



School Social Work Association of America Resolution Statement

CLINICAL SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK: RESPONDING TO THE MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS OF STUDENTS

“School social workers are often the first line of defense to provide clinical services to students and their families in a school setting. The clinical role of the school social worker includes diagnostician, counselor, and group facilitator. Assessment of the student’s problem involves the diagnostician’s role. The counselor role is performed with intervention services such as individual or family counseling. The group facilitator role can be applied in social skills groups, grief groups, anger management groups, parent groups, and staff team groups” (Lee, 2007).

Summary

Qualified school social workers provide mental health counseling and psychotherapy to promote the academic success of students. When a school social worker is working under the supervision of a licensed clinical social worker the clinical skills that are utilized should be incorporated into clinical supervision plans submitted to state social work board for approval. State licensing boards should approve clinical supervision plans that delineate the use of clinical skills in a school setting. School social workers who apply to take the clinical licensure exam should be considered for approval based on their training and documented clinical experiences in schools.

The Rationale

Students’ unmet mental health needs can be a significant barrier to student academic and personal-social development and even compromise school safety. School social workers are prepared to recognize and respond to student mental health crises and needs. School social workers address these barriers to student success by offering education, prevention, and crisis intervention.

One of the first places where children’s mental health crises and mental health needs are initially recognized and addressed is in the schools (Hennessy & Green-Hennessey, 2000; Hoagwood et al., 2005). Research indicates that between 18%-20% of students have mental health issues significant enough to cause functional impairment (Dore, 2005), yet only one out of five of these students receive the necessary services (Kaffenberger & Seligman, 2007). Furthermore, diverse students, including special needs students, students of color, and those from families with low income, are at greater risk for mental health concerns, but are less likely to receive needed services due to lack of and access to community resources (Kaffenberger & Seligman, 2007; Vera, Buhin, & Shin, 2006). Students with untreated mental health issues can develop significant barriers to learning, with nearly half of these students eventually dropping out of school (Erford, Newsome, & Rock, 2007). School social workers often serve as the primary mental health provider for these students as they may be the only counseling professional available to students and their families and have the required skills and training to provide the services (Early & Vonk, 2001; Hennessy & Green-Hennessey, 2000; Kelly, Berzin, et al., 2010).

In a 2008 survey of school social workers, only 11 percent of respondents reported that all or most of the students on their case loads receive outside counseling or therapeutic services (Kelly, Berzin, et al., 2010). School social workers who are licensed clinical social workers are necessary to fill the gap in access for students to essential mental health services.

Qualifications of School Social Workers

Social workers receive two different sets of credentials: degrees and licenses. Social work degrees are earned from academic institutions. The bachelor level social worker is prepared for practice of mental health case management. The master level social worker has the training and skills to provide services beyond case management through advanced clinical mental health practice and may also be trained in a specialty area such as

chemical dependency. School social workers in most states must be licensed by the state social work board and the state department of education.

Master level school social workers under clinical supervision or holding a clinical license have received instructional hours in evidence-based theory, practices and curricula through clinical coursework and post MSW supervision to competently practice mental health/behavioral assessments, interventions, evaluations, and diagnoses. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) has outlined core competencies and practice behaviors that every student from a CSWE accredited institution must demonstrate in order to be eligible for graduation. SSWAA believes that school social workers at the master's level are qualified to and do provide clinical services that address mental health issues under appropriate licensure or supervision.

The Role of the School Social Worker

School social workers at the master level receiving clinical supervision or holding clinical licensure are prepared through their education, practicum, clinical supervision, and licensure to provide clinical mental health services in a school setting. They effectively utilize clinical social work skills to address the mental health needs of students through evidence-informed assessment, diagnosis, intervention, and evaluation to individuals, small groups, families and school-wide.

Some states permit school social workers to practice at a bachelor's level. Bachelor level and master level practitioners without clinical licensure or supervision are qualified to provide mental health case management services.

The Association Social Work Boards (ASWB) has published a document outlining the definition and role of clinical social work. According to the ASWB Model Social Work Practice Act, "*Counseling* means a method used by social workers to assist individuals, couples, families, and groups in learning how to solve problems and make decisions about personal, health, social, educational, vocational, financial, and other interpersonal concerns."

Additionally the document also defines *psychotherapy* as, "...the use of treatment methods utilizing a specialized, formal interaction between a Clinical Social Worker and an individual, couple, family, or group in which a therapeutic relationship is established, maintained and sustained to understand unconscious processes, intrapersonal, interpersonal and psychosocial dynamics, and the assessment, diagnosis, and treatment of mental, emotional, and behavioral disorders, conditions and addictions" (ASWB, 2012, pg. 9-10).

Furthermore, the ASWB Model Social Work Practice Act outlines the practice of clinical social work as follows:

The practice of Clinical Social Work is a specialty within the practice of Master's Social Work and requires the application of social work theory, knowledge, methods, ethics, and the professional use of self to restore or enhance social, psychosocial, or biopsychosocial functioning of individuals, couples, families, groups, organizations and communities. The practice of Clinical Social Work requires the application of specialized clinical knowledge and advanced clinical skills in the areas of assessment, diagnosis and treatment of mental, emotional, and behavioral disorders, conditions and addictions. Treatment methods include the provision of individual, marital, couple, family and group counseling and psychotherapy. The practice of Clinical Social Work may include private practice and the provision of clinical supervision (ASWB, 2012, pg. 6).

The national School Social Work Practice Model, as outlined by the School Social Work Association of America, "encourages school social workers (1) to provide evidence-based education, behavior, and mental health services; (2) to promote a school climate and culture conducive to student learning and teaching excellence; (3) to maximize access to school-based and community-based resources" (SSWAA, 2013). School social workers deliver services that promote social and emotional development, which includes offering education, prevention, and intervention services utilizing clinical skills designed to promote positive mental health and to remove any barriers to learning and student success. School social work services span the continuum of care provided to students, families, the school, and the community, and are consistent with school social workers' commitment to student success. School social workers may:

- Deliver classroom instruction that enhances awareness of mental health; promotes positive, healthy behaviors; and reduces stigma associated with mental health issues.
- Provide small group counseling focused on anger management, bullying, peer/social relationships, grief/loss, and childhood DSM IV-TR diagnoses (autism, anxiety, depression, or ADHD).
- Provide responsive services including internal and external referral procedures, counseling or crisis intervention focused on mental health or situational (e.g. grief, difficult transitions) concerns with the intent of helping the student return to the classroom by removing barriers to learning;
- Utilize evidence-based theories, such as cognitive behavioral therapy or solution focused therapy, to facilitate the process of understanding unconscious processes, intrapersonal, interpersonal and psychosocial dynamics, and the assessment, treatment, and evaluation of mental, emotional, and behavioral disorders, conditions and addictions.
- Provide individual services to students that address their academic, personal, social, and mental health needs;
- Educate teachers, administrators, parents/guardians, and community stakeholders about the mental health concerns of students, including recognition of the role environmental factors have in causing or exacerbating mental health issues;
- Advocate and collaborate with school and community stakeholders to ensure that students and their families have access to mental health services.
- Participate in professional development to increase their ability to recognize and respond to student mental health crises and concerns.

Implication for Licensing Boards

Although the ASWB Model Act (2012) is designed to be a guideline for statutes, rules, and regulations for state social work boards, the minimum credentials to practice clinical social work vary according to the licensure board in each state. Requirements typically include a master of social work degree, supervision during a practicum and post-graduation, and successful completion of the ASWB clinical licensing exam. SSWAA believes school social workers can fulfill a requirement for supervised post-graduate clinical experience through direct mental health services provided to students and families as school social workers. Such services include diagnosis, counseling services, interventions, and assessments. A recommendation to licensing boards is to require a pre-approved supervision plan that outlines the anticipated supervised “post-graduate clinical experience” that may be necessary to apply to take a clinical exam.

Implications for Schools

SSWAA believes that schools have an obligation to provide “highly qualified” school social workers including, but not limited to, school social workers qualified to utilize clinical skills. SSWAA supports schools by providing and encouraging continuing education credits and advocating for the completion of clinical licensing requirements.

Implications for K-12 Students

Only 11% of students with mental health needs receive services outside the school. SSWAA believes students should receive services, including mental health interventions, from school social workers who are licensed at the clinical level or acting under appropriate supervision. SSWAA believes school social workers licensed at the appropriate level do provide clinical services, such as counseling intervention and assessment.

Implications for School Social Workers

Master level school social workers utilize clinical skills to foster a positive learning environment within the school. Before beginning clinical supervision, a masters-level school social worker should develop a detailed supervision plan that outlines anticipated goals and learning objectives. Counseling and psychotherapy skills, as defined by the ASWB and state statutes should be included when composing a supervision plan.

With appropriate clinical licensure and experience, mental health interventions with a school social worker may be written into a student's Individualized Education Program. School social workers may also be permitted to bill Medicaid for mental health interventions. School social workers should seek to provide competent services, through continuing education requirements, supervision, or the pursuit of clinical licensure.

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