

Testimony of Angelina Romano, MSW, LSW
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Good morning, Chair Schweyer, Chair Topper, and committee members.

My name is Angelina Romano. I'm a full-time school social worker, part-time mental health outpatient therapist, and advocate for Pennsylvania's students. I serve as the sole social worker for 2,200 students in the South Middleton School District in Cumberland County. I've witnessed firsthand the challenges faced by our most vulnerable students due to economic distress, social issues, and systemic gaps in social services. I'm here to highlight how school social work contributes to the well-being of families and the mental health of students.

When a student's basic needs go unmet, both their academic functioning and mental health suffer. Social work education equips professionals with versatile skills, enabling them to serve in a generalist capacity, connecting marginalized populations to their needs, and providing one-on-one clinical mental health care. Similar to our school nurse colleagues, social workers are uniquely positioned due to their training not being exclusive to education. Our expertise allows us to advise and support families, students, administrators, and colleagues regarding the impact of various systems on education.

The school social worker is a key component of the evidence-based Multi-Tiered Systems of Support, offering universal support such as school-wide anti-bullying initiatives, targeted support like facilitating psycho-educational groups related to anxiety and depression, and intensive interventions such as counseling and home visiting. Most importantly, school personnel are often the first to notice subtle changes in our students, and school social workers are uniquely positioned to build trust with students and intervene quickly at the first signs of trouble.

In 2017, approximately 30,000 students were identified as homeless across Pennsylvania. The most recent data from the 21-22 school year reports a staggering 33% increase in just 5 years, totaling approximately 40,000 homeless students in PA schools. In 2021, 20,490 Pennsylvania children were in foster care, served by an entire child welfare system. The state has nearly twice the number of homeless students than children in foster care. Despite similar risk factors between these two groups, there is a lack of uniformity in serving homeless children, except by way of their homeless liaisons - which is only mandated to be one single individual serving an entire school district. Social workers play a key role in supporting this population.

Beyond direct mental health support through counseling, social workers are trained to assess social determinants of health. Recent bed shortages in juvenile justice facilities, an affordable housing crisis, an ongoing opioid epidemic, and a youth mental health crisis reflect the burden on many systems. Our schools are a microcosm of our society, and symptoms of these issues enter our K-12 buildings every day. Pennsylvania's students cannot wait for major social issues to resolve. Displaced by factors like landlords selling homes to real estate hedge funds, experiencing life without parents due to the opioid epidemic, and lacking parental involvement, many students are at elevated risk of mental health concerns.

Promoting mental wellness occurs each time a social worker helps an unaccompanied youth secure vital records, faxes a food stamps application, helps a parent navigate a PFA, or brings a child a new pair of sneakers. School social workers work directly with all systems involved with at-risk youth: their families, case workers, Guardian Ad Litem, juvenile probation officers. We testify in their adjudicatory hearings, advocate to their utility companies, and coordinate with churches, community resources, and other stakeholders to meet the needs of our students.

It's imperative to highlight that we represent the only certified profession on this panel explicitly called upon to conduct home visits as a practice behavior. We meet children and parents in various settings, - their homes, their RVs, even the tent cities where our most vulnerable students live - bringing resources that make it possible for students to succeed in schools and bridging the communication gap between non-involved parents and the school system. When students see us showing up for them and providing for their basic needs, it improves their overall sense of connection to their community, trusted adults, and the wider education system.

Despite our passion for public service, financial disparities between public education and the private sector persist. Licensed Social Workers or Licensed Clinical Social Workers can earn 2-3 times more in private mental health practice. This financial reality poses a challenge for individuals like me, privileged to pursue a passion of public service in education, but faced with the dilemma that it is not the sustainable or financially responsible decision for my family.

It's crucial to emphasize the prioritization of school-employed mental health professionals over contracted providers who typically lack the same level of credentials expected of certified professionals by PDE. School-employed professionals establish enduring relationships within the community and with students, fostering trust and stability. In contrast, the transient nature of those employed by contracted providers negatively impacts students, hindering the development of crucial trust for effective mental health support. Relying on grant monies as a primary funding source proves unsustainable, introducing uncertainties and potential gaps in mental health support for students.

I urge policymakers to prioritize long-term investments that allow public schools to employ and retain highly trained professionals committed to the long-term success of students and schools. Policymakers should also prioritize incentives such as scholarships and loan forgiveness to make school-based practice more attractive for social workers and other professionals. Doing so will ensure reliable mental health support for students in an environment where they already spend a significant amount of time.

Optimal mental health is not achieved solely through weekly therapy. It's achieved through robust, holistic, and inclusive educational programming that promotes self-worth, belongingness, and dignity of each student.