



**School Social Work Association of America**  
3001 Veazey Terrace, NW • Suite 825  
Washington, DC 20008

January 13, 2019

The Honorable Grace Napolitano  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative Napolitano:

The School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA) wishes to offer its support for the *Mental Health in Schools Act*. The *Mental Health in Schools Act* recognizes that good mental health is an essential component of a child or adolescent's healthy development. Good mental health affects how individuals think, feel and act, and is critical to developing self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills and social awareness, and ultimately supporting learning and academic success.

Unmet emotional needs impact a child/adolescent's ability to function successfully in school, impairing ability to concentrate and learn, make decisions, and develop healthy relationships, possibly leading to poor outcomes later in life. (Gearity, 2014). Research confirms that **1 in 10 youth has serious mental health problems severe enough to impair how they function at home, in school, or in the community.** (Stagman & Cooper, 2010), and the **onset of major mental illness may occur as early as 7 to 11 years old.** (Stagman & Cooper, 2010). The most common disorders among children and adolescents are Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Depression, Anxiety and Conduct Disorder. (CDC, 2015). **Elementary students with mental health problems are more likely to be unhappy at school, absent, or suspended or expelled.** In the course of the school year, they may miss as many as 18 to 22 days. Their rates of suspension and expulsion are three times higher than their peers. **Approximately 50% of students with mental illness age 14 and older drop out of high school.** Comparing those who drop out of high school with those who complete high school, the average high school dropout costs the economy approximately \$240,000 over his or her lifetime.

By providing \$200,000,000 in competitive grants of up to \$1 million each, *The Mental Health in Schools Act* expands the scope of the Safe Schools/Healthy Students Program by providing on-site licensed mental health professionals in schools across the country while honoring the need for a continuum of mental health service delivery in schools in the following ways:

- **Ensure Access:** Lack of insurance or inadequate financial support for quality services to prevent and treat mental health problems of children and youth are contributing factors for unmet mental health needs in children. Many mental health services for children are not covered by managed care payers. (Children's Mental Health Network, 2018).
- **Early Intervention:** Schools are in a pivotal position to identify and provide early interventions for children struggling with social, emotional and behavioral problems. **Up to three-quarters of children** receiving professional care for a mental health problem obtained services through a school-based program. (Slade, 2002).
- **Educational Model of Mental Health Service Delivery:** To effectively address barriers to learning, schools must weave resources into a cohesive and integrated continuum of interventions that promote healthy development and prevent problems, allow for early intervention to address problems as soon after onset is feasible, and provide assistance to those with chronic and severe problems. (Adelman & Taylor, 2006; Gearity, 2014)

- **School Safety and Violence Prevention:** Safe and successful learning environments are fostered through collaboration among school staff and community-based service providers while also integrating existing initiatives in the school. (SSWAA, 2013)
- **Integrating Services through Collaboration and an Interdisciplinary Team Approach:** Collaborative efforts between schools with community health, mental health, and social services agencies create a holistic approach to effectively address the growing health, behavioral, and mental health needs of students (New Freedom Commission on Mental Health. 2003; Olfson, Druss, & Marcus, 2015). The collaborative pooling of unique skill sets and expertise of school-employed mental health providers – including school social workers, school counselors, school psychologists, school nurses, and other specialized instructional support personnel (SISP) – enhance students' positive mental health, healthy social development and academic achievement. (Gearity, 2014; SSWAA, 2013)

**By providing essential funding for Licensed Mental Health Professionals like Licensed Clinical School Social Workers, schools will have the capacity to reduce barriers to learning while increasing academic outcomes.** School social workers are well-positioned to spearhead identification, training, and implementation of evidence-based educational, behavioral, and mental health services in schools as well as in partnerships with community agencies. Although there are many adults in a school who provide mental health support to students, school social workers are trained mental health professionals who are prepared to recognize and respond to student mental health crises and needs as well as provide support to administration and staff when school crises occur. School social workers not only provide direct services to students and families in the form of individual or group therapeutic support but also serve as a resource to administrators and other educators, providing consultation and training on identifying students with mental health needs and a referral process when services are sought" (SSWAA, 2013).

SSWAA urges Congress to pass this essential legislation to ensure schools have the appropriate resources and supports to address and reduce the social, emotional, and physical health barriers impacting academic success.

Sincerely,



Rebecca Oliver  
Executive Director

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