

Testimony before the Mental Health Working Group
January 29, 2013
DeEtta G. Breitwieser, MSW

Dear Task Force Members:

As a School Social Worker in the Newtown Public Schools from 1983 until retirement in 2006, I would like to address the need for school social work services across the State. Many schools in Connecticut have no school social work services and those that do have to share the service with several other schools in their district. When I began work in the Newtown system, I was the only social worker for all levels. As parents, school administrators and staff recognized the value of social work service in their schools, additional social workers were hired, eventually to include a social worker at each level, one for the high school, one for the middle school and one to cover all four elementary schools, which was my assignment. Recently I learned the elementary position was cut some years ago, leaving no school social work service at any of the four elementary schools, namely, Hawley School, Head O' Meadow School, Middle Gate School and Sandy Hook School.

Some districts may believe their school psychologists and guidance counselors provide the mental health service, so there is no need for a school social worker. I would like to clarify this misconception by describing the work a school social worker does and differences that exist in the education and training the various disciplines have.

First, a school social worker is trained in a family systems approach, meaning s/he looks beyond the classroom for solutions to problems. The school social worker often makes home visits and meets collaboratively with community mental health and other service providers to diagnose a problem and arrive at a solution. The school psychologist and guidance counselor focus on classroom performance and provide educational testing while holding parent meetings to gather background information or discuss solutions is a lesser time spent. The difference is for the school social worker this work makes up the bulk of their job while the other providers are more focused on the academic domain. The school social worker is able to develop a more in-depth relationship with significant members outside of the school that often means better cooperation and success for the student. This description is by no means intended to negate the skills of the other school mental health providers but to highlight the value of a full-team, collaborative approach. Working together in a systems approach, the school mental health providers can offer the student wrap-around services with a positive outcome.

Secondly, a school social worker undergoes training designed to not only understand child behavior but also to develop insight into his/her own thoughts and feelings, so as not to allow the interactions and decisions s/he makes to be biased or negatively influenced. The social worker undergoes intensive supervision during placement training with emphasis on the use of self in the helping relationship, while other

disciplines by necessity must focus on test administration while also learning the emotional needs of the student. The school social worker brings an objective, impartial perspective to the table that is often needed when there is conflict.

Thirdly, with training in an eco-systemic approach, the school social worker provides school staff with training in child abuse prevention and reporting, as well as offering parent training workshops to the school community. During my tenure in Newtown, I participated in the community's prevention task force and also a regional community collaborative. This is a school social worker's appropriate work.

Personally, I am still reeling and devastated from the horrific murders at the Sandy Hook School, where I worked for 21 years and where my four children attended. Just as so many in our community are probably asking themselves, I, too, wonder if there was anything I could have done, anything within my power, to have prevented such a tragedy. We have no knowledge of what might have influenced the disturbed mind of the perpetrator to commit such a crime. Could more parent and/or staff training have alerted relevant persons to detect such a looming event and if detected, the appropriate reporting contact? Hindsight is not the answer. However, each school district should assure a full complimentary of mental health services, which includes a full-time school social worker at each school. Our children deserve nothing less.

Respectfully Submitted,

DeEtta G. Breitwieser, MSW