



School Social Work Association of America Position Paper

Advocacy and Action: Changing the Conversation around School Social Work

Why Advocacy is a Critical Component of our Practice

School social workers might find that our students and parents often have difficulty accessing services and resources they need to be successful. In response, school social workers employ the intervention of advocacy which involves purposeful actions to protect the dignity and fundamental rights of individuals, assure access to services, reduce barriers to receiving services, and if necessary, to ensure policies are fully enforced. Today many of the conversations school social workers are participating in include disproportionality, school violence and safety, bullying, LGBTQ rights, lack of affordable housing, barriers to academic success and incorporating Social Emotional Learning into the curriculum. To enact change, we must change the dialogue we are having to address the underlying factors sustaining these issues.

For school social workers, engaging advocacy efforts goes beyond simple policy change. The goal is to protect individual rights, educate the public to focus more urgently on creating lasting change, and encourage stakeholder participation to educate the public. Advocacy can seek fundamental institutional change or seek to address issues that need greater focus to create lasting transformation in the lives of the clients served. Advocacy gives a voice to people and causes that are often overlooked, and at its best supports students and families rights, creates access to needed services, reduces barriers, and promotes a safe and healthy learning environment for all children to be successful. Some might argue that school social workers have a responsibility to take on this role. Our NASW Code of Ethics outlines a social worker's responsibility to "promote the general welfare of society, from local to global levels, and the development of people, their communities, and their environments" (6.01), "facilitate informed participation by the public in shaping social policies and institutions" (6.02), and "engage in social and political action that seeks to ensure that all people have equal access to the resources, employment, services, and opportunities they require to meet their basic human needs and to develop fully" (6.04).

Practice, Policy & Research

We often think of policy, practice and research in school social work as separate, unconnected, and isolated silos. The truth is, in school social work realizing true change is only possible when we bring these three ideas together. We only truly start to make changes when we focus on the areas where there's an interrelationship between practice, policy, and research. That intersection is where true lasting change is possible. Each of these arenas play a key role in advocating for change and the combination allows us to not only think about eliciting change but to also alter the conversation about the issue at hand. Thinking critically about the influence of each connects the pieces across all areas of our practice. For instance, you might notice that students are in your school who have experienced trauma are not being successful in their classes (practice). As you start to look around you notice that there are no trainings associated with Social Emotional Learning and trauma informed practice for your fellow social workers, let alone teachers (policy). You then decide to bring in some evidence-based practices that you learned while you were at the last SSWAA conference to address this lack of service (research). It is vital to think about how

policy, research and practice affects and influences the other in order to identify the best places to intervene and advocate for change. Therefore, understanding the relationship between policy, practice, and research in school social work increases awareness and where our advocacy efforts can most impact social justice.

We must also recognize that as school social workers to best meet the needs of students, advocacy occurs at all levels: micro, mezzo, macro. Knowing where we can be most effective in our advocacy efforts is often the challenge. For example when we look at laws and regulations at the federal level impacting our profession and our clients, the capacity to elicit change may feel beyond our reach. While advocating at the national level is one venue, our work is also highly impacted by what happens through our state's laws, our state Departments of Education, our school districts, our social work departments, and our local schools. Local decisions can have a profound impact on all of our students as well. Too often our school social work perspective is missing during the decision-making process at various stages which can result in negative outcomes, inequities or lack of access to vital resources. Thus, advocating at the individual, school, local, state, national and even global levels can improve the way students receive services as well as ensure access to needed supports and resources.

Art & Science of Advocacy

Effecting change requires two sides of advocacy, the art and science. When we bring the art and science of advocacy together, we begin to develop an action-oriented course to focus on solutions for the problems our students and families are facing today. The first thoughts that often come to mind when we think about advocacy are protests, sign holding, or petitions. On one side of advocacy, we need to engage others in becoming passionate about change and to empower them to take action. The **art of advocacy** is about how to take action in raising awareness of our issue, mobilizing supporters, and sharing the stories of those affected. The goal in the art of advocacy is to bring attention to an issue, engender passion among supporters, engage stakeholders in wanting to know more about the issue, and provide a way for others to get more information.

Unfortunately, too often there is a sense of urgency until the next issue comes along and attention shifts. We must combine our passion with the science of advocacy, which provides the underlying facts and evidence about our issues. The **science of advocacy** helps define the issue, it's scope and magnitude, who is affected and how, what we've tried before and what we should try now. In this arena we are making the case for the cost of not addressing our issue, which can be social, economic, or even political. Our message should be tailored to whom we are speaking and consider any barriers we might face in funding, policy, or implementation. Understanding our audience's perspective will create solutions using data and evidence to support the need for change and how our solution will solve this particular issue. It's not enough to just say something isn't working; we must also propose solutions which embody a school social work perspective.

The goal of school social work advocacy is to educate all stakeholders on the issues and engage them as partners in transforming systems, policies and practices. In addition, we must provide the knowledge and tools to all stakeholders to help them embrace their role as agents of change.

Next Steps

As school social workers who are on the front lines with our students and their families every day, it is imperative that we utilize our knowledge and experience while connecting to our stories and those of our clients. The work we are doing is vital in addressing inequities and providing a platform to ensure all voices are heard. Getting the message out is one part of the process but changing the conversation from

only the issue to how that change will make a difference for our students now and in the future can set the stage for meaningful action. The final message for school social work today is not should we do advocacy, but how can we get involved in advocacy to help our schools and communities, provide equitable access to services and supports, and most of all fight against social injustice.

Reference

National Association of Social Workers. (2017). NASW code of ethics. Retrieved Month, Day, Year, from <https://www.socialworkers.org/About/Ethics/Code-of-Ethics/Code-of-Ethics-English>

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