



## **“It Takes a Team: The Important Role of School Social Workers, Especially During COVID-19”**

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It's "Back to School"—a time filled with the excitement of new beginnings as schools and teachers gear up for another year to provide structure, routine, and excitement for learning. Last March, COVID-19 suddenly disrupted these constructs and continues to create uncertainty, apprehension and even fear as districts, staff and parents explore what form "Back to School" will really take.

Regardless what format, schools offer unparalleled access to students to address both academic and mental health needs. The hiring of sufficient numbers of Specialized Instructional Support Personnel (SISP) i.e. School Social Workers, school psychologists, counselors and nurses to address the wide range of issues presented by students, families and staff especially during this pandemic will be imperative. Each professional serves a distinct and significant role in providing a multi-tiered system of supports. As licensed clinical social workers, School Social Workers are trained mental health professionals skilled at screening, assessing, monitoring and providing direct consultation and clinical intervention to students and staff on site and in real time.

Due to COVID-19, members of the school community may be struggling with the death of a loved one, fears of contracting the disease/infecting others, the after effects of their own infection, financial insecurity, loss of control, social isolation, child abuse, domestic violence, etc. We know that children are even more vulnerable to these kinds of traumatic events and will require differentiated teaching as well as strong support systems.

The coronavirus only exacerbates prior adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) that children were dealing with pre-pandemic. As a result, School Social Workers continue to assist districts in the development of trauma informed schools or other school wide programs to provide safe havens to build positive connections, trusting relationships, and a sense of belonging. School Social Workers provide in-service training on mental health issues and the effects of trauma as well as work closely with teachers regarding restorative behavior management techniques to address the various ways that children exhibit grief, loss, anxiety and stress. When outside mental health services are needed, School Social Workers connect families with community based mental health providers as well as supply follow up case management to ensure coordination of services.

In addition to being on-site mental health professionals, School Social Workers serve as the vital link between school, home and community working closely with parents to assess problems that may be affecting a child's educational adjustment or even engagement in learning. Whether attending school or participating in virtual learning, families will find different levels of relief as well as additional stressors. Juggling childcare; fearing for a child's physical, social and academic well-being; playing the role of teacher; trying to find work; paying bills and keeping food on the table; facing potential eviction; coping with domestic violence/abuse; and dealing with the inequities of racism are just some of the concerns that may contribute to how children adjust to learning during this pandemic. School Social Workers work with families to address and/or obtain community resources to help relieve these kinds of family stressors that may be impacting their child's educational functioning. At the community level, School Social Workers also work on interagency teams i.e. food banks, social service agencies, etc. to provide improved and coordinated services to families.

"Back to School" is going to be more challenging than ever before. Adequately staffed SISP teams will be critical to help alleviate the numerous sources of distress impacting children, families and educators. Working closely as a team, each profession provides unique skill sets to address the myriad of barriers to learning in order to reduce stressors and provide an optimal environment for education in whatever form that takes so we can all get through this together.