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PREPARED TO PROMOTE EDUCATIONAL EQUITY: THE CASE FOR SPECIALIZED SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK TRAINING IN NEW MEXICO

A POLICY BRIEF

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It has been seven years since the state was found in violation of its mandate to equitably educate all students (*Yazzie/Martinez v. State of New Mexico*, 2018). Since this finding, New Mexico has remained at the bottom of national rankings for education and child wellbeing (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2024). Students of color, Native American students, and students with disabilities in New Mexico continue to experience poor educational outcomes (Legislative Finance Committee, 2023) and remain chronically underserved (New Mexico Center on Law and Poverty, 2024). Given the correlation between social needs and educational performance, school social work services create essential pathways to educational equity and success. In many New Mexico communities, school social workers (SSWs) are the only accessible providers of these critical services.

SSWs represent an essential and substantial group of Specialized Instructional Support Personnel who serve as critical links in the state's educational and social service infrastructure, yet they currently are not required to undergo specialized training to prepare them for their unique roles. As a result, they often find themselves marginalized by education systems which may not fully understand their work (Sherman, 2016), unsupported in adapting social work practice skills to the unique institutional environment of schools (Knox et al., 2020), and ill-equipped to advocate for students and families within these systems (Knox, 2022). This policy brief examines the implications of this gap and proposes a comprehensive framework for enhancing school social work practice standards to better serve New Mexico's diverse student population.

School Social Work in New Mexico: The Current Landscape

CONTEXT AND URGENCY

The 2018 *Yazzie/Martinez* ruling found that New Mexico failed to provide sufficient resources for English language learners, Native American students, and students with disabilities; the ruling specifically identified limited support services—including social work—as a critical contributor to ongoing inequities (*Yazzie/Martinez v. State of New Mexico*, 2018). The more recent September 2024 motion calling for a comprehensive action plan noted that not only has the state made inadequate progress since 2018, but that many districts have experienced cuts to critical social services and other support programming (New Mexico Center on Law and Poverty, 2024).

The social and behavioral needs of students with disabilities represent a critical concern across the state. While these needs impact student performance in school, current resources are insufficient. A 2023 Legislative Finance Committee report on special education reported that stakeholders across the state reported “inadequate services for developing individualized education plans, and insufficient behavioral supports for students including an over-reliance on student removals, restraints, and seclusion” (Legislative Finance Committee, 2023).



CURRENT REQUIREMENTS FOR SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK

Under current New Mexico regulations (New Mexico Administrative Code 6.63.7), which has not been revised since 1998, social workers can practice in schools with a Bachelors or Masters degree in Social Work and a general social work license issued by the New Mexico Board of Social Work Examiners. Like other educational professionals, school social workers operate within a three-tiered system of licensure from the New Mexico PED. This requirement allows individuals with social work degrees and licensure to work in schools as Level 1 practitioners. To progress to Level 2, social workers must demonstrate competency as verified by the superintendent. In addition to the Level 2 requirements, progression to Level 3 requires a Masters degree and at least 875 hours of supervised experience providing therapeutic services to children in a school setting (including children with severe emotional disturbances).

WORKFORCE CHALLENGES

At present, data suggest that the workforce of child, family and school social workers in New Mexico is only 64% of its recommended size (Nelson et al., 2024). Given these ongoing workforce challenges, there is a clear need to reduce barriers to entry into the field. As such, the current requirements which allow for SSW to practice at the bachelor's level initially and move into advanced licensure through experience are understandable. And yet, research has found that under-preparedness and low efficacy are common among NM school social workers and are contributing factors to ongoing workforce challenges (Knox et al., in press).

Impact and Comparative Analysis

IMPACT ANALYSIS

While it is critical that the state ensure that administrative requirements do not further reduce or disincentivize the workforce, it is also critical to ensure that SSWs enter the field with the knowledge, training, and skills necessary to support their own success and retention. We have observed that limitations in the impact of SSW services in New Mexico are the result of a problematic feedback loop (Gherardi & Whittlesey-Jerome, 2019) in which workforce shortages discourage the specialization of SSWs while the lack of specialization limits impact and retention.

Importantly, the current licensure structure does not require specialized training for SSWs at any level. It is common for individuals to graduate with a social work degree without any exposure to the unique legal and ethical issues that arise in school settings and with no knowledge of specialized assessments or interventions necessary for effective practice in schools. Most will leave their social work education with no disability-specific or special education training despite the reality that most SSWs in the state will provide special education related services. Given the relative isolation of school social workers and limitations in the relevance of district/school-provided professional development, in-service professional development is often self-directed or inadequate (Knox & Gherardi, 2020).

Outside of self-sought professional development and some important efforts at the district level to enhance training and support, most NM SSWs have limited exposure to relevant evidence-based practices for the settings and students they serve, a factor that impacts provider efficacy, wellbeing, and retention. Considering the critical and substantive imperative represented by the Yazzie/Martinez decision, we suggest that the state would be well served to consider whether its current policies ensure that school social workers have the skills and knowledge to ethically and effectively provide support services for marginalized student groups including students with disabilities, Native American students, and linguistically diverse students.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Examining other states' SSW credentials reveals opportunities for New Mexico to strengthen requirements while maintaining workforce flexibility. While Texas has no SSW licensure framework, New Mexico is somewhat unique in its recognition of SSW licensure without specialized training requirements. Other states have varying requirements. California requires supervised school-setting practicums and completion of approved specialized MSW programs (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, n.d); Illinois requires school-based practicums, SSW exams, and specialized coursework or MSW programs (Illinois State Board of Education, n.d.). Some states offer more flexibility. Colorado requires one course with SSW/special education content plus one practicum with school-aged children (Colorado Department of Education, n.d.), while Arizona requires an MSW with six semester hours of school-setting practicum or one year working with PK-12 students (Arizona Department of Education, n.d.).

Enhancing School Social Worker Preparation in New Mexico

How, then, might New Mexico balance the need to attract and retain an adequate school social work workforce with the imperative to ensure that SSWs are effectively prepared for the settings and student populations that they will encounter? We recommend that the state establish a framework of enhanced preparation for SSWs while maintaining flexible pathways to obtain and maintain SSW licensure while allowing current practitioners to be grandfathered in or provided incentives for completion of the new requirements. Such an approach would thoughtfully phase in critical new opportunities for specialized training utilizing existing resources and incentives without penalizing current practitioners. Below, we provide suggestions for integrating enhanced preparation requirements into the current three-tiered framework for school social work licensure through the New Mexico Public Education Department (NM PED).

BASIC LICENSURE RECOMMENDATIONS

Level One represents the basic level of SSW credentialing through the NM PED. At this level, practitioners should have the basic knowledge and skills necessary for ethical, evidence-based practice in schools. A flexible standard which might achieve this without imposing substantive barriers to entry could require at least one course in school social work which contains special education content or one MSW practicum experience in a school.

This low bar for pre-service training could be met by students within the regular course of most MSW programs or through completion of graduate courses post-MSW. At present, Western New Mexico University offers a graduate certificate in SSW; New Mexico State University is in the process of advancing a similar Related Services SSW certificate focusing on supporting children and families with disabilities in schools.

As such, both universities consistently offer school social work courses. Students who do not attend these universities or current level one SSWs who do not have such training could pursue options to enroll in single courses as non-degree graduate students. New Mexico social work graduate programs also regularly partner with schools across the state to provide graduate social work practicum experiences.

The imposition of a basic coursework or practicum requirement could help universities justify increases to existing capacity in this area as a response to increased demand. The creation of a state-level requirement for such training would provide the necessary student enrollment pipeline to allow these institutions to regularly and consistently offer these critical courses or to develop/deploy them as non-credit, fee-based offerings through online platforms, creating a mutually beneficial ecosystem for workforce development and the universities which provide pre-service training.

ADVANCED LICENSURE RECOMMENDATIONS

The state could further incentivize additional specialized training through linkages with advancement in the three-tiered licensure system. Given the existence of SSW certificates within the state higher education ecosystem, the NM PED could consider allowing MSW graduates who possess a SSW certificate to begin their practice at licensure Level Two. Practitioners without a certificate could advance to Level Two through documenting three years of practice at Level One and the completion of at least one additional/advanced SSW-specific course. Again, such advanced courses exist as part of current certificate programs and could be accessible to current practitioners on a non-degree basis or through new offerings created for in-service professionals.

The current Level 3 requirement for three years at Level 2 and supervised practice could be modified to ensure that supervision is provided by experienced and trained SSWs. Given limitations in specialized training, licensed social workers outside of schools often provide supervision to SSWs. While they are highly skilled practitioners, they may not possess the specialized knowledge necessary to support advanced practice in schools. As such, the creation of a statewide network of approved supervisors who possess specialized training and experience in SSW could enhance the efficacy of Level Three requirements.

Conclusion

Enhancing professional standards for school social workers represents a critical step toward fulfilling New Mexico's constitutional obligation to provide sufficient education for all students, as mandated by the Yazzie/Martinez ruling. While maintaining adequate staffing levels remains crucial, improving professional preparation will enhance service quality and advance educational equity. Minimally, New Mexico should review and revise the School Social Worker NMAC Code, which has not been do so in nearly 30 years, and engage practitioners, school districts, and the universities to identify current competency needs. Through thoughtful policy development that considers both workforce needs and service quality, New Mexico can better support its diverse student population while advancing the professionalization of school social work practice.

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