



School Social Work Association of Arizona

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SSWAAZ Response to Area School Districts Eliminating School Social Workers From Campuses

We are deeply disturbed to learn that some area school districts have voted to eliminate School Social Workers from all their campuses beginning next school year, 2024- 25. This decision is deeply concerning and has far-reaching implications for not only the well-being but also the educational success of students. School social workers play an invaluable role in our educational system, providing essential support that extends far beyond the classroom.

Research supports the essential role that school social workers play in fostering safe and nurturing environment conducive to learning. When providing comprehensive school mental health services in schools, which includes the presence of social workers, schools have been shown to significantly improve attendance rates, academic performance, school safety and overall school climate. Schools with positive school climate are more likely to achieve higher standards of school safety, including less bullying, less student isolation, more positive peer and teacher-student relationships, and less weapon threat and use in schools.(1)

School social workers have specialized training to meet the social, emotional and mental health needs of students. They serve as the primary mental health providers for students and are often the only counseling professionals available to students and their families to initially identify and provide interventions for issues that lead to violence.(2) "Although the vast majority of students with mental illness are not violent (and are more likely than their peers to be victims of violence), systems for early identification and mental health treatment for students with mental health challenges can protect students who are vulnerable to being disconnected, isolated, self-harming, retaliating and aggressive, all of which are predictive of future violence."(1)

The current youth mental health crisis among Arizona youth is an alarming reality that demands immediate attention. According to the AZ Dept of Health Services, suicide is the second leading cause of death for youth in Arizona since 2018(3), and currently ranks 49th in the Nation for youth mental health. (4) The two indicators used in this ranking by Mental Health America are higher prevalence of mental illness and lower rates of access to care. As such, schools are often the only opportunity for our most vulnerable youth to receive any level of mental health support. School social workers serve as a critical lifeline for students, identifying at risk students, offering counseling, crisis intervention, and mental health resources to families within the familiar and accessible school environment.

The need for school social workers and other mental health professionals has been recognized and supported across disciplines at the National level. The National Association of School Resource Officers, National Association of Elementary and Secondary School Principals, National Association of School Psychologists, American School Counselor Association and the School Social Worker Association of America created a joint statement for creating safe and successful schools, titled *A Framework for Safe and Successful Schools*. (5)



Best practices identified in the Framework include “Improve access to school-based mental health supports by ensuring adequate staffing levels in terms of school-employed mental health professionals who are trained to infuse prevention and intervention services into the learning process and to help integrate services provided through school–community partnerships into existing school initiatives.”(5) The recommended school social worker to student ratio set forth by School Social Work Association of America to effectively meet student needs is 1:250.(6)

SSWAAZ has collaborated with other state associations including the Arizona Association of School Psychologists, Arizona School Counselors Association and School Nurses Association of Arizona, and recognize the importance of each of role in meeting the needs of all students. Each role is equally important and interdependent.

As a result of the national Youth Mental Health crisis, The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), through the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), and the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), announced \$206 million in grant awards towards youth mental health. The School Safety Program was established within the AZ Department of Education to provide funding to districts to “support, promote and enhance safe and effective learning environments for all students by supporting the costs of placing school resource officers, juvenile probation officers, school counselors and school social workers on school campuses.”(7) In addition, Districts may utilize other funds such as Title I, Special Education, Title IV, and M&O funding to fund school social work positions at their sites.

Obtaining funding for school social workers is not the problem; rather, the problem is districts’ not effectively prioritizing and utilizing these funds appropriately. By eliminating school social workers, campuses are not just losing essential personnel; they are also depriving our students of a fundamental and urgently needed support system. These professionals are uniquely positioned to identify and address the socio-emotional and mental health needs of students, intervening early to prevent escalation of issues that may hinder their academic progress and overall safety and well-being.

The safety of our schools and the mental health of our students should be paramount. We urge the reconsideration of this decision and advocate for the retention and support of school social workers within all Arizona school districts for the betterment of our students and the community as whole.

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Statement approved by the SSWAAZ board on 11/17/2023



- 1) Astor, R. A., Jacobson, L., Wrabel, S. L., Benbenishty, R., & Pineda, D. (2017). Welcoming practices: Creating schools that support students and families in transition Oxford University Press.
- (2) School Social Work Association of America. (n.d.). School social work: A vital part of the education team. Retrieved from: https://www.sswaa.org/files/ugd/486e55_5c7e1bd8a31e4400895dd1c6bb77d1d0.pdf
- (3) [Arizona Department of Health Services Suicide Prevention Action Plan 2022- 2023](#)
- (4) Reinert, M, Fritze, D. & Nguyen, T. (October 2021). [“The State of Mental Health in America 2022”](#) Mental Health America, Alexandria VA.
- (5) Cowan, K. C., Vaillancourt, K., Rossen, E., & Pollitt, K. (2013). [A framework for safe and successful schools](#) [Brief]. Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.
- (6) [School Social Workers Helping Students Succeed: Recommended School Social Worker to Student Ratios](#). School Social Work Association of America www.sswaa.org (2013)
- (7) Arizona Department of Education. (n.d.). School Support & Prevention Programs. Retrieved from <https://www.azed.gov/ssp>

Also Informed by

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U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. (n.d.). The Surgeon General’s advisory on youth mental health and social media. Retrieved from <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/sg-youth-mental-health-social-media-advisory.pdf>