



## School Social Work Association of America Resolution Statement

### Clinical Social Work: Responding to the Mental Health Needs of Students

#### Introduction

One of the first places where children's mental health crises and mental health needs are initially recognized and addressed is in the schools (Hennessy & Green-Hennessey, 2000; Hoagwood et al., 2005). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, around 1 in 5 children have been diagnosed with a mental health condition (CDC, 2018). Of the 1 in 5, only 20% have received treatment from a mental health specialist (CDC, 2018). Furthermore, diverse students, including special needs students, students of color, and those from low-income families, are at greater risk for mental health concerns, but are less likely to receive needed services due to limited or unavailable community resources (Kaffenberger & Seligman, 2007; Vera, Buhin, & Shin, 2006). Students with untreated mental health issues can develop significant barriers to learning, with nearly 50% of these students dropping out of school (Erford, Newsome, & Rock, 2007). School social workers often serve as the primary mental health provider for these students as they may be the only counseling professional available to students and their families and have the required skills and training to provide the services (Early & Vonk, 2001; Hennessy & Green-Hennessey, 2000; Kelly, Berzin, et al., 2010).

Masters level school social workers have the training and skills to provide advanced clinical mental health counseling and psychotherapy (APA, 2017). They work to promote the academic success of students and may also be trained in a specialty area, such as chemical dependency. School social workers address these barriers to student success by offering education, prevention, supportive services and crisis intervention (NASW, 2021).

***School social workers who are licensed clinical social workers are necessary to fill the gap in access for students to essential mental health services.*** The Association Social Work Boards (ASWB) has published a document outlining the definition and role of clinical social work. According to the ASWB Model Social Work Practice Act, "*Counseling* means a method used by social workers to assist individuals, couples, families, and groups in learning how to solve problems and make decisions about personal, health, social, educational, vocational, financial, and other interpersonal concerns" (ASWB, 2018, p. 8). Additionally the document also defines *psychotherapy* as, " ...the use of treatment methods utilizing a specialized, formal interaction between a Clinical Social Worker and an individual, couple, family, or group in which a therapeutic relationship is established, maintained and sustained to understand unconscious processes, intrapersonal, interpersonal and psychosocial dynamics, and the assessment, diagnosis, and treatment of mental, emotional, and behavioral disorders, conditions and addictions" (ASWB, 2018, p. 10).

Furthermore, the ASWB (2018), Model Social Work Practice Act outlines the practice of clinical social work as follows:

The practice of Clinical Social Work is a specialty within the practice of Master's Social Work and requires the application of social work theory, knowledge, methods, ethics, and the professional use of self to restore or enhance social, psychosocial, or biopsychosocial functioning of individuals, couples, families, groups, organizations and communities. The practice of Clinical Social Work requires the application of specialized clinical knowledge and advanced clinical skills in the areas of assessment, diagnosis and treatment of mental, emotional, and behavioral disorders, conditions and addictions. Treatment methods include the provision of individual, marital, couple, family and group counseling and psychotherapy. The practice of Clinical Social Work may include private practice and the provision of clinical supervision (p. 6).

The national [School Social Work Practice Model](#), as outlined by the School Social Work Association of America, "encourages school social workers (1) to provide evidence-based education, behavior, and mental health services; (2) to promote a school climate and culture conducive to student learning and teaching excellence; (3) to maximize access to school-based and community-based resources" (SSWAA, 2013). SSWAA believes that school social workers at the master's level are qualified to and do provide clinical services that address mental health issues under appropriate licensure or supervision.

School social workers who apply to take the clinical licensure exam should be considered for approval based on their training and documented clinical experiences in schools. Master level school social workers under clinical supervision or holding a clinical license have received instructional hours in evidence-based theory, practices and curricula through clinical coursework and post MSW supervision to competently practice mental health/behavioral assessments, interventions, evaluations, and diagnoses.

### **Recommendations for Licensing Boards**

- Allow for practice based in schools to qualify for clinical hours so that school social workers can fulfill the requirement for supervised postgraduate clinical experience through direct mental health services provided to students and families as school social workers.

### **Recommendations for State Associations**

- Offer professional development relevant to clinical school social work practice
- Create a network of clinical licensed supervisors with school social work experience
- Assist school social workers who are seeking clinical licensure
- Highlight school districts which support school social workers in obtaining their clinical license

- Advocate for laws and regulations which support the employment of clinically licensed school social workers

### **Recommendations for Schools**

- Hire highly qualified school social workers [Definition of a Highly Qualified School Social Worker](#) (SSWAA, 2021)
- Support school social workers by providing and/or encouraging clinically focused continuing education.
- Create a pathway for school social workers to receive supervision for clinical licensure.

### **Recommendations for School Social Workers seeking Clinical Licensure**

- Utilize clinical skills appropriate to the context of the school environment
- Include state statutes, counseling and psychotherapy skills as defined by ASWB, into a detailed supervision plan that outlines anticipated goals and learning objectives at the start of clinical supervision (ASWB, 2018).
- Share with your school administrators and personnel that you hold a clinical license and are under supervision to obtain a clinical license.
- Address mental health and social justice issues with students.

### **Recommendations for School Social Workers holding Clinical Licensure**

- Provide supervision to another school social worker seeking to be clinically licensed.
- Advocate in your state for school settings to be accepted by the state social work licensing agency as clinical practice

### **Conclusion**

School social workers who have completed clinical supervision are highly qualified to address the unmet mental health needs of students in a school setting and increase their academic success. With appropriate clinical licensure and experience, mental health interventions provided by a school social worker may be written into a student's Individualized Education Programs, and also allow the school district to bill Medicaid for mental health interventions. **SSWAA is proud to offer a network of professionals and tools to support your practice such as the above recommendations. Continue to access the SSWAA website, SSWAA professional development opportunities and SSWAA Board to meet your needs.**

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