

Pennsylvania House of Representatives – Education Committee Hearing: Mental Health in Schools
January 17, 2024

**Testimony of Ms. Angelina Romano, MSW, LSW
K-12 School Social Worker**

**President - School Social Worker/ Home and School Visitor Section, PSEA Department of Pupil Services
Board member - Pennsylvania Association of School Social Work Professionals (PASSWP)**

Good morning, Chairs Schweyer and Topper, and members of the House Education Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about the presenting issue of mental health in Pennsylvania's school systems.

My name is Angelina Romano. I am a full-time school social worker, a part-time mental health outpatient therapist and a passionate advocate for advancing access to quality professional social work services for Pennsylvania's children and families. I am the sole school social worker catering to the needs of 2,200 students in the South Middleton School District in Cumberland County. Under provisions set forth by the federal McKinney-Vento Act and Every Student Succeeds Act, I also function as my district's mandated homeless liaison and foster care point of contact. I've been a first hand witness to the hardships of our most vulnerable students, and have observed how economic distress, social problems and systemic gaps in social services play out in individuals' lives. I'm before you today to narrate how the role of school social workers nurtures the well-being of students and families within our educational system.

I am a third year school social worker, but the foundation to my social work career started many years ago in public child welfare where I worked as an intake caseworker at a county child protective agency investigating allegations of child abuse and assessing families experiencing at-risk circumstances. I've since held other full-time and part-time positions in drug and alcohol, mental health and juvenile justice programming. For the last 16 months, I've worked part-time at a private practice, providing one-to-one outpatient mental health therapy to adolescents and adults. I entered the world of education, not explicitly trained in its intricacies, but trained in systems improvement and helping individuals overcome social and emotional problems. Though one of the least lucrative roles I've ever held - school social work best positions me to implement lasting, systemic and supportive changes in my community.

Who is a Social Worker?

It is essential to define the professional identity of a social worker in Pennsylvania. A phrase often assumed to be synonymous with any helping professional, "Social Worker" is a legally protected title under Act 68 of 2008. Individuals must have a degree conferred and accredited by the Council of Social Work Education. An individual who violates Act 68 of 2008 can be fined \$1000 per month for each violation by the Pennsylvania State Board of Social Workers, Marriage and Family Therapists and Professional Counselors. This level of accountability is important to consumer protection - as it signifies to the general public that the professional holding the position of a "Social Worker" is educated appropriately in the key tenets of Social Work values, ethics and practice behaviors.

What do Social Workers do?

Social workers are trained to intervene, assess and support marginalized populations. With education specific to both sociological theories and psychological training, social workers enhance the well-being and quality of life for

individuals, families, groups, and communities. Social workers address and alleviate social issues and disparities by providing support, advocacy, and interventions. They work in diverse settings, including healthcare, schools, government agencies, non-profit organizations, and private practice. Social workers utilize a range of skills and methodologies to help people navigate complex situations, access resources, and develop positive coping mechanisms. They may engage in direct practice, such as counseling and therapy or they focus on macro-level activities such as policy development, community organizing, and social justice advocacy.

Who is a School Social Worker?

Current school social work credentialing in Pennsylvania requires a master's degree in social work, licensure from the Bureau Professional and Occupational Affairs, and an educational specialist certificate from PDE. The PDE School Social Work Educational Specialist Certificate was introduced in 2021. School social workers must have their PDE certification by August 1st, 2026. Emergency certifications can be sought by any existing Licensed Social Worker (LSW) or Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) as these professionals already hold a Master's degree in social work and a state license to practice social work. LSWs and LCSWs seeking emergency certification can be hired by an LEA, enroll in a school social work certificate program and consider their work as field experience.

What does a School Social Worker do?

With the passing of the first version of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, school social work services became codified into special education law in 1975. Many school social workers still function with this original intent - they provide direct "social work services" as a related service to students with disabilities by providing counseling services. School social workers also function broadly, supporting an entire district's adherence to federal laws related to serving homeless and foster youth. The school social worker is a key component of the evidence-based Multi-Tiered Systems of Support, providing universal support such as school-wide anti-bullying initiatives, targeted support such as facilitating psycho-educational groups related to anxiety and depression and intensive interventions such as counseling, home visiting and more. Most importantly, school personnel are often the first to notice subtle changes in our students, and school social workers are uniquely positioned to build trust with students and intervene quickly at the first signs of trouble.

Social work education equips professionals with versatile skills, enabling them to serve in a generalist capacity, linking marginalized populations to their needs, and providing one-on-one clinical mental health care. Like our school nurse colleagues, social workers are uniquely positioned due to our training not being exclusive to education. Our expertise lends itself to systems-level understanding, allowing us to advise and support families, students, administrators, and colleagues regarding the impact of various systems on education. We act as liaisons, guiding families through challenges related to homelessness, juvenile justice, domestic violence, child welfare, mental health, and substance use and other social issues plaguing our children.

Social Work, Mental Health and Education

Addressing mental health in the school system goes beyond providing therapeutic services. Developing a serious mental illness is dependent on many factors - trauma, emotional functioning and genetic predispositions. Decreased school and community connectivity, increased social issues, poverty, domestic violence, bullying, substance use, exposure to the criminal justice, child welfare and juvenile justice systems all impact the healthy development of a child into adolescence. School social workers promote the mental health and wellness of all students by helping to offset the risk factors associated with social problems. Promoting mental wellness occurs

each time a social worker helps an unaccompanied youth secure vital records, secures transportation to/from soccer practice after the family is displaced to a shelter, faxes a food stamps application, drives a student to their vision appointment or secures household cleaning supplies for a family. Many of the former, are federally mandated of schools under provisions of the McKinney-Vento Act¹. PDE guidance placed social workers into a number of systems and supports through publishings related anti-bullying programming, Student Assistance Programming, Threat Assessment Teams, Risk Assessment Teams, Data Teams, Child Study Teams and IEP teams. As an active participant in many district wide initiatives, school social workers provide a different lens to assess children and their circumstances, considering their involvement with systems at large.

Regarding clinical mental health services, clinical social workers are one of the largest groups of psychotherapists in the United States² treating mental illness. All Licensed Social Workers in Pennsylvania are trained and credentialed from their time of licensing to conduct psychotherapy, and several commercial insurance companies will reimburse for clinical work conducted by an LSW. However, provisions of Act 76 of 2018³ do not allow LSWs to practice independently in the private practice setting. An LSW must practice under the supervision of an LCSW (or a mix of supervision by an LCSW, a Licensed Clinical Psychologist or a Psychiatrist) for a total of 3,000 hours over two years and take an additional exam before they are granted their own LCSW license. Mental health and behavioral health services provided by an LCSW are reimbursable through medicare, medicaid and all commercial insurances. LCSWs are credentialed to assess and diagnose mental health disorders.⁴ Some social workers provide therapeutic services in the school setting to special education students and to general education students with parental consent.

Social Work Services: a Related Service for Special Education

School social workers providing direct counseling services are trained and credentialed to provide the support for students who have Individual Education Plans under IDEA.⁵ Services can be offered through targeted interventions of students who have similar needs such as facilitating a psychoeducational group for students struggling with executive functioning that need to develop time management and organization skills to be successful in school. Services can also be provided one on one where a social worker can counsel a student regarding peer conflict, emotional dysregulation and coping with anxiety, for example.

Sec. 300.34 (c) (14) of IDEA states that Social work services in schools includes—

- (i) Preparing a social or developmental history on a child with a disability;
- (ii) Group and individual counseling with the child and family;
- (iii) Working in partnership with parents and others on those problems in a child's living situation (home, school, and community) that affect the child's adjustment in school;
- (iv) Mobilizing school and community resources to enable the child to learn as effectively as possible in his or her educational program; and
- (v) Assisting in developing positive behavioral intervention strategies.

¹ [Local Homeless Education Liaisons: Understanding Their Role](#)

² [What is Clinical Social Work?](#)

³ [Act 76 of 2018](#)

⁴ [Act 76 of 2018](#)

⁵ [Sec. 300.34 Related services - Individuals with Disabilities Education Act](#)

Social Workers: Promoting Wellness Among Vulnerable Populations

The teachings of Abraham Maslow, a psychological theorist examined the framework for human motivation as a hierarchy of needs. Maslow asserts that until physiological needs are met and a feeling of physical safety is achieved, a human cannot feel the most basic form of belongingness to a social group, and further cannot develop cognitively or achieve self-actualization.⁶ This is a lens we must consider as we assess student needs.



Maslow's hierarchy of needs

In 2017, 30,264 students were identified as homeless across Pennsylvania.⁷ The most recent data set from the 21-22 school year reports a staggering 33% increase in just 5 years for a total of 40,003⁸ homeless students identified in Pennsylvania public schools. Some parts of the Commonwealth have seen exasperated figures, for example, in Cumberland County where the number of homeless students rose 20% in the most recent school year. For further context, there were 20,490 Pennsylvanian children in foster care⁹ in 2021 - served by an entire system of multidisciplinary professionals. Pennsylvania has nearly twice the number of homeless children than we have children in foster care - and yet their risk factors remain similar while the resources are nowhere near comparative.

When a student's basic needs are not met, their academic functioning will suffer and their mental health will suffer. Recent bed shortages in juvenile justice facilities¹⁰, an affordable housing crisis¹¹, an ongoing opiate epidemic¹² and youth mental health crisis¹³ reflect the over burdening of many systems. Pennsylvania students cannot wait for problems inherent to the child welfare system, the juvenile justice system, a systemic economic issue, or the opioid epidemic to resolve. Our children are displaced by aging landlords selling their homes to real estate hedge funds, resulting in their eviction when their rent is raised month after month. Our children are displaced when their remaining parent dies of an overdose. Our children are displaced when one parent is incarcerated for domestic violence against the other, and in the absence of income, fall victim to predatory housing practices when they're told by a landlord that if they "just leave the property" that they'll be spared the infamy of eviction on their record. Our children are displaced when their unapproving parent discovers their same sex attraction. No matter the cause - housing instability for any student leaves them at higher risk for social problems. The US Surgeon General warns the public that some youth are of particularly high risk regarding mental health: Those involved in the child welfare system, the juvenile justice system, those who are homeless and those who are runaways.

⁶ Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review*, 50(4), 370-396.

⁷ [2017-18 PDE ECYEH Homeless Report](#)

⁸ [2021-22 PDE ECYEH Homeless Report](#)

⁹ [2022 PA: State of Child Welfare](#)

¹⁰ [PCCD Report Pennsylvania Secure Detention Red Gap Analysis](#)

¹¹ [Housing Affordability in PA](#)

¹² [2022 Attorney General Fentanyl Report](#)

¹³ [US Surgeon General Advisory: Youth Mental Health](#)

Stuck in a truly between a gap in services, families who live in hotels or become doubled up with a relative meet the federal U.S. Department of Education definition of homelessness but they do not meet the federal Housing and Urban Development definition of homelessness¹⁴. Only the latter can access expedited housing assistance through federal funding at local housing authorities. A family living in a hotel they are paying for is not “homeless enough” to access the services often needed to get permanent housing. In Cumberland County, the cheapest rooms will start at \$1600 per month, a bill so high that most families are stuck perpetually in a single hotel room with their children.

Outside of homelessness, foster care, adjudications of dependency and delinquency - often, other high risk families are known to us. When a family reaches out because their LIHEAP was denied and the oil wasn't delivered to a 1st grade students' mobile home, the school social worker can drop off a space heater, help appeal the denial and apply for other local resources to alleviate the issue. Without school social work, the student may go days or weeks with poor sleep due to the cold temperatures in the house and a domino effect occurs: the students' academics slip, their behaviors increase, the lack of a working water heater results in hygiene issues and with mounting concerns, the classroom teacher makes a ChildLine referral. A child welfare caseworker is dispatched to find out that realistically the family needs a short-term heat source and a referral to the local church to get them through the winter months. This results in yet another burdensome assessment for our already taxed child welfare system, a delayed intervention for an at-risk student, and the possibility of a fractured school-family relationship when the family feels they were inappropriately reported to an agency that primarily functions to address child abuse.

This narrative highlights an important piece of the work school social workers do. School social work represents the only certified profession on this panel that is explicitly called upon to conduct home visiting as a practice behavior of our jobs. Last year, I conducted over 240 home visits to the families in my district, meeting children and parents where they are in their most comfortable environment. I bring resources to my families, coordinating mobile food pantries in low-income housing parking lots, or simply being the friendly face that delivers the excess of donated vegetables at the hotel or the trailer park. Being a school employee, I am able to quickly build rapport and trust with a family. I conduct visits sometimes by myself and sometimes with other stakeholders, or I help bridge the gap to a needed intervention by earning a family's trust and introducing them to the resource they truly need for meaningful change – perhaps an immigration attorney, a drug and alcohol professional, a food pantry or to the wider mental health system.

Multi-Tiered System of Support

Beyond physical needs and direct special education services, school social workers engage in evidenced based practices to promote the mental health and well-being of all students. Social workers play a vital role in implementing Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) within the broader framework of a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) in a school setting. PBIS, an evidence-based approach, aims to create a positive and inclusive school culture by reinforcing desired behaviors. MTSS, a comprehensive system, integrates academic and behavioral supports to address the diverse needs of students across different intensity levels. In the context of PBIS, social workers actively contribute to establishing a positive school climate by nurturing a supportive environment.

Collaborating with educators, administrators, and fellow support staff, they develop and execute strategies that promote positive behaviors and address the underlying social and emotional needs of students. Focusing

¹⁴ HHS Definitions of Homelessness for Federal Program Serving Children, Youth, and Families

particularly on at-risk students, social workers operating within the MTSS framework identify those requiring extra support due to factors like poverty, trauma, or mental health challenges. Through assessments, they gain insights into individual needs and collaborate with teachers to tailor interventions in line with PBIS principles. These interventions encompass targeted social-emotional learning programs, counseling services, and personalized behavior plans.

Social workers also play a crucial role in preventing and early identifying behavioral challenges among at-risk students. By closely working with teachers and leveraging their mental health expertise, social workers contribute to creating early intervention strategies that curb the escalation of behavioral issues. Within the MTSS, social workers frequently engage in Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions, providing more focused and intensive support for at-risk students. This involvement may include conducting small-group counseling sessions, formulating personalized behavior plans, and coordinating with external community resources to address complex needs. Moreover, social workers actively contribute to the overall MTSS by participating in data-driven decision-making. They analyze behavioral data, identify trends, assess the efficacy of interventions, and make informed adjustments to better support at-risk students. This collaborative and systematic approach aids in establishing a more inclusive, responsive, and effective school environment, fostering the well-being and success of all students, with special attention to those facing heightened risk factors.

Private Practice versus Public Service

Despite our passion for public service, it's crucial to acknowledge the financial disparities between public education and the private sector when discussing student services personnel. School nurses, school counselors, school psychologists and school social workers are not pigeonholed to education. Although not a requirement for their school employment, school counselors and school psychologists often hold the needed credentials to pursue their BPOA clinical licenses.

A school social worker, already holding a mental health license by default, will earn between 2-3x their salary by transitioning to a full-time role in a private mental health practice. This is a fact I've experienced working in the private practice field where a 53-minute therapy session provided by a Licensed Clinical Social Worker is reimbursed by Medicare at \$141¹⁵ – commercial insurance rates are comparable. The prerequisite for school social work, a Master's degree and social work license, is met by nearly 20,000 Licensed Social Workers and Licensed Clinical Social Workers in Pennsylvania, as reported by the BPOA. The Council on Social Work Education notes that 1,118 MSW degrees¹⁶ were conferred in 2022 in PA, indicating a robust pipeline of social work professionals, but a lack of financial incentive to enter the field of school social work. I am privileged to be able to pursue my passion of school social work, but if my husband and I decide to start a family, I will need to leave the field of school social work to pursue employment that can provide for the rising cost of living, especially related to childcare and housing. The National Association of Social Workers¹⁷ and School Social Work Association of America¹⁸ both endorse a ratio of 1 social worker to every 250 students for generalist social work support. A higher ratio of 1 social worker to every 50 students is suggested when a social worker is providing support to students with intensive needs. Current ratios of students to school social workers in Pennsylvania is 1:3,416.¹⁹

¹⁵ [Medicare Fee Guide](#)

¹⁶ Council on Social Work Education. (2024). Pennsylvania MSW degrees conferred. Alexandria, VA: Hussein, Amml.

¹⁷ [NASW School Practice Standards](#)

¹⁸ [SSWAA Ratio Resolution Statement](#)

¹⁹ [2022 Hopeful Futures - Student Services Ratios](#)

Workforce Issues

It is crucial to emphasize the prioritization of school-employed mental health professionals over the hiring of contracted providers who may not always possess the same level of credentials. School-employed professionals establish enduring relationships within the community and with students, fostering trust and stability. In contrast, contracted providers, subject to the mobility dictated by their employers, may lack the consistency necessary for cultivating lasting connections. The transient nature of contracted providers negatively impacts students, hindering the development of trust crucial for effective mental health support. Furthermore, relying on grant monies as a primary funding source for these services proves to be unsustainable and introduces uncertainties, creating a potential gap in mental health support for students.

I urge the committee to prioritize standardized basic education funding that prioritizes the long-term financial support of student services professionals. This approach ensures reliable mental health support for students, free from the red tape often associated with agency providers, creating a consistent environment for the well-being of our students.

In conclusion, the invaluable contributions of school social workers extend far beyond the classroom, reaching into the intricate webs of systems that impact our students' lives and contributing either indirectly to their mental wellness through generalist social work support, development of and adherence to systemic interventions (MTSS, PBIS, SAP and more) or dir

Solutions

To support continued mental wellness of Pennsylvania's students, I urge the committee to make considerations:

1. Expand loan forgiveness & scholarship opportunities

My school district is identified within the Low Income LEA directory published by FASFA. My colleagues teaching in the classroom, serving the exact same students I do, are eligible for loan cancellation for up to 17,500 with 5 successful years. This programming, coined "Teacher Loan Forgiveness"²⁰, doesn't offer any support to those of us in student services. I am on the same contract as teachers, I am paid the same as a teacher but I'm unable to access the same loan forgiveness opportunities.

2. Advocate for district hired student services personnel

Our testimony reflects the nuances and differences in our roles - and while I'm a major advocate for school social work specifically, I recognize that sharing the case planning for our at-risk youth and spreading their support among positive and influential adults is the key to their success. Please encourage the current use of grant funding to specifically hire district employed student services personnel.

²⁰ [Teacher Loan Forgiveness | Federal Student Aid](#)