

## Kansas School Social Worker Association

### Barb Meyer, President

I wish to take this opportunity to thank Chairman Baumgardner and the rest of the committee for allowing me to speak about the relationship between School Social Work and School Mental Health. Schools are often one of the first places where student mental health issues are recognized and addressed.

I would like to talk briefly about school social workers. School Social Workers in Kansas are required to be master level social workers who are licensed by the Behavioral Sciences Regulatory Board. It is recommended in many districts that the social worker also complete a practicum in the school setting and take a college course in school social work. School Social Workers have unique training, knowledge and expertise to address mental health needs of students within the school environment and school social workers are the vital link between the school, the home and the community. The roles and responsibilities of school social workers can vary significantly based on the needs of the students, the school and the community. School social workers work with students at all functional levels serving student in special education and those in the general education classroom.

School Social Workers wear many hats and play many roles as they go throughout their work day. Student mental health issues are becoming more a part of our day. Research has shown that 18-20 percent of students have mental health issues significant enough to cause impairment to major life functions. Yet only one in five of these young people receives the necessary services. Schools are the primary place for mental health services for many students.

This is complicated in Kansas with the backlog in Medicaid applications processing through KanCare. There has also been a reduction in psychiatric hospital beds for children and adolescents. We have students in our buildings who need psychiatric hospitalization but the beds are not there. We believe that many students will benefit by KSDE making social emotional learning a priority in Kansas. Our organization was also pleased when Governor Brownback recently mentioned adding 150 more school psychologists and school counselors each year, but disappointed that school social workers were not mentioned. School mental health is always best addressed by a team approach that includes school social workers.

Many School Social Workers provide professional learning to teachers regarding mental health issues in students. A collaborative approach with other school staff to help promote a positive school climate is necessary in our schools. School Social Workers, school psychologists, and school counselors are involved in promoting and training staff on the impact of trauma on our students. Many of our students who have been diagnosed with mental illness have also experienced traumas in their life. School Social Workers help to identify what traumas these students have experienced and what protective factors we can help identify to help these students. Our students with mental health issues also have a greater chance of being placed into special education. We assist with functional behavioral assessments to help develop ways to keep these students in the classroom without major disruptions for other students. I have several students that I spend time with when the stress of dealing with their mental illness and school becomes too difficult and they need a place to recover and practice how to use their coping skills. Safe and successful learning environments are fostered through collaboration among school staff as well as community based partners.

School social workers and other school personnel who work with students with trauma and mental health issues are at risk for secondary trauma, compassion fatigue and burnout. All school support staff spends time helping to support our teachers. I know that many of us leave work and continue to think about these students. Self-care is definitely important for school staff who work with students who have experienced trauma and exhibit challenging behaviors and signs of mental illness. I believe more time needs to be devoted to supporting school staff and especially our teachers.

On Tuesday, January 11<sup>th</sup> Wichita had school when several districts around the area cancelled school due to icy road conditions. I would like to share a post from Facebook made by colleague which illustrates how important schools are for some children. It goes beyond academics for many of our most vulnerable.

Because you went to work today.....

It's cold. It's icy and snowy. The wind is howling but you had to go to work because your school did not cancel! How dare they, they must not care about kids or employees right??? What you might have forgotten and believe me we all do in our moments of frustrations is the whys. These districts have to take more into consideration then who is in or out of school. So here it is.....

Because you went to work today...

Hundreds of Wichita children weren't stuck at home alone all day because their parents had no choice but to go to work for fear of losing their job.

Because you went to work today...

Hundreds of Wichita children had breakfast and lunch which they wouldn't have gotten at home.

Because you went to work today....

That single mom didn't have to panic about what to do with her kids since taking a day off is out of the question.

Because you went to work today....

Many Wichita children left a home with minimal heat to walk into a building that was warm and comfortable.

Because you went to work today....

That child that went to bed abused and neglected saw your face today instead of someone that hurts them, they were thrilled to see you.

Because you went to work today....

A teen that was thinking about ending his life spoke to a counselor and began getting the help they need.

Because you went to work today...

Children learned and you made a difference.

As much as we all want to complain about having to get out in the cold we must remember that the district we serve has a large base of kids from less than safe circumstances to take into consideration and public-school teachers may be the highlight of these kid's day, their source of food and warmth and someone that loves them. Let's remember why we got into this profession in the first place...It was for the kids.

I'm so glad I went to work today

Thank you for this time to speak about School Mental Health.

