

A Collective Responsibility: Addressing the School Social Worker Shortage

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Author's Note:

The Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy, and Practice's dedicated School Social Work Program of Study (POS) factored large in my decision to attend the University of Chicago. Once I arrived, I was surprised to learn that this POS was relatively small in size and how few Crown Family School students intern with Chicago Public Schools each year. Given the nationwide shortage of school-based social workers, I believe there is an urgency to identify and dismantle the barriers that keep people from pursuing the field. My hope is to draw attention to this pressing workforce issue and spark conversation here at the Crown Family School and beyond around the role we can all play in ensuring our schools have the necessary staffing to support students' mental health needs.

Abstract

Given their proximity to students, school social workers play a critical role in supporting the well-being of youth. As mental health awareness has grown, so has the demand for school-based social workers. Due to an existing shortage of such professionals, however, and the current challenges to hiring more, access to mental health care continues to be limited or nonexistent in many schools across the United States. This paper positions this persistent workforce problem as a collective responsibility, outlining the engagement demanded from a broad range of actors, specifically school districts, government agencies, and social work education programs. Working together, they can strategically reduce barriers to entering the field

and ultimately diversify and expand the ranks of the school social work profession.

Spurred largely by the onset of COVID-19, there has been a great deal of conversation around the role school districts can play in addressing the mental health needs of their students. In communities across the country, the pandemic exacerbated already existing shortages in the mental healthcare workforce (Simpson, 2023). In December 2021, US Surgeon General Vivek Murthy issued a rare public health advisory calling for swift action to address the ongoing youth mental health crisis (OSG, 2021). A more recent report from the Centers on Disease Control and Prevention found that teen girls and LGBTQ+ teens are “experiencing extremely high levels of mental distress, violence, and substance use” (CDC, 2023). More than 1 in 4 girls and half of LGBTQ+ teens reported they seriously considered attempting suicide in 2021. In response to these alarming findings, the CDC has called for increased access to mental health services and identified schools as uniquely positioned to provide such resources to students.

The Surgeon General’s advisory problematized the current provider-to-student ratios within schools and specifically called for the expansion of the school-based mental health workforce. Schools, after all, are an existing touch point to youth and families. Obstacles that keep families from seeking care, such as transportation and scheduling, are less salient in schools with adequate staffing. School-based social workers can provide a wide range of services to students at no cost to families. Unfortunately, the efforts of school districts have been hindered by a shortage of mental health professionals interested and equipped to serve in schools. One school hiring a social worker often means “poaching” one from another school or agency (Wiener, 2022), leaving far too many students with limited or no access to care.

Federal relief dollars made available during the pandemic did enable school districts to make substantial investments in their mental health infrastructure. While some districts did utilize these monies to

hire additional staff, including school social workers (AASA, 2022), many have found recruitment challenging. In a recent survey, schools cited “insufficient mental health professional staff coverage” and “inadequate access to licensed mental health professionals” as the primary factors limiting their ability to effectively provide mental health services to students (Panchal et al., 2022). The Los Angeles Unified School District, for example, set aside \$177 million dollars in the 2021–22 school year to hire nearly 900 social workers and support staff, but by the start of the following school year, had filled just one-third of the positions (Esquivel, 2022).

In order to develop and sustain a workforce pipeline that reflects the needs in schools, longstanding obstacles to pursuing school social work as a career should be addressed. Central among these barriers are the educational costs related to becoming a school-based social worker. Given that the well-being of children is a collective responsibility, school districts, social work programs, and government agencies need to thoughtfully examine the role they can and should play in expanding and diversifying the ranks of the school social work profession—indeed, the development of a workforce that is prepared to serve K-12 students includes a need for social workers who reflect the populations being served, not just increasing sheer numbers.

The costs related to becoming a school social worker create a sizeable barrier to growing the ranks of the profession. The majority of states require a master’s degree to serve as a school-based social worker, and in turn, most prospective candidates face a multi-year process that can cost tens or even hundreds of thousands of dollars (Mumm & Bye, 2011). Social work students must also intern in the field and fulfill a set number of work hours to graduate, labor that is rarely compensated. A recent survey of University of Michigan social work students found that 67% took out loans to finance their education and 73% worked outside of their field placement to financially support themselves (Rich, 2022). This model serves as a deterrent to viewing social work as a viable career pathway since after

such an investment, the mean salary for a school social worker is only \$66,700 (Bureau, 2021).

Many school districts have utilized hiring incentives, such as signing and relocation bonuses for teachers, bus drivers, and nurses, other positions that are in high demand within schools (CASBO, 2022). Unfortunately, such incentives have not been extended to school social worker candidates despite the National Governors Association having identified incentives as a helpful tool in addressing the shortage of social workers committed to school-based mental health (Kirchner & Cuneo, 2022). When developing their incentive structures, school districts have largely overlooked the significant time and monetary investments social workers have made to serve in a school setting.

California, however, offers an example of how financial barriers for potential social workers may be addressed more broadly. During the summer of 2022, Governor Gavin Newsom announced his Master Plan for Kid's Mental Health, a series of proposals that includes awarding scholarships of \$20,000 to mental health workers who commit to two years of school-based service in California (Aere, 2022). This plan emulates a proposal first put forth by the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Tony Thurmond, himself a social worker. The 2022–23 state budget earmarks tens of millions of dollars to provide financial aid and support residency programs for aspiring mental health clinicians, with the goal of recruiting 10,000 mental health professionals to work in schools (Balderas, 2022). These scholarships are particularly helpful given that California requires graduate-level training in order to serve as a school social worker (Mumm & Bye, 2011).

Oregon has also invested in innovative models to increase diversity within its behavioral health workforce. Established in 2021, the Behavioral Health Workforce Initiative provides incentives to recruit and retain behavioral health providers who are people of color, tribal members, or residents of rural areas (NASHP, 2021). The state

legislature has allocated \$60 million toward this initiative. Among the incentives include sign-on and retention bonuses, tuition assistance, scholarships, loan forgiveness, and housing assistance. These tools are intended to dismantle financial barriers that keep people from considering or continuing with behavioral health as a profession. Similarly, offering financial aid to prospective school social workers would allow more people to access the field, and subsequently, increase the diversity of the mental health providers serving in schools.

At the federal level, Senators Tina Smith (D-MN), Lisa Murkowski (R-AK), and Maggie Hassan (D-NH) reintroduced the Mental Health Professionals Workforce Shortage Loan Repayment Act this year (Office of Senator Tina Smith, 2023). This bill would enable \$250,000 in eligible student loan repayment for mental health professionals who work in designated shortage areas. Loan repayment could incentivize social workers to serve in higher need areas, and possibly even prevent social workers from leaving the field for better paying jobs. Still, given the upfront cost of social work programs, scholarships and stipends may be more effective at attracting providers from BIPOC and under-resourced backgrounds to school-based mental health.

Schools of social work can also play an active role in addressing the school social worker shortage. Programs should consider offering specializations in school-based practice, and those that have existing specializations should work to increase the number of participating students to reflect the growing demand for school-based practitioners. A 2020 survey of social work education programs found that just 48—less than 20%—of master’s programs offered a concentration in school social work (CSWE, 2021). Another survey of school social workers found that those who engaged in school social work specific programs felt significantly better trained to address issues such as violence and sexual abuse than workers with more general training (Slovak et al., 2006).

Social work programs can further engage with neighboring school districts to better understand their staffing needs, both in the immediate and long-term. Moreover, offering stipends and other incentives to students who pursue school-based field placements may introduce school social work as a viable pathway to students who had never previously considered working in a school setting. In Minnesota, for example, Rochester Public Schools and Winona State University are working together to expand Rochester's school-based social work services (Mewes, 2023). Using funding from a federal grant, this new partnership will provide scholarships to 30 Winona State MSW students who intern with Rochester Public Schools.

Fortunately, there is already a promising stipend-based model for growing and diversifying the child welfare workforce that can serve as a model for increasing the number of school social workers. Through the Title IV-E program, schools of social work have long worked in tandem with state governments from Wisconsin to West Virginia to increase the ranks of child welfare agencies (Social Work Policy Institute, 2012). In California, for example, more than a dozen social work schools participate in the Title IV-E program, each providing annual stipends of \$18,500 to a cohort of roughly 20 students. Stipend recipients then work for county child welfare agencies or the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) child welfare division for at least two years upon graduating (CalSWEC, 2017). Between its inception in 1993 and July 2016, California's stipend program has nearly doubled the number of MSWs in public child welfare. The program has also helped increase the workforce: 67% of stipend graduates are people of color and 45% are bilingual (CalSWEC, 2018).

More recently, Connecticut Governor Ned Lamont launched CT Health Horizons, a three-year, \$35 million initiative aimed at growing and diversifying the state's social work and nursing workforce (State of Connecticut, 2022). Funded by the American Rescue Plan, this program brings together several state agencies and over 30 public and private colleges, to address this critical workforce issue. These dollars will be used to provide scholarships to prospective students,

as well as the hiring of more faculty to expand seat capacity within existing programs. CT Health Horizons is expected to provide tuition assistance to more than 1,200 students and increase seat capacity within state social work and nursing programs by 1,000 students. The University of Connecticut School of Social Work, one of the grant recipients, will use the monies to (1) grow the number of social workers in schools and (2) increase the number of Spanish-speaking social workers (Kashef & O'Connell, 2023). This effort to dismantle barriers to cost is particularly relevant in Connecticut, where school social workers are required to have an MSW (Mumm & Bye, 2011).

These innovative programs demonstrate how government agencies, school districts, and social work programs can strategically work together to resolve shortages in school-based mental health. By collaborating to resolve workforce shortages, they embrace the well-being of children as a collective responsibility. Given the longstanding struggle to fill workforce gaps, creative approaches to growing and diversifying the school social work profession are necessary for students to access the mental health resources they need and deserve. Looking ahead, individuals and organizations concerned about children's mental health should contribute to, amplify, and co-develop programs centered on building a school social worker pipeline.

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