

School Safety Working Group- School Security Special Task Force
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Increasing the Number of School Social Workers in Public Schools Throughout the State of Connecticut

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My name is Ashley Williams and I am currently a master's level social work student at the University of Connecticut. I am also a member of Connecticut's Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers and I am here to call upon the State of Connecticut to have a school social worker in every school throughout the state.

I received my Bachelor's in Social Work from Eastern Connecticut State University in May of 2012. As part of my education there I had to complete a four hundred hour clinical internship during my senior year. This internship took place in a rural town at a public school that housed grades 7 through 12. This school was a regional school for three small towns and had a student population of about 390. For these 390 students, there was one school social worker and upon my arrival as the student social work intern, I definitely saw that this one social worker could not take on the amount of work that she had by herself. NASW has a recommendation of 1 school social worker to every 250 students, so as you can see this ratio was not nearly met at the school I interned at.

School social workers are on the frontline at schools as they are often the first people to realize that a student is going through something traumatic that needs to be addressed. The school that I interned at may have had a fairly small student body, but the obstacles that the students within the school faced were vast. Some of these obstacles included: tardiness/absenteeism for various reasons, home violence, parental incarceration, drug use, self-injurious behavior and severe bullying cases. Although this particular school had a guidance department that had two guidance counselors and a school psychologist, the social emotional issues that faced these students needed to be addressed by a trained professional social worker. Unfortunately, many students were referred to the guidance counselors because the school social worker was too tied up. Therefore, these students did not receive the the help that they needed simply because the resources were not there.

For the purposes of this particular hearing, I think it is necessary to bring up the fact that more school social workers would equal more school security. In a time where school security is at the front of everybody's mind, we need to address the dire need to hire more school social workers. Throughout my year at this particular school, I was often faced with situations that involved self-injurious or suicidal students. When this was brought to my attention or my supervisor's attention we acted right away and got the students to a place of safety: i.e. a hospital or some sort of program. Many of these students had unidentified disorders that were later identified by the hospital that we sent them to.

Although we took great pride in helping students when we could, the two of us just could not cover the 390 students in the school. This is the case in many school districts, and students with

great emotional needs are being ignored because the human resources to help them do not exist. These at risk students could easily have continued their self-injurious behavior, they could have taken it a step further and taken their lives or they could have gotten so unstable that they took the lives of other students. This is one huge reason why the State of Connecticut needs to hire more school social workers in their public schools to address the severe issues at hand.

Despite only being an intern at this school, I created bonds with the students that I worked with each and every day. There was one female student who was put on my caseload in the beginning of the school year who I was told was incredibly difficult to work with. In years past, she had been expelled, been in multiple fights and had extreme issues with authoritative figures in the school. My work with this student went really well and we made huge breakthroughs together. The staff at the school saw huge improvements in this student and I truly believe that her hard work and dedication to our weekly meetings played a role in her improvement. This is only one example of success, but school social workers make huge strides with students who are seen as being a “lost cause.” We need more school social workers to create these positive relationships with students who would otherwise go unnoticed.

The primary purpose of a school is to educate, however when students are struggling emotionally or socially, education cannot occur to its’ fullest potential. We have seen socially and emotionally disturbed people do things that are beyond our comprehension and although this is not something we enjoy talking about, we must come together and realize that school social workers are a vital organ to our schools. School security is something that is being looked at in great detail, and to ignore the idea of hiring more school social workers, would be tragic. The time for Connecticut to become front runners in school safety is now, and in order to do so more school social workers need to be present in our public schools.

Thank you for your time.