

IASSW

ILLINOIS ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS

October 14, 2020

Dear Sen. Bertino-Tarrant, Sen. Weaver, Sen. McGuire, Sen. McClure and Committee Members,

The Illinois Association of School Social Workers (IASSW) is composed of currently practicing, former, and retired school social workers, as well as graduate-level school social work students. Presently, IASSW represents over 3,700 school social workers across the state of Illinois. Our members serve in urban, suburban and rural areas throughout the state, and are represented by a broad demographic of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. As mental health practitioners, school social workers provide services in schools to improve the social and emotional health of our students and their families. The impact of the pandemic has brought on additional mental health concerns and the need for additional resources. We are reminded daily of the emotional, mental and financial stress that the pandemic has placed on families and their children. We observe families trying their best to manage work, school engagement, financial stability, and put food on the table. It is increasingly stressful on our families with more severe economic challenges. The emotional, physical and mental health of our students, families, and teachers are of great concern; a concern that school social workers continue their efforts to address.

Middle-income and lower-income families have been heavily impacted by job loss, housing insecurity and significant health concerns since many of these families serve in essential services and may or may not have insurance for healthcare. These stressors create an enormous mental health burden for these families as they strive to provide basic needs such as food, housing, clothing and necessities of daily life. Currently in Illinois, about 1,283,550 people are struggling with hunger and of them 363,900 are children (Feeding America, 2020). These families are also assisting their children with remote learning, the stress and health challenges of returning to school in-person, and their own health concerns as essential workers. In high need schools some parents may send their children to school without knowing the health risks their children face and without support for their own mental health concerns.

Schools have become “the de facto mental health system for many children and adolescents,” providing mental health services to about 57% of adolescents who need the support (Golber, Wen, & Miller, 2020). Many schools may encounter obstacles when trying to meet the needs of their community especially if they do not have the needed personnel to help support students’ mental health needs. Before the pandemic, about 45% of children in the U.S. experienced one adverse childhood experience and one in ten have experienced three or more. COVID-19 amplified these numbers and worsened existing mental health conditions not just because of the trauma from the pandemic itself but because of the unique combination of the public health crisis, social isolation, and economic recession.

The Illinois School Code has a recommended student-to-social worker ratio of 250:1. Unfortunately, many school social workers are experiencing higher caseloads and most school districts do not meet the recommended school social worker to student ratio. It is imperative that

districts determine how to address the mental health needs of their communities. Thus, we urge for the implementation of criteria to measure if districts are adequately providing for students' mental health needs. Also important is the mental health support available from community agencies. Outside agencies are experiencing a lack of resources to provide for the mental health needs of children and families. Therefore, families are being forced to travel further distances to receive adequate services to meet their mental health needs. For example, when a family is in crisis with a suicidal child, the lack of local resources compels the family to seek resources outside of their community. This contributes to additional stress for the family and hinders their ability to maintain a daily supportive role with their child(ren). Mental health resources are vital to the well-being of our Pre-Kindergarten through 12th grade students and their families.

As members of IASSW, we are prepared to offer the information, experience and recommendations that we have gathered through our direct interactions with our students and their families. We are more than willing to work with the Illinois Senate on an ongoing basis to address the needs of students, families, schoolteachers/staff, and the communities within the state of Illinois.

Sincerely,

Tom Tebbe, IASSW Executive Director
Dr. Maria Sinkule, IASSW President
Michael Langendorf, IASSW Legislative Chair
Dr. Tiffany Nelson, IASSW President-Elect