



SSWAA Response – Creating a Positive Climate in Schools

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Dear State Leaders and SSWAA Members:

Waking up this past Wednesday after the election, school social workers around the country entered our school buildings as a beacon of grounding and hope for our students, families, and staff. Our wisdom, expertise and unique skill set can provide hope and empower individuals to create change even in the most difficult of circumstances. Undoubtedly, the polarization of our nation has instilled a sense of uncertainty while also reopening wounds of historical and intergenerational trauma experienced by various marginalized groups. As a result, our students and families need us to create or reestablish a sense of safety in our buildings as well as our communities.

Utilizing a trauma informed approach is one way to address the increasing aggression and violence throughout our communities. School social workers can transform our schools by educating our administrators and staff about the widespread impact of trauma, the signs and symptoms of trauma in our students and families and interventions to build resilience within our students. SAMHSA outlines 6 key principles for a trauma informed approach:

1. Safety
2. Trustworthiness and transparency
3. Peer support
4. Collaboration and mutuality
5. Empowerment, voice and choice
6. Cultural, Historical, and Gender issues

As the licensed mental health professionals of the educational team, accomplishing the task of building safety and trust begins in our offices by creating space to allow others to freely express their worries, concerns and fears. At the same time, school social workers also recognize the need to establish a safe and supportive school environment where all students and families are treated with dignity and respect. Building a community of trust and safety requires leading efforts in developing an awareness and understanding of the impact of trauma especially historical and intergenerational trauma on how our students interact in the world. For Latinos, immigrants, Arab Americans, Muslims, African American, and the LGBTQI communities, the current climate has not only raised fears, but has resulted in increased acts of hate speech and acts of violence towards others resulting in a re-traumatization for many. Building the capacity of administrators and staff to approach students with a trauma informed approach to our students' needs will aid in our ability to have a safe and supportive school environment. There are multiple resources for school social workers to begin this work (see our list below).

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How do we talk about concerns related to the current national climate with our students? In addition to creating a safe space, we must reassure our students that we live in a society that has a democratic process with checks and balances to ensure justice. Acknowledging the truth that we have work to do as a nation to promote respect for all individuals and their human rights is also necessary in our conversations. Empower students to uplift their school community and provide them with a sense of our hope that their voices do matter.

Our service to others is based on the basic fundamental values of recognizing the value and worth of every human being while challenging injustices that continue to oppress and divide. As school social workers, we not only practice on the micro level with students and families but recognize the necessity of aligning our practice to transform policies and practices that further marginalize or negatively impact the populations we serve. For example, school social workers collaborate with other specialized instructional support personnel to implement and facilitate bullying prevention curriculum to create an atmosphere of safety and belonging. Use of empowerment strategies such as embedding Peace Circles into the school community and restorative practices have fostered the development of our students' abilities to value and respect diversity.

Although this may be a challenging time in our nation, the value we provide to our school community is priceless. We offer solace and hope when students, families and staff are confronted with uncertainty, pain and angst. We rise to the challenge in honor of our professional code of ethics. With this responsibility, we must always explicitly engage in self-care whether that is through exercise, meditation, deep breathing, journaling, processing with your school social work colleagues or anything that assists you in being the most effective School Social Worker, you can be. As a member of the SSWAA community, you have support at a national level to strengthen your practice at the micro, mezzo and macro levels. One benefit of being a part of the SSWAA community is knowing that SSWAA has an influential Government Relations Specialist and Legislative Committee that is dedicated to upholding the values of our profession through our advocacy work on behalf of the children, youth and families we serve. We invite you to get involved at the local, state, and national level to be a voice for those that feel voiceless and to be an agent of change. As a unified force, we truly can be agents of change bringing about the best outcomes for all people.

Below is a list of resources to enhance your practice and as always, SSWAA has numerous position statements that can also be accessed for your advocacy efforts. Simply visit the website or feel free to contact our President Anne McNerney MSW LICSW or Executive Director Rebecca Oliver LMSW CSW with any questions you may have.

1. Blausstein, M. E. & Kinniburgh, K. M., (2010). *Treating Traumatic Stress in Children and Adolescents: How to Foster Resilience through Attachment, Self Regulation and Competency*.
2. <http://www.samhsa.gov/nctic/trauma-interventions>
3. Boyes-Watson, C. & Pranis, K. (2010) *Heart of Hope: A guide for using peacemaking circles to develop emotional literacy, promote healing and build healthy relationships*. Boston, MA: Center for Restorative Justice, Suffolk University.
4. Boyes-Watson, C. (2008) *Peace Circles and Urban Youth: Bringing Justice Home*, Boston, MA; Center for Restorative Justice, Suffolk University.
5. McCaslin, W. D. (2005). *Justice as Healing Indigenous Ways*. Writings on Community Peacemaking and Restorative Justice from the Native Law Center
6. www.tolerance.org