

BRIDGING THE GAP

Reflection and Guidance on the
SSWAA National Practice Model 2.0

April 10, 2025

Dr. Kevin Tan

BRIDGING THE GAP

School social workers serve as vital professionals who bridge the gap between students, families, schools, and communities. They address barriers to learning by providing direct services, such as individual and group counseling; implementing evidence-informed interventions; advocating for students' rights and needs; providing crisis response and prevention efforts; and promoting positive school climates. They engage in systems-level work – collaborating with educators, administrators, and community partners to advance practice, research, and policies that support the holistic development of all students and schools.

At the foundation of the profession's work is an enduring commitment to serving **all** students. No child is excluded from school social work services or denied access to programs based on any social or demographic characteristics. Rather, the profession has always ensured that every student has the opportunity to succeed. School social work services and programs are designed to respond to individual needs, not to confer advantages based on their identities. **School social workers serve students of all backgrounds, working to remove barriers to learning, promote well-being, and ensure that every child is supported in reaching their full potential.**

INTRODUCTION

School social workers remain essential in all communities, fostering student and school well-being through the key components outlined in the National Practice Model 2.0, which was formally adopted by the SSWAA Board of Directors in December 2023. This document, which follows this Preface, represents the priorities of the social work profession at that time, particularly in seeking equitable reform in support of various communities in need (National Association of Social Workers, 2021), addressing disparities in social work licensing outcomes (Association of Social Work Boards, 2022), and in integrating content on anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) across all accredited social work programs (Council of Social Work Education, 2022).

Since its adoption, however, significant policy shifts at the federal level have altered the broader context in which school social workers operate. These shifts have created uncertainty about how school social workers uphold their professional values while navigating legal constraints, and it raises important questions about the profession's role and direction in today's schools.

A clear and informed understanding of the current socio-political climate is crucial for recognizing the practical implications of this December 2023 document in light of recent federal policy shifts. The broader shifts at the federal level will have an impact on the scope of services, advocacy, and support that are essential to meeting the needs of all students and families. Clarity on the key components, intent, and context of the National Practice Model 2.0 is critical to understanding its relevance and application. A call for unity and civil discourse is paramount to advancing the field of school social work in steadfast service to all students, as the profession has historically done.

UNDERSTANDING THE DEC 2023 DOCUMENT IN THE CURRENT SOCIO- POLITICAL CONTEXT

On January 20, 2025—the first day of the new Federal administration—President Trump signed an executive order rescinding all federal DEI programs. This sweeping action signaled a significant policy shift with immediate implications across federal agencies and educational institutions nationwide.

Shortly thereafter, on February 14, 2025, the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights issued a “Dear Colleague Letter” that outlined restrictions on DEI-related activities within educational institutions. The letter suggests that any program or service perceived to provide differentiated support based on race may be considered discriminatory under federal civil rights law. Although this regulatory guidance does not carry the force of law, it may carry significant implications for the implementation and enforcement of legal policies within the education profession, raising questions about the legal boundaries of DEI-driven work in public education, particularly for those seeking to address long-standing disparities and support historically marginalized student populations.

Additionally, the Department of Education launched a website to collect reports of DEI-related initiatives perceived to be non-compliant with the new executive order. This public online reporting mechanism has heightened anxiety within school systems, as it invites public scrutiny and potential federal opposition to long-standing programs and services designed to promote inclusion and educational access.

Such federal actions will undoubtedly impact school social work practice, even as multiple legal challenges continue to unfold. Again, it is important to reaffirm that school social workers do not exclude or prioritize services based on any social or demographic characteristics. School social workers do not deliver programs that deny any student access to support or resources based on their social identities. **Instead, the profession remains grounded in its longstanding commitment to serving all students by identifying and addressing individual needs, eliminating barriers to learning, and ensuring every child has the opportunity to thrive.**

As the profession moves forward, school social workers must be mindful of the critiques surrounding DEI initiatives, particularly as these conversations increasingly influence K–12 education. In some communities, DEI efforts have been criticized for promoting perceived political agendas or introducing content that some believe is divisive or inappropriate for young students. Others argue that initiatives to foster equity—such as culturally responsive teaching or efforts to close opportunity gaps—may be viewed as compromising academic rigor or fairness. There is growing skepticism about the effectiveness of diversity training, with some questioning whether these programs yield meaningful or measurable outcomes.

By understanding and being aware of these critiques, school social workers are better positioned to engage constructively with educators, families, and key personnel in ways that reflect both professional ethics and the unique needs of their school communities.

UNDERSTANDING THE SSWAA NATIONAL PRACTICE MODEL 2.0

What is a Practice Model?

To understand the relevance and application of the December 2023 document in today's context, it is essential to first consider the purpose of a practice model.

A practice model is intentionally both descriptive and prescriptive. *Descriptively*, it outlines the key domains in which school social workers operate, reflecting the breadth and complexity of their roles across diverse educational settings. *Prescriptively*, it offers a long-term, forward-looking, aspirational vision and direction that guides the profession in responding to the needs of students, families, and schools (Tan & Frey, 2025).

Key Components of the National Practice Model 2.0

The key components of the National Practice Model 2.0 *descriptively* reflect the core commitments and multifaceted roles of school social workers across diverse school settings and job functions. School social workers serve in different capacities – some are dedicated to special education, others focus on attendance and supporting students experiencing homelessness, and many operate within general education settings. To capture this breadth, the model must be sufficiently comprehensive.

The following outlines the key components of the model:

- School social workers promote **Student** and **School Well-Being**;
- School social workers advance **Academics, Mental Health, Social and Emotional**, and **School Climate**;
- School social workers operate by working with the **Home**, the **School**, and the **Community**;
- School social workers conduct their work through **Practice, Research, Policy, Advocacy**, and **Leadership**.

The model affirms that school social workers are guided by our **Code of Ethics**, our **Social Work Values**, and the principle of **Equity**, which is defined as ensuring that every student has access to resources, opportunities, and benefits. People have different needs and circumstances, and school social workers provide what each person needs to succeed or thrive. The tagline “**School Social Work Promotes Sustaining and Equitable Outcomes**,” emphasizes the profession’s role in fostering long-term change towards advancing student and school well-being.

Model Design

The model is visually represented by a set of interconnected wheels designed to reflect the dynamic relationships among its core components. It is structured to facilitate the deliberate exploration of how various combinations of practice domains, focus areas, and professional roles intersect to address the evolving needs of students, families, and communities.

The model is designed to be interactive – users are encouraged to “Spin the Wheel”. By selecting different combinations across the wheels, users can generate reflective questions, spark dialogue, or guide planning and professional development. For example, selecting the first term from each wheel might lead to a question such as: “In what ways can school social workers support academic achievement at home through direct practice?” Choosing the second term from each wheel may prompt a different inquiry, like: “How can school social workers enhance students’ social and emotional well-being within the school setting through research?” (Tan & Frey, 2025).

While the model envisions school social workers engaging fully across all dimensions, it is recognized that this may not always be feasible in every context. **In this respect, the National Practice Model 2.0 offers a *prescriptive* and aspirational vision for the future of school social work.** It challenges school social workers to imagine what is possible in serving the needs of our students, reaffirming the profession’s vital role in advancing sustaining and equitable outcomes for all students.

Create Your SSWAA National Practice Model 2.0 Wheel

The National Practice Model 2.0 Wheel is a practical and interactive tool designed to help users connect the core components of the model to the daily work of school social workers. To create a physical version of the wheel, print the template on sturdy cardstock, cut out each layer, stack them in order, and secure the center with a push pin or brad fastener, allowing the wheels to spin independently. This resource is purposely designed to support professional reflection, planning, collaborative discussion, and teaching within school social work.

Review the Core Components and Definitions While Assembling Your Wheel

- School social workers promote **Student** and **School Well-Being**
- School social workers advance **Academics, Mental Health, Social and Emotional**, and **School Climate**
- School social workers operate by working with the **Home**, the **School**, and the **Community**
- School social workers conduct their work through **Practice, Research, Policy, Advocacy**, and **Leadership**
- School social workers are guided by our **Code of Ethics, Social Work Values**, and the principle of **Equity**

Guiding Questions

Once your wheel is assembled, use it to generate reflective questions by combining terms across the wheels. These questions can be used to spark discussion, facilitate planning, or foster a deeper exploration of our profession. Encourage individuals or teams to create their questions by spinning or selecting new term combinations. For example:

- In what ways can school social workers support academic achievement at home through direct practice?
- How can school social workers enhance students' social and emotional well-being within the school setting through research?

Use the Wheel for Planning, Professional Development, and Supervision

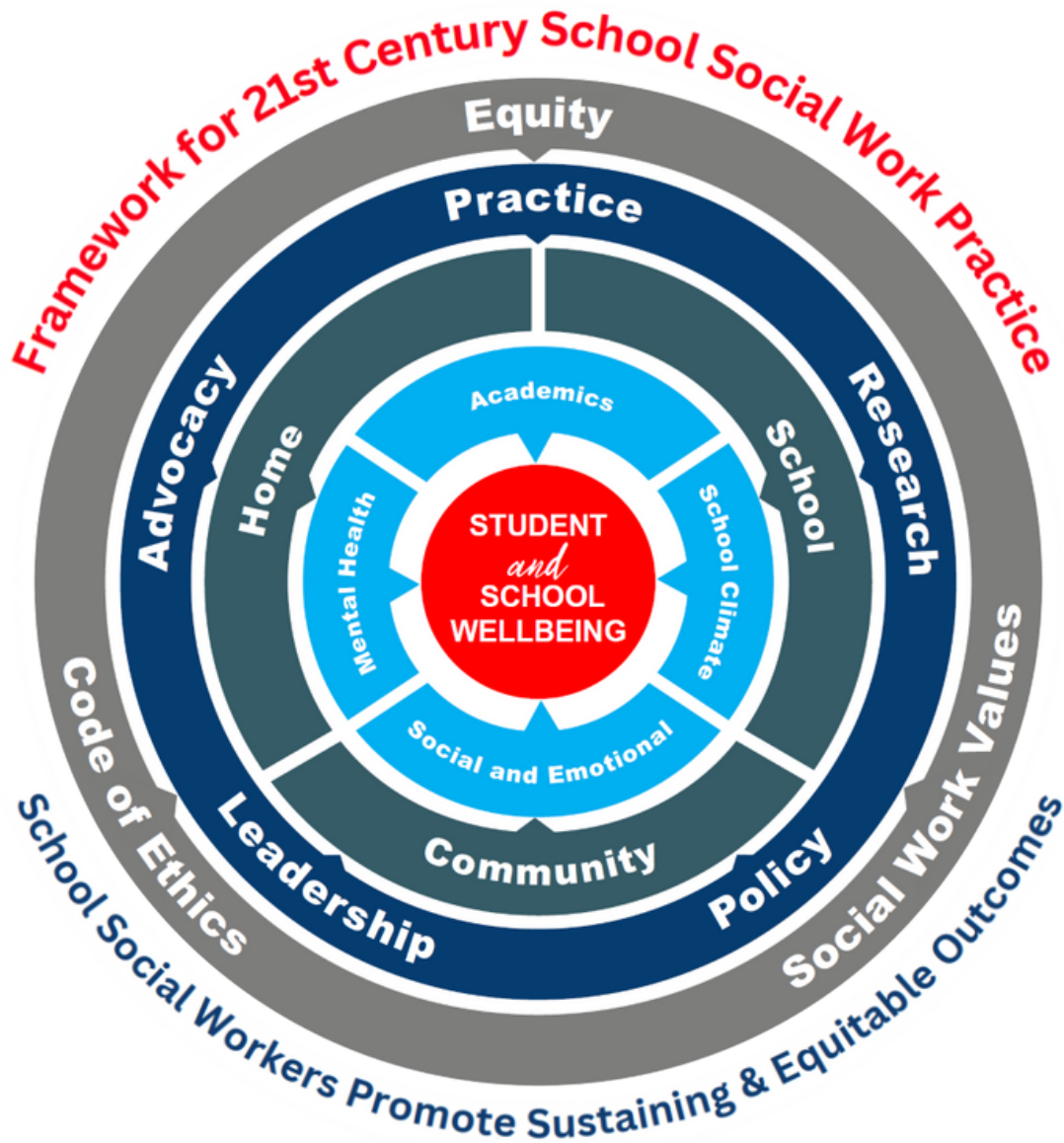
The wheel can be integrated into various aspects of our profession, including:

- Team meetings and staff development days
- Individual supervision and reflective practice
- Strategic planning and goal setting
- Student-centered case discussion

Teaching Using the Wheel

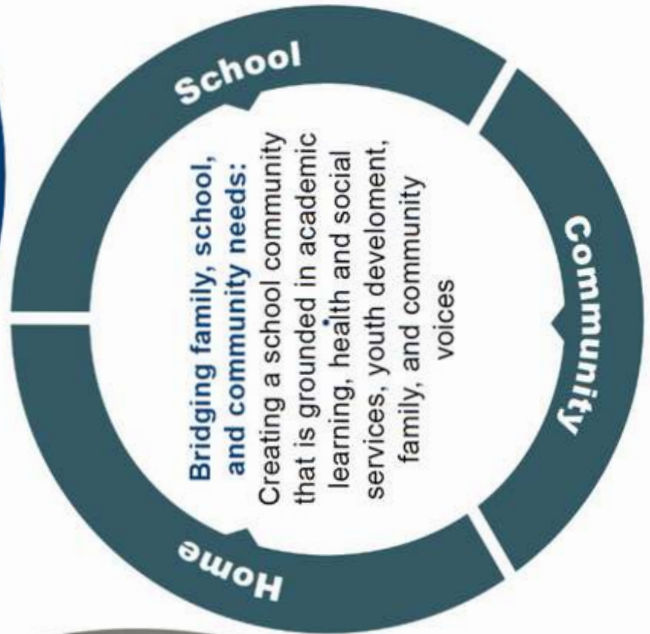
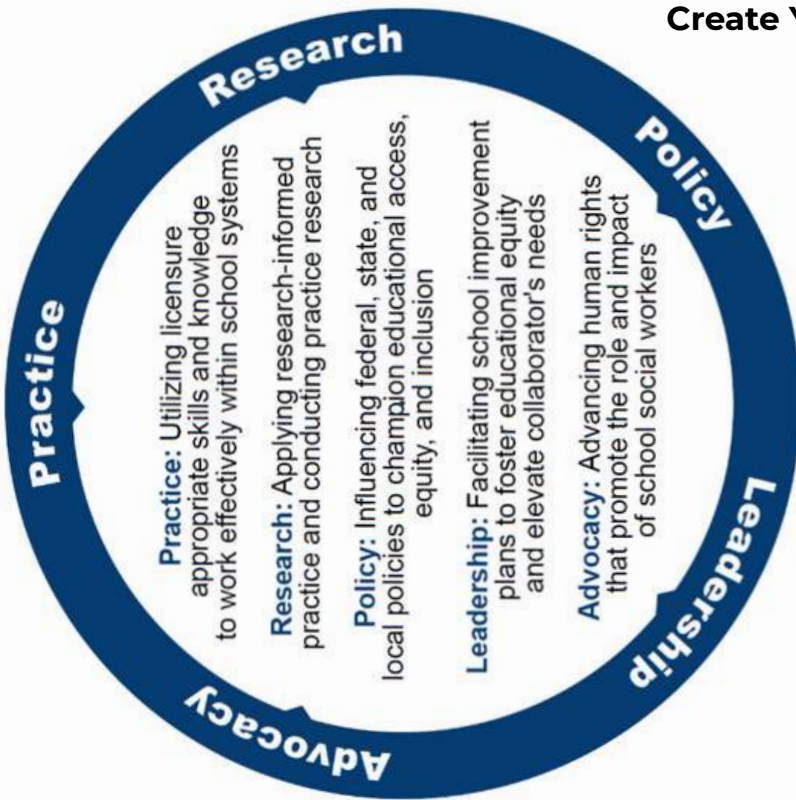
If you are an instructor or supervising interns, consider using the wheel as a teaching tool. Encourage students or interns to explore real-world scenarios and consider how different combinations of the model's components can inform decision-making, guide interventions, and enhance their understanding of the profession's role in educational settings.

Materials needed to create your own wheel can be found on the next page.

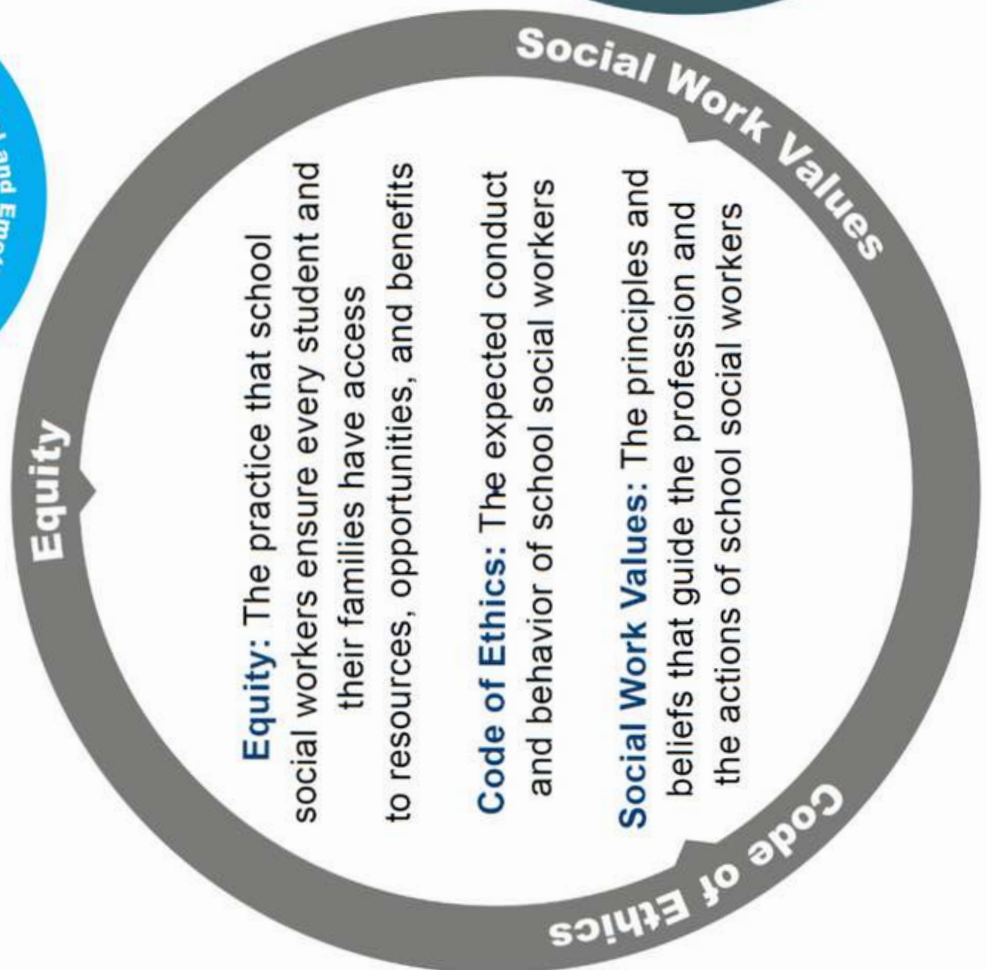


Create Your SSWAA National Model 2.0 Wheel

Developed by Dr. Kevin Tan



Dot for hole punch is in the center of each circle



A CALL FOR UNITY AND CIVIL DISCOURSE

In a time of heightened polarization and differing viewpoints, there is an urgent need for unity and civil discourse—especially within our profession, schools, and communities. It is crucial to acknowledge that the aspirational vision underlying the December 2023 document will face significant challenges.

The following December 2023 document should be reviewed in accordance with the necessary federal, state, and local guidelines while remaining mindful of our core professional values. This reality prompts important questions: How does the school social work profession continue to uphold its core mandate while navigating evolving societal challenges? How does the profession adhere to the accreditation standards in the training of future school social workers as stipulated by the Council of Social Work Education?

Important questions remain unanswered, underscoring the need for continued dialogue within the profession. These conversations must take place with sensitivity, humility, transparency, and mutual respect—qualities that are essential to building trust. While individuals may hold differing views on education, family, and social issues, respectful dialogue grounded in shared values—such as the well-being of children and the importance of strong families, schools, and communities—has the potential to bridge divides and foster collective understanding.

Our Profession's Commitment

Social work is a longstanding profession with a deep history of service to individuals, families, and communities. The profession is guided by its Code of Ethics, which emphasizes the importance of ethical practice, the dignity and worth of all individuals, and a commitment to social justice. The profession continuously responds to societal needs.

School social workers are uniquely positioned to foster this spirit of understanding by creating spaces for meaningful conversations, listening with empathy across both sides, and promoting inclusive practices that honor all perspectives. By committing to civil discourse, we reaffirm our collective responsibility to support every student's potential and to foster learning environments that are grounded in dignity, respect, and collaboration.

School social workers have been and will continue to serve **all** populations. School social workers must utilize their expertise to adapt, advocate, and uphold the profession's core values in service to the children and families they support. In doing so, they preserve the integrity of the profession and continue to serve as critical agents of support and inclusion for **all** students.

Dr. Kevin Tan
April 10, 2025

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Tan, K., & Frey, A., (2025). School Social Work Association of America's National School Social Work Practice Model 2.0: The Past, Present, and Future, Children & Schools, Volume 47, Issue 2, April 2025.

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SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK

National Practice Model 2.0

A Framework for 21st Century School Social Work Practice



School Social Work
Association of America

Overview

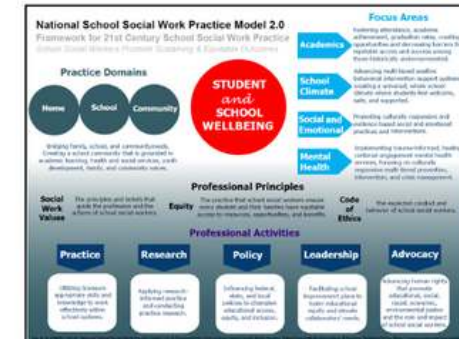
The National School Social Work Practice Model 2.0:

The Framework for 21st Century School Social Work Practice outlines the critical values, domains, focus areas, and professional activities of school social workers as we enter into the next decade and beyond. School social work is a specialized form of professional social work practice. This model was developed to inform policymakers, administrators, educators, allied professionals, and key collaborators about the work of school social workers who operate in pre-kindergarten to 12th grade contexts.

The model aims to:

- (1) define the scope of work that can be expected from school social workers,
- (2) promote consistency in the training of school social workers, including certification, and
- (3) promote the importance of school social workers as vital members of school teams.

The goal is to advance sustaining and equitable student and school well-being outcomes.



Downloadable at <https://www.sswaa.org/ssw-model>

The Practice Model 2.0

School Social Workers Promote Sustaining and Equitable Outcomes

Dimensions of Equity

School social workers work to establish anti-racist, anti-oppressive, diverse, equitable, and inclusive environments. The profession is dedicated to dismantling racially oppressive practices both within schools and communities. School social workers ensure that historically marginalized, racialized, and minoritized students and families have equitable access to resources, opportunities, and benefits. School social workers address the multiple disparities that exist across all dimensions of equity such as, race, social, economic, health, educational, gender, sexual orientation, culture, environmental, intergenerational, legal, spatial, and many more.

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School social workers are qualified professionals with a minimum of a master's degree in social work from a higher-education institution and accredited by a recognized governing body, such as the Council of Social Work Education. School social workers complete foundational coursework on school social work practice and policy. School social workers must also be appropriately certified and licensed by their state's governing bodies to operate in schools. School social workers possess specialized knowledge and technical skills and develop competencies in all elements presented in the practice model. They are asked to be involved in their state associations and be registered members and nationally certified by the School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA).



Factors Influencing School Social Work Practice and Impact

Multiple factors influence the percentage of time, effort, and impact of school social workers in the areas outlined in this model. This ratio of school social workers to the number of students served in a building is a critical consideration. SSWAA recommends that the ratio of one full-time equivalence of a school social worker to students be 1:250. Other factors include the prevailing sociopolitical context, state and district policies, the quality of resources to reduce risk factors for students in the school, the ability of the school social worker to be critically reflective and foster racial equity and other dimensions of equity, and the availability of other services in the community.

Social Work Values, Code of Ethics, and Social Justice

School social workers uphold the values that comprise the Code of Ethics governed by the National Association of Social Workers, including the principle of social justice. School social workers promote equitable access to resources, services, and opportunities in the school environment. They are called to work with and advocate for students and families who experience various forms of inequities and barriers in their schools and communities, especially those from historically marginalized, racialized, and minoritized segments of society. School social workers must be cognizant and develop capacities to address the critical issues that impact the lived experience of the students and families that they serve. School social workers must advance the principles of cultural humility and be reflective of their own social identities and positionalities in their practice.

Student and School Wellbeing: Domains of Practice, Focus Areas, and Professional Activities

The Practice Model 2.0 encourages school social workers to promote sustaining and equitable outcomes across all dimensions of equity through three inter-related domains: home – school – community. The model highlights the primary functions of school social workers through four focus areas: academics, socioemotional, mental health, and school climate. School social workers also advance sustaining and equitable outcomes through five professional activities: practice, research, policy, leadership, and advocacy.



The principles of social work values, ethical practice, and equity are infused in each of the domains, focus areas, and professional activities.

Domains of Practice: Home-School-Community

School social workers bridge families, schools, and communities in fostering more responsive educational systems that center on youth and community voices. School social workers integrate academic learning, health and social services, youth development, and community voices. Students' social environments, including relationships and interactions across their homes, school settings, and community contexts, profoundly affect them and their well-being and educational success. Facilitating communication and promoting linkages across the home, school, and community systems is a central and longstanding characteristic of the profession. School social workers are called upon to examine and acknowledge the historical and current socio-political contexts of the home-school-community interlinkages in which they operate. School social workers must promote healing and restore relationships within the communities of their students and families that have been historically strained and harmed based on past and current racialized and historical trauma.

Focus Areas: Academics, Social and Emotional, Mental Health, and School Climate

School social workers adopt a whole-child, whole-school approach to their work. They offer prevention, intervention, and postvention at the individual student-level and at the universal school-level. School social workers support academic success by attending to students' academics and socioemotional skills, their mental health wellness and resiliency through establishing a diverse and inclusive school climate.

School social workers are thus called to address all forms of inequities that exist in the student body and school environment. They work to remove both tangible and intangible barriers to student and school success and positive youth development. They take a holistic approach to assessing and intervening with students and schools and consider their broader social and environmental influences in the following four focus areas:

Academics: School social workers foster attendance, academic achievement, and graduation rates; create opportunities; and decrease barriers for equitable access and success among all students especially our historically excluded and minoritized student populations.

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Social and Emotional: School social workers promote culturally responsive and evidence-based/research based socioemotional practices and interventions. They recognize and value students' intersecting social identities and lived experiences in ways that support their socioemotional development.

Mental Health: School social workers implement trauma-informed, healing-centered engagement with mental health services, focusing on developing equitable and responsive multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) including prevention, intervention, and crisis management.

School Climate: School social workers advance multi-tiered positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) systems. They work to create a universal, equitable, whole-school climate where students feel welcome, safe, and supported.

Professional Activities: Practice, Research, Policy, Leadership, and Advocacy

The Practice Model 2.0 encourages school social workers to engage in a range of strengths-based and culturally responsive professional activities that promote student and school success. They work collaboratively with staff, families, and community organizations to provide a comprehensive and equitable system of support in ways that meets the diverse needs of students. They also engage in policy reforms bringing attention to the needs of their students, families, and communities and in ways that increase resources for those most in need. School social workers actively engage in the following five micro- and macro-level professional activities:



Practice: School social workers utilize licensure appropriate skills and knowledge to work effectively within school systems. They engage in strengths-based and culturally responsive practices, recognizing the ways in which the social context impacts individuals, and valuing the heritage, backgrounds, and lived experiences of students and families.

Research: School social workers apply critically reflexive, race conscious research to inform their practice and engage in practice research to evaluate the effectiveness of their practice. They utilize research to understand and identify areas of needs and inequities in their work with students and schools.

Policy: School social workers champion federal, state, and local policies that promote educational access, equity, and inclusion. They engage in policy reforms to eliminate the causes of systemic inequities that serve as barriers to student and school success.

Leadership: School social workers facilitate school-improvement plans to close educational achievement gaps and give voice to collaborator needs. They provide and facilitate training, professional development, and consultancy to school staff that promote equity in education.

Advocacy: School social workers advance human rights and promote educational, social, racial, economic, and environmental justice. They advocate for the needs of students and families in ways that promote the equitable distribution of resources and services.

Acknowledgement

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Participants at these events discussed and provided feedback on earlier versions of the practice model 2.0: SSWAA Standards and Practice November 2022 committee meeting; SSWAA Annual Conference 2022 (Chicago, IL) and 2023 (Denver, CO); SSWAA Delegate Assembly Meeting 2022 (Alexandria, VA) and 2023 (Buffalo, NY), Society for Social Work and Research roundtable session 2023 (Phoenix, AZ).

An earlier version of the practice model 2.0 was discussed by SSWAA's Board of Directors. The final version was approved on December 14, 2023 to be launched on January 1, 2024: Terrilyn Rivers-Cannon (President), Christy McCoy (Past President), Tish Brookins (Secretary), Marina Badillo Diaz (Northeastern Representative), Lindsey Oliver (Southern Representative), Mary Boyd (Midwest Representative), Patrick Mulkern (Western Representative), Summer Woodside (University Representative), and Brandy Hall (Student Representative).

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Correspondence concerning the model should be addressed to: ContactUs@sswaa.org

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