



## **School Social Work Association of America Resolution Statement**

### **The Impact of School Social Workers during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

In this time of crisis, the critical services that school social workers provide are more important than ever. The Great Depression which began with the crash of the stock market of 1929 and lasted until 1939 financially impacted school districts similarly to how COVID-19 is affecting school budgets right now. Where schools were once seen as just a place for education, the Depression moved schools into the epicenter of resources and assistance for families and school social workers were on the frontline to meet those needs. They rose to the challenge of procuring food resources, meeting clothing needs, addressing child welfare concerns, and providing mental health supports to parents experiencing the trauma of economic devastation. School social workers are again being called to the front lines to assist families with resources, mental health supports, and trauma informed care during the current pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected all stakeholders throughout the PreK-12 public educational system and has increased already existing educational and societal inequalities. School social workers have been called upon to provide a continuum of support to students, their families and educational communities who are struggling with increased physical, emotional, and mental health needs such job loss, death of family members or loved ones, and ongoing uncertainty and instability. School social workers are also assisting their communities by bringing specialized skills in networking and resource procurement to those who are dealing with social isolation. Additionally, school social workers are critical points of contact within a school district offering support to teachers and school staff who must address their own needs and distress.

School social workers are uniquely trained to navigate the myriad of issues resulting from this health crisis and are prepared to meet the increased demands for services. The impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic has created needs in all areas of the lives of students and their families. For example as families struggle with loss of income, there is elevated household stress, often less food available, and intensifying anxiety. School social workers are trained to address student's readiness for education by mitigating the traumatic impact of this crisis on mental health and the disruption of education in the foreseeable future by helping families find food, secure safe and suitable housing, and meeting basic needs. The reality is that school social workers will be continuing to address these needs long after students have returned to school.

These are difficult times as each member of our community tries to navigate new and old daily challenges. It is also important to recognize that there will be long lasting impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on the social, economic, physical and emotional well-being for all students, their families and staff. School social workers can play an important role while navigating the current challenges, but also in preparing for the challenges of returning to school in the fall. There are key areas where school social workers are able to create a lasting impact, because of their specialized training and education in system navigation, mental health and advocacy:

1. **Families Basic Needs:** Many families are struggling with access to even the basic needs such as safety, income, food, lack of internet, or ability to pay rent. Not only is this an immediate concern but it also raises the level of stress for families and students. Until basic needs are met, students are unable to focus on school and learning. School social workers have knowledge of and relationships with local communities and can link families to needed resources.
2. **Mental Health Needs:** Social isolation, dramatic changes in routine and uncertainty about the future, all create stress for families. These challenges are amplified by a lack of access to regular mental health care. These unmet needs can impact student engagement and interrupt learning. Providing access and connection to tele-mental health services and engaging youth and their families in finding culturally responsive services during this time is a way that school social workers help address the social and emotional needs of students.
3. **Supporting Teachers & Staff:** While the impact on students can be more obvious, teachers, staff, and their families may also be struggling to adjust. The stress from having to abruptly learn and transition to a new online platform for teaching can impact one's health and/or mental health. As teachers engage their students and listen to their struggles, it is also possible they will experience vicarious trauma and need assistance to effectively respond to and support students. Thus, teaching strategies and helping colleagues engage in self-care can go a long way in assisting teachers and staff maintain a healthy balance and continue to be present for their students.
4. **Supporting Family Stability:** When families are isolated and sheltering in place, there can be an increased risk of child abuse/neglect and domestic violence. The stress of being isolated together combined with the inability to leave and seek help are two potential risk factors. School social workers are specifically trained in responding to families dealing with extreme environmental stress. Creating community connections, linking students and families to resources and providing opportunities for those who are experiencing these issues to seek help will be more important than ever in helping students to be safe and stable.
5. **Student Engagement:** Unfortunately, some of our students are "missing in action" and are not accessing their online education. Other students are showing up in their classes but are struggling with motivation to engage in assignments and learning. This creates short term and long-term impacts on their academic trajectories. Using a Multi-Tiered Systems of Support approach school social workers are well versed in engaging students in community (Tier 1), family and group (Tier 2) and individualized interventions (Tier 3) which will re-engage these lost students.
6. **Grief, Loss, and Trauma Informed Care:** Many families and school personnel will experience the loss of someone they know and love. This is coupled with the grieving that many youth will experience at the loss of rituals such as prom, graduation, and simply being their friends is compounded by the intense social isolation. Each of these instances can carry over into schools long after the pandemic has passed. These enduring effects must be treated with a trauma informed approach that school social workers are trained in and leaders in implementing nationally.
7. **Addressing Inequities:** The SSWAA National School Social Work Practice Model calls on school social workers to attend to issues of educational access, equity, and advocacy. School social workers are uniquely positioned to support the creation of more responsive systems in the schools that address the needs of families such as those whose primary language is not English; understand the additional identity and historical trauma of students of color disproportionately impacted by deaths, unemployment, housing, and environmental issues; and help students and families access resources both within the school and in the community.

Many school districts in the country will suffer negative financial impacts from the crisis and their response to COVID-19. While addressing budgetary challenges will be a priority, it must also be balanced

with meeting the significant social and emotional needs that students will bring with them when they return in the fall. Research has repeatedly shown that students affected by trauma, poverty and mental health issues are unable to access learning and engage in school. No doubt when we return, we will all have been impacted to some degree but some students and staff will be experiencing the results of serious prolonged exposure to trauma and scarcity. Responding to this is something that school social workers have explicit and specialized training in, as well as skills to assist students and their families in accessing the resources, support and help that will enable them to re-engage in school. Reducing funding for school social work positions will only result in compounding these issues and ultimately costing districts millions more in lost instructional time and teacher burnout.

We must prioritize mental health support if we expect our students to truly recover and regain skills from the lost in-class instruction time. School districts and educational personnel throughout this country are facing a challenge unlike anything in our history, but by coming together as school staff and communities and focusing on the whole child we can meet it and potentially create an educational system that is better able to meet the needs of all students. Thus, school social workers expertise in crisis intervention and postvention have positioned them as vital leaders in supporting the needs of the entire school community.

**Approved by the Board of Directors, 5/11/2020**

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