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MSSWA
MINNESOTA SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS ASSOCIATION

January 30, 2023

Senator Steve A. Cwodzinski
Education Policy Committee Chair
95 University Avenue West
Minnesota Senate Building, Room 3207
St. Paul, MN 55155

Honorable Chair and Committee Members:

My name is Christy McCoy and I am the Legislative Chair for the Minnesota School Social Workers Association (MSSWA), a school social worker, and a licensed clinical social worker. I have worked for St. Paul Public Schools for over 26 years and have been a school social worker for the past 19 years. On behalf of the Minnesota School Social Workers Association, I am offering the organization's strong support for establishing comprehensive school mental health services lead positions at the Minnesota Department of Education as outlined in SF123.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, research showed that 1 in 4 children had been exposed to at least one traumatic event. Since the pandemic, all of us have been impacted by this collective trauma experience. This includes our youngest learners to adolescents, to school staff and the community as a whole. Exposure to high levels of trauma, especially during a child's early years can adversely ***affect a child's sense of security, attention span, memory and ability to process information and lead to inconsistent school attendance, and poor outcomes later in adulthood.***

School social workers have witnessed first hand the ongoing impact of how unresolved grief and loss, persistent anxiety and fears have overwhelmed the capacity of many students' ability to cope and this is adversely affecting their educational experience. To mitigate the detrimental effects of this ongoing public health crisis, a comprehensive approach is required to address the social, emotional & mental health needs of students. This comprehensive approach should prioritize the creation of two mental health leads to serve as a source of information and support for schools in addressing the mental health needs of students, teachers, and school staff, and developing comprehensive school mental health systems in school districts and charter schools. One lead would be responsible for coordinating the supports and resources to address the mental health needs of students and the other lead would work on addressing the mental health needs of teachers and other school staff.

Students across the state of Minnesota in both urban and rural communities are not immune to the collective trauma of the pandemic, increased gun violence and racialized tension. Prior to the pandemic, some students were already struggling with issues such as anxiety, depression, self-regulation, and chemical health, but this year, students have required even more support in the classroom to be present and ready to learn. School social workers are reporting increased persistent mental health needs, causing a strain on the current system.

Everyday the social, emotional & mental health needs are apparent. This shows up as chronic absenteeism, externalizing behaviors like bullying, physical and verbal aggression and internalizing behaviors such as not being able to concentrate, debilitating anxiety, self destructive acts such as chemical use, etc. School social workers across the state are spending time providing crisis management services to address issues related to suicidal ideation, domestic violence, homelessness, death of loved ones, etc. School social workers are reporting an increase in suicide risk assessments. For example, I have been conducting suicide risk assessments on a weekly basis since the start of this school year. It is important for you to know, that too often even when a high risk is determined and a student goes to a hospital, there is a lack of openings for inpatient services. Youth sit in the ER for days or are released and return to school, where we welcome them and create a safety plan and school routine.

The reality is schools are struggling in the aftermath of a pandemic yet at the same time it is important to acknowledge the resilience of the students, families, and educators. These vital positions would streamline services, provide information and resources for school districts, charter schools, teachers, and families to support students', teachers', and school staff mental health needs. MSSWA urges you to support SF123 as one step to building a comprehensive, integrated mental health support structure for all schools. SF123 is ***an investment not only in the healing and recovery process but also ensures all students are able to learn. Students cannot learn if their mental health and physical needs are unmet.*** Your consideration and support is appreciated.

If you have any questions or would like further information, please feel free to contact me at christy.mccoy@spps.org or 651-890-9988.

Sincerely,

Christy McCoy

Christy McCoy MSW LICSW
MSSWA Legislative Chair