Summary

The School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA) believes that all children and youth have a right to a quality public education delivered in a safe and supportive learning environment. As such, SSWAA supports a comprehensive approach to school safety that promotes the emotional and physical wellbeing of all education stakeholders: students, school personnel, families, and community members. This approach focuses on addressing the mental and behavioral health of all students, developing healthy school climates, training educators in early identification protocols, ensuring safe facilities, creating family partnerships, and establishing community collaborations that support safety.

The Rationale

Violence, injury and unaddressed student mental health concerns can create climates that inhibit learning while adversely affecting the wellbeing of students and school personnel across the United States (Astor, Benbenishty, & Marachi, 2010). To address these concerns, SSWAA supports measures to increase safety in schools, including sensible gun safety legislation, enhancement of mental health services in schools and communities, bullying and violence prevention and reduction programs, and broad based efforts to reduce exposure of children and youth to violence in the environments in which they live, play, and learn.

Qualifications of School Social Workers

SSWAA endorses evidence-based approaches that reduce violence and increase safety in public schools. School social workers are well-positioned to spearhead identification, training, and implementation of evidence-based educational, behavioral, and mental health services in schools as well as in partnerships with community agencies.

Utilizing multi-tiered systems of support to deliver prevention and intervention services, school social workers enhance safe and healthy school climates and increase students' capacity to learn (Frey, et al, 2013; NASW, 2012). Services provided by school social workers in multi-tiered systems of support include, but are not limited to:

Tier one universal prevention efforts that create positive school climates, including:
- Policies aimed at bullying and violence prevention, inclusion, and acceptance of diversity
- Character education
- Staff development addressing mental health needs, trauma, risk assessment, and cultural competence
- Parental/family involvement strategies
- Development of partnerships and safety oversight committees involving school and community stakeholders

Tier two secondary interventions:
- Peer mediation programs
- Asset-building teams
- Assessment, consultation, and progress monitoring
- Small group counseling, including student support groups

Tier three targeted interventions:
- Direct therapeutic services to students presenting more severe social, emotional and behavioral concerns
- Special education services, including case management and designated instructional services

- Identification of critical times for interventions, such as when school shootings, completed suicides, sudden and unexpected deaths of stakeholder(s), natural disasters, and/or heightened racial or ethnic unrest occurs (Frey, et al, 2013; NASW School Social Work Standards, 2012).

School social workers embrace collaboration with school counselors, school psychologists, other specialized instructional support personnel, and school resource officers by actively working towards nonviolent resolution of conflicts (Mattaini, 2001). We recognize the importance of caring adults as change agents in the lives of children and youth and seek to ensure the presence of supportive adults in both school and community settings. This strength-based approach helps build and enhance internal and external assets for children and youth that research has shown leads to greater academic outcomes and increased pro-social behavior (Search Institute, 2003).

SSWAA promotes training other school community members to identify potential threats to safety. School social workers have the education and training necessary to assist educators in recognizing these potential threats and in identifying warning signs, such as disturbing drawings or written commentary, while developing sensitivities to avoid profiling based on outward appearances. With training, teachers, administrators, other school staff, parents, and extended family members become integral parts of an early identification system.

In times of crisis, school social workers provide support and crisis intervention services in collaboration with other specialized instructional support personnel, school resource officers, public safety personnel, and other first responders to ensure students' physical safety, the integrity of facilities, and efficient school-wide immediate responses. As direct practitioners, school social workers also provide follow up services to members of the school community who are impacted by vicarious trauma or may experience symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Beliefs
SSWAA believes that school safety is enhanced by establishing a culturally competent school community committed to prevention, support, early identification, community and family involvement, and acceptance of diversity. When each member feels welcomed, valued, and able to meaningfully participate in the school community's academic and social-emotional success, the community will have helped ensure its own safety.

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