**Safe and Supportive Schools Commission Focus Group with the MA National Associations of Social Workers**

**College of the Holy Cross - October 25, 2019   
Summary of Key Themes**

One of the Co-Chairs of the Safe and Supportive Schools Commission (Commission), a current Commission member, and a colleague from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (Department) joined a meeting of the annual National Associations of Social Workers (NASW-MA) School Social Work Conference on October 25, 2019. An optional 30-minute focus group was offered to conference participants, and the goal was for the conversation to inform the Department and the Safe and Supportive Schools Commission’s considerations regarding possible efforts and recommendations related to the Commission’s charge to “propose steps for improving schools' access to clinically, culturally and linguistically appropriate services.”

The educators attending (a total of 12, including primarily social workers, social worker interns, and adjustment counselors) were provided with a copy of several [prior focus groups](http://www.doe.mass.edu/sfs/safety/commission.html#reports) with school counselors, nurses, and others, and participants were asked to share thoughts on what rose to the highest priority in their minds for the Commission, Department, and state to consider. Summary highlights from the discussions are below.

**DISCUSSION THEMES INCLUDED THE FOLLOWING**

* **WORKFORCE SHORTFALLS/LACK OF SUFFICIENT BEHAVIORAL STAFF:** Participants cited high caseloads for social workers and adjustment counselors. Several indicated that the shortage of behavioral staff such as social workers in schools is critical. One social worker shared about challenges in having consistent group therapy time as they are often called upon to manage a crisis. Another agreed and stated that “social workers have become crisis interveners” and shared that when they need to postpone or end early a meeting a student to deal with another student in crisis, some students feel abandoned and their anxiety and depression may be increased. Some students may become traumatized when their guidance and support has been removed, often with little warning. Various participants spoke to the state required universal substance use ~~related verbal~~ screenings, and the challenge with the time it takes to screen high numbers of students (as an example, in one school, one social worker screens up to 400 students), and also the concern about not necessarily having enough available resources to support identified needs. Related concerns were noted related to when universal mental health screenings are conducted and sufficient support resources are not available.
* **FOCUS ON PREVENTION:** Related to the above comments, participants shared about the inability to do preventative work because social workers are working with students one to one and dealing with crises. While at times one to one is needed, and crisis management is essential, in order to have the best impact, more small group and universal whole class/whole school prevention and early intervention efforts could be helpful. As a part of this, another participant shared that it is impossible to think that teachers could do all that they need to including make academic gains, plus teaching social-emotional learning, etc. and be successful. In other words, it is essential for social workers, guidance and adjustment counselors, etc. to be partners and guides with teachers and classes (beyond just meeting one to one with students), in order to promote wellness and healthy strategies for coping, and to offer early intervention efforts that help prevent escalation and facilitate de-escalation of concerning behaviors, etc.
* **SAMPLE PROMISING PRACTICES:** Some promising practices were mentioned, including the following. In some districts, consistent support staff (counselors, etc.) stay with students across grade spans (e.g., K-8 or 5-12). When students transition between grades and have new support staff, for those who are in most frequent contact with them or in contact with them for the most intensive needs, it is helpful to have intentional efforts made to help with a smooth transition – e.g., so students are more likely to turn to support staff when needed or helpful, and so support staff have information in advance or as needed in the moment to help them best support students with helpful strategies, resources, etc. to best meet their needs and build their skills.

Something else promising that was mentioned was efforts to increase restorative practices to help with positive discipline focused efforts that can lead to stronger relationships between students and adults as well as peers, as well as more respectful behaviors. However, a caution based on experience was noted; it is important to assist all teachers with understanding the value and practices that will be helpful. Without enough training and support for teachers (and administrators), and an intentional rollout that also includes communication with families, there may be more resistance or ineffective or counterproductive implementation attempts.

* **SUGGESTIONS FOR THE DEPARTMENT/STATE:** Ideas for efforts the Department/state could make to support capacity to meet the increasing mental health needs included the following:
  + Mandate and ensure schools to abide by the suggested student to social worker ratio (per NASW, it is currently one social worker for 250 students) and include funding to support this;
  + Encourage schools to create a specific role for others to manage crisis situations to allow social workers to do their specified jobs;
  + Create guidance for teachers/staff to know how to respond to crisis situations that is consistent across situations, with caveats as needed;
  + Encourage or require every school to have a discipline/behavior response plan in order to promote consistency within a school. Each school could create their own, but would have considered the matter and have a plan written down and available for people to reference.
  + Promote efforts that support self-care for social workers and other support staff, and teachers, etc. to acknowledge the challenges of the work, to help them be most effective, reduce turnover, etc.
  + Have employees from the Departments of Mental and Public Health (DMH and DPH) visit therapeutic programs and other schools as needed to help provide more support to students who are transitioning out of school, and who are not college bound and need alternative options; and
  + Provide guidance and training to the pre-k to 12 spectrum on relationship building, restorative practices, and training on alternatives to discipline.

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The Commission thanks the NASW-MA leadership for generously hosting this focus group that will help inform efforts of the Commission and Department, and to all participants for their contributions. Any questions about the focus group or Commission may be directed to [achievement@doe.mass.edu](mailto:achievement@doe.mass.edu).