



NASW

National Association of Social Workers / Connecticut Chapter

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Marsha DeGennaro
Woodbridge Board of Education
40 Beecher Road
Woodbridge, CT 06525

Dear Ms. DeGennaro:

On behalf of the National Association of Social Workers, Connecticut chapter, representing nearly 2,500 members we are writing you to express our concern with the elimination of the part time social worker at Beecher Elementary School. It is our understanding that are slated to be replaced with a school psychologist. An effective mental health approach for schools demands both school social workers and school psychologists, not one profession over the other.

Social workers are trained in a biopsychosocial perspective that starts with the individual. Social workers use a systems approach that is unlike any other profession in that the social worker evaluates the individual, family, and community to determine where intervention is necessary. In school systems the social worker is the only school personnel that addresses student's needs, from this comprehensive approach that considers both the educational environment and larger systems that impact on students. This is particularly important in a pandemic where children are at home. Social workers are recognized by the State of Connecticut as essential workers and essential workers should be the last employees to be let go during the Covid-19 virus.

Children today have more stress than ever before that place increasing numbers of children at risk. School social workers can help children learn ways of adapting to stressful situations before maladaptive coping skills are established. It has been shown that children with healthy adaptive coping skills to stress have higher attendance rates, decreased drop-out rates, higher test scores and higher self-esteem. School social workers are the one discipline in a school system that proactively addresses academic barriers within the child's home, school and community. School social workers serve as a catalyst to bring people together to create an environment conducive to learning.

According to the National Mental Health Association, less than 1 in 5 of the 12.5 million children in need of mental health services actually receive them. Many of these children will not achieve academic success due to social, emotional and behavioral problems affecting school performance. School social workers can help these students through

means of prevention, early identification, intervention, counseling and support. School social workers address issues of isolation, loss of connections to other students and the school due to the pandemic, bullying, crisis intervention, drug use, counseling, conflict resolution, issues of self-esteem, child neglect and abuse, working to connect students with needed services, and the list goes on. These are services that benefit the student, the student's family, teachers, and administrators. However services once dismantled are not easily gained back and school systems that have reduced or eliminated school social workers quickly find that they need the social workers and ultimately have the expense of rehiring social work staff.

Focusing on students is a key aspect of school social work practice however it is just one of several important parts played by school social workers. Social workers are pro-actively involved in working with parents to enhance parent involvement, assuring families have information and access to community services, and collaborating with outside agencies such as the Department of Children and Families are all part of a school social workers typical day. Teachers and school administrators also benefit, in multiple ways, from having available school social workers as a resource, including helping to explain how family issues are affecting academic performance, coordinating services, and assisting in developing individual educational goals and the means to help the student attain those goals.

Schools do not function in a vacuum. When students cross that school door (be it physically or virtually) they bring with them the life stresses of their family, impacts of trauma, fears of being bullied, and in this pandemic environment where so many families are struggling to get by those concerns press on the student's mind. All of these factors are obstacles to learning. All of these obstacles are brought into the classroom. School social workers break through these barriers by providing students with the coping skills and support necessary to allow learning to take place.

At a time when school safety and security is on all of our minds please know that school social workers are part of the answer to secure schools. School social workers identify children with mental health and social development needs and when school social workers are in the elementary schools such identification and referral to treatment can be made early on when intervention is most successful.

The Child Health and Development Institute of Connecticut, the Sandy Hook Advisory Commission and the Keep the Promise Coalition all have endorsed expansion of school social work services to address the mental health needs of school children. It would be most unfortunate if the Woodbridge Board of Education acts in reverse of these recommendations.

In regards to the school psychologists, we recognize the value of school psychologists, however they do not function in the same capacity of school social workers. The two professions complement each other, but are not interchangeable parts. School psychologists are master level trained personnel, as are school social workers, however school psychologists (unlike a licensed clinical psychologist) cannot diagnose and treat,

whereas licensed social workers can. This collaborative approach between the professions was demonstrated during a 2015 meeting regarding a plan to use solely school psychologists for mental health services in the Avon Schools. The school psychologists reportedly did not support the decision to eliminate the school social work positions. Furthermore, the CT Association of School Psychologists supports having both school psychologists and school social workers, recognizing the two professions are not interchangeable parts. After a 2.5 hours public hearing on replacing school social workers with school psychologists, with not one resident in support of the proposal, the Avon BOE voted to replace the school social workers with school psychologists. After 3 years the Avon BOE discovered they needed school social workers, rehiring several school social workers. Over the years this same scenario has played out in other towns, with the ultimately the same results.

As chair of the BOE Finance Committee, I know that you, and the other members of the BOE, have a deep commitment to the children in your school district. Your district's elementary school social worker share in that goal of educating and advancing students who are prepared for a middle school.

NASW/CT respectfully requests that the consideration to eliminate the Beecher school social worker be opposed and that the dedicated and experienced social worker be retained. Thank you for consideration of this most important matter. If I may be of further resource to you please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Stephen A. Wanczyk- Karp, LMSW
Executive Director