

March 13, 2017

Dear Chair Doherty and Members of the House Education Committee,

House Bill 2658 is an important step in establishing systems to support school social workers in public schools. School social workers are an important part of behavioral health and school teams, providing a critical role and perspective for our youth. School social workers are trained to intervene with individuals, families, and systems, providing a different lens than other behavioral health practitioners.

Schools are some of the only institutions that must serve our most vulnerable youth and families, which means they provide not just education, but also help meet students' basic needs. Schools are faced with increasing responsibility with regards to educating our youth. The role of the school has changed from simply an educational institution to a place where youth and families come to meet their most basic needs. School social workers are especially important in schools with high poverty and high rates of traumatic experiences. School social workers are needed to address mental health and systematic barriers for youth and families.

For over five years, I served as a community partner working in schools both in Milwaukie, Oregon and in Denver, Colorado. As a community partner, social workers were imperative to social service work. Their lens focused on community assessment, systems assessment, and individual assessment. They understand that people must be met where they are and have a pulse on the community. They are trained in home visits and intervention with families, making them comfortable working with families who have experienced generational poverty or trauma. School social workers have a pulse on the community in ways other professionals do not; they've known exactly which family needed which intervention when resources were made available. They are constantly assessing the needs of individual students and the needs of their communities.

The trauma-informed approaches used by social workers in schools is different from what I have seen other behavioral health professionals employ. School social workers focus on the *why* behind the behaviors instead of focusing only on the symptom of the behavior. Rather than simply addressing attendance, school social workers employ preventative approaches that address systematic barriers that affect communities and individuals.

The school where I work now (as an employee and as an intern in a school social work program) uses trauma-informed approaches under the direction of a school social worker. These approaches have focused on staff self-care related to their experiences of vicarious trauma. Implementing these approaches has changed the culture and morale of our staff. We have data to show that the environment and satisfaction of staff is higher this year; this culture shift positively impacts youth and families' experiences.

Thinking outside of a typical education box, the school social worker has implemented a variety of interventions to address the needs of the community. In addition to her required role of implementing social emotional learning, sexual abuse prevention curriculum, and providing behavioral support, the school social worker provides an important lens to the work at school through individual, group, and system-level interventions. These interventions include: four mentor programs, weekly community meetings, process therapy groups for youth, a weekend food program, an afterschool program, family classes (like English or Zumba), parent leadership initiatives, involvement in community neighborhood coalitions, one-on-one trauma-informed coaching sessions with teachers, and mindful curriculum. These approaches are rooted in trauma-informed care where relationships are emphasized and communities can heal.

Please vote in support of House Bill 2658 in an effort to provide more youth access to school social workers.

Sincerely,

Annie Schlegel
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Former Site Manager for Community School Initiatives in Colorado & Oregon