



Testimony in Support of SB 278

The Roles and Benefits of School Social Workers

School districts across the country, including in neighboring Washington and California, are increasing the number of school social workers, due in part to the wave of research on the impact of trauma on student achievement, attendance, and negative health outcomes. Unfortunately, in the state of Oregon, schools have no or very few school social workers to support students experiencing trauma and other barriers to school performance. It is encouraging to see bills like SB 278 coming forward to begin to address the need for more social work services in schools.

School Social Work License

Though many states nationwide have a certification license in school social work, Oregon only recently began issuing this license. Starting in 2010, the Teacher Standards and Practices Commission began a school social worker licensing program in an effort to support the institution of school social workers in Oregon schools. The number of individuals acquiring this license is growing, and Portland State University has developed a rigorous program to support school social work training.

Multidisciplinary Approach

Schools need the multidisciplinary team of school social workers, school psychologists, school counselors, and school nurses, as each possesses special expertise critical to student success. We acknowledge there is certainly some overlap in training; however, school social workers employ a wider lens than other disciplines. School social workers are clinically trained mental health professionals with a more systems approach. While school counselors have expertise in academic advising and school psychologists are well-trained diagnosticians, school social workers are armed with systemic skills to understand and intervene across all levels (school, home, community) to effectively address barriers to school success (poverty, homelessness, addiction, violence, etc.). School social workers are highly skilled at assessing students' mental health and trauma related needs, employing prevention and early intervention strategies, and applying deeper therapeutic skills that put students on the path to success. Students need the benefit of each of these professionals. When budgets are tight and schools have to make tough choices, hiring policies should be more flexible to ensure there are school social workers available to meet the needs of students and families.

Roles of the School Social Worker Vary

Unlike other disciplines, including school psychologists, school nurses, and school counselors, school social workers' wide range of expertise allows them to fulfill many different types of positions in school settings. ***Sometimes their role may be very specific***, like that of an attendance counselor, school-based mental health therapist, autism specialist, or homeless liaison. Often these positions cover a large number of schools and students. Though these roles are very important, it is not enough to provide the critical social services that the majority of students today need in schools.

At the **high school and middle school level**, there is often more than one social service position, and it is easier for a school to use limited funding allotted to support a multidisciplinary team where a social worker fulfills a ***more generalist social service role***. This is critically important at the high school level. School counselors are responsible for scheduling, credit monitoring, college preparation, and academic advising and often do not have the time available to deal with issues related to trauma that may be interfering with students' school success. School social workers are invaluable at this level to catch the unseen students and truly attend to the deep issues that present barriers to achievement and graduation. Even so, there are still few school social workers filling these positions at the middle and high school level, and even those who do are not usually seen as a member of the school culture. Because of the high staff to student ratio, the school social worker is more often viewed as a "visiting" position or occasional visitor without the time to build the relationships necessary with the general population.

At the **elementary level**, it is critical to have a multidisciplinary team where intervening early could prevent the conditions causing dropout before even reaching the secondary level. There is often only room for **one** general social service position in schools due to budget constraints. School social workers have been prevented from filling these positions, despite their expertise in working with students in Title 1 schools, where multiple social and mental health factors impeding a student's success could be positively addressed through social work services.

Benefits of School Social Workers as Primary Team Members in K-12 schools

To accomplish effective social work interventions, students and families need a regular presence in the school—a trusting relationship with a trained, skilled school social worker. Having a school social worker housed in a central office or responsible for huge numbers of students and schools prevents the development of this trusting relationship. Not having these positions in one building prevents them from contributing to the policies, climate, and culture of a school. ***Such circumstances also prevent them from having the time and presence in the buildings to develop the relationships necessary with educational staff, especially in Title I***

schools where staff need support to manage secondary trauma. Being an integral part of the day-to-day workings of a school is necessary to assess and eliminate barriers to student achievement as a result of trauma, systemic, and other mental health conditions. In fact, the School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA) recommends a maximum ratio of one Master of Social Work (MSW) level school social worker to 250 general education students or one school social worker per building serving 250 students or fewer. This recommendation is consistent with the roles and functions of the profession as delineated in the SSWAA School Social Work National Practice Model (2013).

Oregon Schools Need Social Work Services

Oregon's schools should pay attention to the national trend of increasing services that address multi-systemic barriers related to mental health, trauma, poverty, systemic oppression, and other environmental factors. Further study is needed to ensure kids and families have the most appropriate social service professionals supporting them. It is this basic motivation that underlies our support of SB 278 and others that increase social work services in schools.