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School of Social Work

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March 23, 2017

Dear Chair Roblan and Members of the Committee,

Portland State University School of Social Work supports SB 278. SB 278 will provide a mechanism for school districts to add licensed school social workers to the team of professionals addressing the needs of students. This pilot program will provide funds for school districts to hire school social workers, and the outcome data will provide evidence on the impact of these funds.

School social workers bring expertise in the areas of trauma informed practice, mental health and substance abuse intervention, as well as an understanding of how family, cultural and community factors impact student success.

**Professional social workers are integral to the success of Oregon schools and students.**

School social workers are a vital element in national efforts to increase school success for K-12 students. Social workers are trained to provide interdisciplinary interventions to students, families, educators and communities that increase student academic achievement and psychosocial functioning in the school setting.

**Challenges Facing Oregon Schools**

**Higher needs and fewer resources** – According to the 2014 National School Social Work Survey, students seen by Oregon social workers have greater needs than the national average based on higher involvement with special education, community mental health, child welfare and juvenile justice services. Oregon school social workers note that large caseloads and restrictions of their role by administrators or district policy were challenges to serving more students ([Portrait of Oregon School Social Workers Findings from the National School Social Work Survey 2014](#)).

**Unmet mental health needs** – Research suggests that 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 necessary services (Kaffenberger, Seligman, 2007). Students with untreated mental health issues may develop more significant problems, which can greatly impact their educational experience and result in poor educational outcomes. (Erford, Newsome & Rock, 2007). Using the Effective School Staffing Model, the School Social Work Association of America recommends a ratio of 1 school social worker per 250 students ([School Social Work Association of America](#)).

**Chronic absenteeism** – [The Chronic Absenteeism Report](#) (2016) commissioned by Oregon’s Chief Education Office and coauthored by Dr. Ann Curry-Stevens, PSU School of Social Work faculty, noted Oregon has one of the highest levels of chronic absenteeism. One in five Oregon students routinely misses more than 10 percent of their school days, which increases in high school and contributes to 26 percent of students not graduating on time. Students of color, students with disabilities and students living in poverty are at the greatest risk for absenteeism. Some of the recommendations to address this problem are:

- Increase educator professional development and support with respect to building culturally responsive and sustaining practices in school communities.
- Increase the number of meaningful partnerships between schools/districts and community-based organizations, especially culturally specific organizations.
- Revise policies and procedures to eliminate discipline disparities.

**Impact of trauma** – The Oregon legislature and the Oregon Health Authority have recognized the impact of psychological trauma on health, mental health and school outcomes. House Bill 4002 (2016) “requires professional development and support for school staff ... to create a culture in the district and community that is informed about how to understand, recognize and respond to trauma.” Trauma Informed Oregon, based in the PSU School of Social Work, which is the statewide collaboration developed to promote and sustain trauma informed care, currently provides the core professional training around the state on trauma informed practices.

**Social Workers are uniquely trained to collaborate with other school professionals to address these challenges.**

Portland State University School of Social Work prepares masters-level social workers (MSW) around the state, and since 2011 has a school social work specialization that leads to the Teacher Standards and Practices Commission (TSPC) initial School Social Worker license. Social workers are trained to assess and intervene on the individual, family, community and organizational levels and to provide linkages between communities, schools, families and students that promote student success.

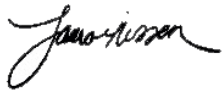
PSU’s MSW Program aims to prepare graduates for initial school social worker licensing and for effective professional practice as school social workers. Guided by an ecological framework, social work values and a commitment to culturally responsive, effective and efficient practice, the School Social Worker curriculum is designed to build competencies related to working with students, families, schools, communities and the larger society. The aim of school social work is to improve educational outcomes for students by: (1) removing structural barriers to learning; (2) increasing collaboration among schools, families and communities; and (3) creating relationships with and among students, families and communities that will promote positive functioning. In addition, students complete 1,000 hours of field practicum, 500 hours in a K-12 school setting and 500 hours in a community-based agency serving children, youth and families.

School social workers are key to the multi-tiered systems of support. As collaborators with other professionals, they are situated to address school culture, as well as the individual, family and community issues that impact school success. School social workers can:

- Work across disciplines to support student success
- Identify and address student mental health issues
- Identify and address family and environmental factors that impact school success
- Develop meaningful, culturally specific partnerships with families and communities
- Assess organizational structures and policies for their cultural responsiveness
- Assess and advocate for policies to address racial disparities
- Educate staff about and implement trauma informed practices
- Intervene to support students and families living in poverty
- Utilize evidence-based prevention and intervention strategies to address psychosocial factors that impact student outcomes

We urge the Oregon Senate Committee on Education to support SB 278. Oregon school districts need to have choices for how best to meet the needs of their children and families.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Laura Burney Nissen". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "L" and "B".

Dr. Laura Burney Nissen, PhD  
Dean and Professor  
Portland State University School of Social Work