors, school psychologists, school nurses, and other specialized instructional support personnel (SISP) (Anderson-Butcher, Hoffman, Rochman, & Fuller, 2017; Kelly & Lueck, 2011). School-employed mental health professionals serve in critical leadership roles related to school safety, positive school climate, and providing school-based mental health services. School social workers offer

their unique training and expertise to link mental health, behavior, environmental factors (e.g., family, classroom, school, and community), instruction, and learning together to create safe and successful learning environments. This is done by school social workers fostering collaboration among school staff and community-based service providers while also integrating existing initiatives in the school. Integrated services lead to more sustainable and comprehensive school improvement, reduce duplicative efforts and redundancy, and require leadership by the principal and a commitment from the entire staff (Iachini et al., 2017; Massat et al., 2016; Thompson et al., 2019).

The School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA) empowers school social workers and promotes the profession to enhance the social and emotional growth and academic outcomes of all students. We envision school social work as a valued, integral part of the education of all children, connecting schools, families, and communities. We work to promote legislative policies at the federal level that encourage states and school districts to include school social workers in their school improvement efforts and overall mission to support the academic success of their students.

Approved by the Board of Directors, 05/05/2020

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