Letter from the Chair

Although children are less likely to become infected with COVID-19, their well-being is greatly affected by school closures, stressed-out parents, social isolation, and the economic consequences of the pandemic. Rightfully so, there is much concern for mental health, learning loss, and equity issues facing children of color and those living in poverty. School social workers are faced with finding creative and innovative ways to connect with children and families in the virtual world. The learning curve has been steep and fast.

The articles in this edition are inspired by the impact of the pandemic on school social work practice. In “The Changing Role of the School Social Worker: A Pandemic Reflection,” Megan Berkowitz and Laurel E. Thompson, PhD, compare the role of school social workers pre- and post-COVID-19. Using the feedback of more than 1,100 school social workers from across the country, the authors found that post-COVID-19, the priorities of school social workers have shifted in response to the immediate needs of families. The article also provides two examples of technology-based innovations, implemented to connect with students and families virtually, that may remain well after the pandemic.

The second article, “Necessity Is the Ultimate Inspiration! Expanded Technology in School Social Work Practice,” by Michael Cappiello, continues the conversation by focusing on the use of technology to provide school social work and counseling services. He aligns the use of technology with NASW’s School Social Work Standards and calls for policy changes to extend the availability of these practices beyond the pandemic. Cappiello also advocates for the use of remote platforms as one way to increase access to social work and counseling services to all students.

The abrupt closure of schools for nearly a year has forced school social workers to find new ways of providing services to children and families. These two articles provide insight into school social work practice during the pandemic and offer practical ways to utilize technology to provide social work services remotely. Unfortunately, we will be uncovering the true impact of COVID-19 for the foreseeable future. Not only do we need to reconsider “the way we’ve always done things,” we must take the lessons learned and reimagine the future of school social work practice.

D. Natasha Scott, EdD, MSW
While the country grapples with prioritizing the continued provision of education for all students during the COVID-19 pandemic, the challenge has been how to do so while adhering to safety protocols outlined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. As school districts actively assessed and vetted alternative schooling options—virtual, in-person, or hybrid models—robust conversation also centered on the continued provision of myriad essential services by specialized instructional support personnel. This article explores the impact of the pandemic on the role of school social workers and gleans information about which resulting changes may remain post-pandemic.

Survey Results
To accurately report on the practices, a brief survey was developed, and for the first few weeks of January 2021, various online platforms were utilized to poll school social workers across the nation. Over 1,100 responded. Approximately 75 percent of the school social workers were from school districts in the Midwest and Northeast, with the West Coast and the South
represented in the remaining 25 percent of the respondents.

This snapshot of the roles of school social workers represents the views of professionals working within a variety of school levels and instructional models. Even though it was clear from the data that several school social workers served at multiple levels, the majority of services were provided to students in the elementary grades. Like teachers, school social workers were tasked with finding creative ways to support students who were learning remotely—47 percent of all students were receiving their education in a virtual setting, while 34 percent were in a hybrid model; only 19 percent received their education in person.

In response to the question asking if the school social worker’s role had dramatically changed, nearly two-thirds of the respondents agreed that the role had changed, but 76 percent reported they felt professionally prepared to provide the needed services.

It is interesting to note the tasks prioritized by school social workers prior to and during the pandemic. There has been a clear shift in the priorities. As Table 5 shows, attendance and family support increased substantially. While crisis support and counseling remained top priorities, each showed a noticeable decrease from their pre-pandemic levels. This shift aligns with the significant increase in family resource needs due to the pandemic’s effect on job stability and housing. It has also highlighted the existing technology gap that is now further hindering educational access and attendance. With the change in priorities, and in order to perform their job well, school social workers reported they most need support for remote learning, telehealth, and technology training. School social workers rely heavily on face-to-face contact with students and families, so the switch to online services had its challenges.

Concerns arose regarding client confidentiality, parental consent for services, and managing technology issues while engaged with students. This finding is consistent with the shift to virtual learning and the high percentage of respondents working in virtual or hybrid models. This shift led to innovative and creative practice models as school social workers swiftly pivoted to develop practice modalities to best meet the needs of their students and families.

Survey Themes
Several key themes emerged from the survey results that, while unsurprising, are important to discuss as we consider the impact on the
larger field of school social work in the years to come.

Connection
When asked about the greatest professional challenge, an overwhelming number of respondents expressed concern about connecting with others. It was a challenge to create and sustain interpersonal relationships with students, families, and fellow staff members. Due to school closures, school social workers lost their physical connection with clients that comes from daily, in-person attendance. Furthermore, the difficulties of digital access led to decreased virtual attendance in many school districts. Students were simply not present. Therefore, it was difficult to develop the rapport required to build the trusting connection necessary for strong therapeutic work to happen in the virtual space.

Use of Technology
A majority of respondents felt that their role, even in the coming years, would continue to utilize technology in innovative ways to alleviate barriers to learning and resources. Specifically, many noted the use of online tools to provide clinicians with more options to access both their school teams and clients through virtual staff or Individual Education Program (IEP) meetings and direct telehealth when needed.

And while there was a consensus that a focus on attendance and resource provision will continue to take precedent even as schools open, respondents cited utilizing technology as an opportunity to provide increased access to meet and coordinate student and family case-management needs. For example, many school social workers reported providing students with open access to their remote office, complete with posted office hours, so students could virtually drop in for services as needed. Parents were also offered this accommodation during the day and on some evenings as well.

Hope for Investment
Finally, a noticeable number of survey participants acknowledged the potential and currently unclear long-lasting effects of school closures and hybrid access. While this is a source of stress, many survey participants are hopeful that the impacts of the pandemic will shine a light on the ongoing needs for increased mental health, social-emotional learning, and trauma-informed supports that existed before March 2020.

Examples of Practices That May Remain
Many new, or newly used, technology-based practices emerged during the pandemic, and it seems likely that several of these approaches will continue as standard practice. Outlined below are two technology-based practices implemented by school districts to support students and families.

Broward County Confidential Referrals
TALK (Tell Another Listening is Key) is a simple, user-friendly way for students to confidentially request help online. Students may request mental health services or report child abuse. The icon for TALK is available through the student sign-on portal. Clicking the icon offers the student a form to provide their name, preferred mode of communication, and a drop-
down menu to select the service needed. While completing the short referral form, the student receives instructions on how to successfully manage an emergency need. For example, the telephone number for the mental health crisis line is provided. With a simple click, the form is submitted and delivered to an e-mail address designated specifically for TALK and monitored by school district staff. Once the referral is received, it is assigned to the most appropriate staff, which is usually the school social worker assigned to the school. The student is contacted by the school social worker within 24 hours.

Remote Coaching and Therapy
At a public charter school network in Washington, DC, a number of pandemic adjustments aimed at increasing access and flexibility are planned to continue as schools open up. To support increased opportunities for engagement, the plans include offering video-based meetings with parents for a wide variety of needs, including, but not limited to, behavior consultations and coaching, multidisciplinary team meetings, and virtual home visits. Additionally, the intentional use of video observations for classroom and intervention coaching and feedback with teachers, which increased substantially during virtual learning, will remain as classrooms open.

Conclusion
An analysis of the data, both quantitative and qualitative, indicates that the essential role of the school social worker during the pandemic has not changed on the whole, but newly emphasized practices indicate a shift in priorities to meet the challenges and demands created by the pandemic. While most school social workers reported they felt well prepared to meet these challenges, many required substantial support in adjusting to the shift from the customary in-person service delivery to providing services in a virtual setting. While acknowledging the substantial and unknown enduring impact of the pandemic on their clients and selves, school social workers embraced the challenges presented and were flexible enough to pivot in their practice to continue to provide students and families with the support they need to be successful.

Megan Berkowitz, MSW, LICSW currently serves as the Positive Behavior Support Manager and Social Work Supervisor for AppleTree Early Learning Public Charter Schools, a Washington, DC network of eleven campuses serving just over 1,100 preschool and pre-kindergarten students.

Dr. Laurel E. Thompson is the recently retired Director of Student Services for Broward County Public Schools, a role in which she served for almost two decades, supervising a staff of 260 school social workers, family therapists, instructional personnel and administrative supports.
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UPCOMING LIVE SPS WEBINAR

WEDNESDAY, JULY 28, 2021 (1-2 PM ET)
Managing Organizations in 2021 and Beyond
Presenter: Gigi Tsontos, LCSW, MPA
CE Category: 1 Social Work CE contact hour
Cost: SPS Members: Free

This webinar will feature some emerging best practices in organizational management, with a future focus. It identifies the new normal and the imperative call to work in the “outside the box” realm of human centered work. These new norms or trends identified are: 1.) access to care and how that access is achieved; 2.) the need to blend community and individual work to ensure effective practice; and 3.) the need for organizations to look toward the future to create best practices for what we want our future to become.

To register visit: The SPS Webinar Catalog

FRIDAY, AUGUST 6, 2021 (1 – 2 PM ET)
Teaching Children About Race and Ethnicity
Presenter: Ruby M. Gourdine, MSW, DSW, LICSW, LCSW
CE Category: 1 Cross Cultural CE contact hour
Cost: SPS Members: Free

This presentation will discuss when and how to talk to children about race and ethnicity in a time where race is a prominent issue in society. Developmental readiness will be explored and comfort level of parents in raising the issue or responding to their child’s questions. A discussion will ensue how different racial groups may approach this discussion.

To register visit: The SPS Webinar Catalog
Social work practice has changed for all of us in ways we could never have imagined possible a year ago. Within a few short school days, many of us moved from all in-person services to fully remote. Internet and computer software enabled many of us to advance our practices in ways that will completely reinvent mental health and school social work services in our local communities for the better. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Standards for School Social Work Services state, “School social workers shall perform roles and responsibilities across a multi-tier framework for service delivery and use technology to enhance communication” (2012). A year into practicing in a fully remote environment has brought many lessons that need to be translated into policy changes in our schools as well as in our practice standards. NASW is beginning a process of updating these standards. I have become an advocate for policy changes that will allow students remote access to counseling and social work services beyond the pandemic, especially to address historical disparities due to systemic racism.

G-Suite for Education by Google is a free resource for school districts that was launched in 2006. Applications include e-mail, Internet telephone, voicemail, text messaging, videoconferencing, Web pages, video production, and more. One of the core applications is called “Classroom”; it is the equivalent of the physical space in a school building with access to course materials and assignments via the remote platform of Web pages. Through video technology a camera icon in the classroom can be pressed to join with staff and students for live instruction remotely. Everyone can interact on camera, audibly, or in a chat box, which allows greater choice. Before COVID-19, some school districts were using “Classroom” to house instructional content that included videos of the daily lecture, supportive materials, and digital homework assignments. This allowed students to have access to all the materials remotely after they returned home from school. Thus, the districts that already had these systems in place had a smoother transition into the remote learning environment. The districts that did not use these platforms had a drastic learning curve to move to a remote environment.

NASW has a public education campaign with the logo “Help Starts Here.” Our profession is often the starting point for many people entering complex systems. It became the title of my remote classroom, with my name and school social work title. The Google Voice telephone remains my first line of engagement in the remote environment. Students and families can call, text, or leave a voicemail at any time. The text feature has been the primary way students, families, and community partners choose to communicate with me.

The use of e-mail for quick contacts is rapidly decreasing and becoming a tool that is used about as frequently as addressing envelopes. It is surprising how few students use e-mail other than for a username. In some communities the telephone and texting are the only modes of contact, but there are continuing efforts to find opportunities to engage in new technology.

The videoconference platform is often the next step in remote school communication. Through
drastic expansion of telehealth, many families are now receiving a range of services through this method. Students with an individualized education program that includes counseling can now see their social worker on a remote platform videoconference. For example, I keep my classroom video feed open the entire school day so that anyone in the school community can drop in whenever they need to. A bell notifies me that someone is waiting. This capability allows me to solve students’ problems by assisting them with accessing a scheduled class or offering emotional support. Private meetings can be opened in a separate window, and the overall disruption is far less than the noise in the building. I also can easily do multiple classroom observations. This feature has been welcomed by the teachers to co-facilitate social and emotional learning into their classes.

For struggling students, caregiver partnership has increased with a quick call to the home to offer support. Caregivers are now connected with school staff during their appointments with medical and mental health providers in the community through videoconferences for full, consented collaboration between home, school, and community supports. This action has drastically changed opportunities for collaboration and service delivery. Students with extensive absences due to medical or mental health challenges can access their home school community on the platform. It has also opened new lines of communication when engaging students who are truant or school avoidant for a range of reasons.

Some educators have been resistant to adopting these new ways of teaching and providing services. This is an issue of equity and access for students, their caregivers, and our community partners. Systemic racism in public education is at the forefront of the problem. The necessities of the pandemic coinciding with the present movement to reconcile our history with racism has created an important opportunity for change. Prior to the pandemic my school provided a full day of training on implicit bias, part of a commitment to educate the educators on our own blind spots in practice. I work in a school that is in one of the poorest congressional districts in the United States with a student body that is almost entirely black and brown. It is a special education program specializing in students with significant learning and emotional disabilities. Most students have come in contact with mental health, social services, or juvenile justice systems and, in more than a few cases, all three. The opportunity to provide social work and mental health services on remote platforms has been an essential tool during the pandemic and needs the ongoing commitment of school systems.

There are many challenges across the United States for marginalized communities to gain access to available technologies. A great advancement came during the pandemic due to necessity, and almost every student in the country now, at least, has an e-mail address. Nearly all local telephone companies offer a dial-up connection to gain access to digital communications and materials for learning. The telephone remains the most direct form of communication that is universally used, and conference calls can be a bridge to remote classrooms. Advocacy is now needed for policies to continue the use of these technologies as we prepare to return to in-person learning. That will be a systemic improvement through the lessons we have all learned together.

Michael Cappiello, MSW, LCSW, is president of the New York State Chapter and a school social worker for the New York City Department of Education. Since the pandemic started, he has been practicing school social work and counseling using remote platforms. Michael can be reached at socialworkvalue@gmail.com.

REFERENCE
National Association of Social Workers. (2012). NASW standards for school social work services. www.socialworkers.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=1Ze4-9-Os7E%3D&portalid=0
MEET THE COMMITTEE – Megan Berkowitz, MSW, LICSW

Since 2016, Megan Berkowitz, MSW, LICSW, has served as the positive behavior support manager and social work supervisor for AppleTree Early Learning Public Charter Schools, a Washington, DC, network of 11 campuses serving just over 1,300 preschool and prekindergarten students. In this role, Megan supervises the social work and counseling program, oversees the networkwide processes for social-emotional learning and behavior supports, and manages community-based mental health partnerships with Medstar Georgetown and Children’s National Medical Center. Prior to joining AppleTree, she served as an early childhood and elementary school social worker for six years. Becoming a social worker was a career change for Megan; before receiving her MSW from the University of Pennsylvania, Megan worked in the federal policy field for the Children’s Defense Fund, Brookings Institution, and Congressional Budget Office. In addition to serving on the NASW School Social Work Practice Committee, Megan is one of the founding members of the Washington, DC, chapter of the School Social Work Association of America.

AREAS OF EXPERTISE

I am a strong advocate for quality school social work practices and is passionate about investing in structured upskilling for novice school social workers.

WHAT I ENJOY ABOUT MY WORK

School social work is an intricate and multifaceted field, which makes it both challenging and exciting. School social work requires many different types of skills, including case management, therapeutic services, social-emotional learning, crisis management, and adult consultation. A strong school social worker can make a difference not just in the lives of the students, but also in the lives of families, staff, and whole school communities.

CHALLENGES FOR SOCIAL WORKERS IN MY PRACTICE AREA

School social workers operate as mental health practitioners in educational settings that are not rooted in clinical practice. Therefore, school social workers often must advocate so that stakeholders understand the full scope and breadth of their position. Additionally, while there are some school social work concentrations within MSW programs, many school social workers begin their practice without previous school-based experiences; training and onboarding structures for school social workers are key to developing a strong and respected workforce.
MEET THE COMMITTEE – Robert Lucio, PhD, LCSW

Robert Lucio, PhD, LCSW, is a licensed clinical social worker with over 18 years of experience working directly with youth at risk of adverse behavioral, academic, and mental health outcomes. He has taught at the undergraduate, master’s, and doctoral level, including courses on advocacy and activism, research, practice, cultural competence, child development, and family/community violence. Robert has also consulted with local school districts to enhance social workers’ use of evidence-informed interventions and has been actively involved in school behavioral health.

Robert is experienced at developing models of risk and protective factors in youth, providing trainings on cultural diversity and equity/inclusion, and serving as a national panelist for the U.S. Department of Education assessing the impact of ethnicity and cultural diversity on the educational outcomes for youth with disabilities. His focus is on how risk and protective factors interact to affect child, youth, and family cognitive, social, and emotional development. Findings of his work demonstrated that many of the same risk and protective factors have an impact on the mental health of children in school settings, child development, maternal and child health, and adolescent pregnancy, making the investigation of these factors crucial to the development of interventions to alleviate these concerns.

AREAS OF EXPERTISE

I worked as a school social worker for 15 years and continue to be actively involved with school social work. I currently teach a class called Advocacy and Activism in Social Work. In addition, I also teach courses on research and program evaluation. I am interested in how social workers use data to engage in conversations about the effectiveness of their services. In much of my work with school social workers, we discuss the steps for data engagement and how to be leaders in sharing that information with others.

WHAT I ENJOY ABOUT MY WORK

I love everything about my work. This includes being able to impress upon the next generation of social workers the need to stand up for social justice and be active agents of change. In addition, I love being able to engage school social workers in exercising leadership skills around their services and helping them use data to tell the story of the impact school social work can have on youth.

CHALLENGES FOR SOCIAL WORKERS IN MY PRACTICE AREA

One of the challenges for school social work has been defining our profession, rather than having it defined for us. Too often our roles are constrained not by our abilities but by the perceptions administration and other school personnel have of what social workers should do. This means we truly need to define what school social workers can do and the impact we can have on students. The pandemic has allowed us to do that in many cases, but we must keep making a focused effort to keep that up. Social workers have an intimate knowledge of community, families, and schools, which allows us to be leaders in engaging each of these systems in helping youth be successful.
Kashera Guy Robinson, MSW, LCSW, is a school social worker with the Clayton County Public School District where she has proudly served for the past 17 years. She received her Bachelor of Social Work at Alabama State University and her Master of Social Work at the University of Alabama. Kashera is a licensed clinical social worker in Georgia and a licensed independent clinical social worker in Alabama.

Kashera is a member of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), where she serves as a committee member on the School Social Work Specialty Practice Section. She is also a member of the School Social Work Association of America, where she has served on the School Social Work Week Committee and on the National Back to School Campaign in conjunction with NASW. Kashera is a member of the School Social Workers Association of Georgia where she serves as chair of the membership committee; she has previously served as president (2019-20) and vice president (2018-19) of District 4 (metro Atlanta region).

**AREAS OF EXPERTISE**

During the 24-plus years that Kashera has practiced as a professional social worker, she has worked in the areas of education, child welfare, juvenile justice, and mental health. Since 2000, she has served as an adjunct instructor at four universities, teaching social work and human services courses in both the asynchronous and synchronous learning environments. Her specialty area of practice deals with adolescent school refusal and its link to childhood trauma.

**WHAT I ENJOY ABOUT MY WORK**

The thing that I most enjoy about my work is seeing children make positive changes in their lives and ultimately graduate from high school, especially those students who have had a history of academic and disciplinary challenges. I believe that it is important for troubled students to know that at least one adult in their life believes in them. The child who seems to be the most difficult, many times, is merely looking for that one adult to show them that they believe in them, to inspire them to keep going and not give up!

**CHALLENGES FOR SOCIAL WORKERS IN MY PRACTICE AREA**

Presently, I feel that the major challenges for social workers within my area of practice are the “unknowns” that we will face in the academic setting post-COVID-19 when students and staff return to our school buildings full-time. We know that, nationally, thousands of children have been “missing” since schools were suddenly closed in March 2020 due to the looming pandemic. It is my belief that school social workers will be called on like never before to help students navigate through the myriad unknown challenges that they have been dealing with during the pandemic.
D. Natasha Scott, EdD, MSW, is the executive director of Student Services for Cumberland County Schools. She received a bachelor’s degree in social work from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, a master’s degree in social work from the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign, and a doctorate in education from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Her experience in public schools ranges from school social worker to social work coordinator and executive director. She also has over 10 years of experience as an adjunct professor. School social work is her favorite course to teach. Currently, she serves as an at-large board member of the North Carolina chapter of NASW.

AREAS OF EXPERTISE
I have had the opportunity to practice social work at all levels in the public school system. I worked in some of the largest school districts in the state of North Carolina, at all grade levels and geographic locations (rural, suburban, urban). I have found that the social work experience changes depending on the environment, and I have enjoyed my journey. My general areas of expertise are school social work practice, section 504 legislation, trauma and loss, children and families, and program development.

WHAT I ENJOY ABOUT MY WORK
On any given day, I may find myself working at all levels of social work practice. I view my understanding of systems and the person-environment fit as my superpower. It is very fulfilling to help clients navigate those systems to improve their quality of life. From advocacy to linking clients to little-known programs and policies, to program planning to fill gaps in service, there is never a dull moment in the field of social work. Most importantly, social work affords me a skill set that is useful in all settings.

CHALLENGES FOR SOCIAL WORKERS IN MY PRACTICE AREA
After 100 years, school social workers are still defining their roles in schools. From school to school, district to district, and state to state, the role looks very different. The certification requirements vary from state to state, and some do not require certification to be a school social worker. Also, it is not uncommon for school social workers to find themselves working in districts where they are supervised by someone with no background in social work, or they may be responsible for providing services to multiple schools. Considering the increasingly complex issues that students are presenting, this lack of consistency is a major challenge for school social workers.
Laurel E. Thompson, PhD, is the recently retired director of student services for Broward County Public Schools, a role in which she served for almost two decades, supervising a staff of 260 school social workers, family therapists, instructional personnel, and administrative supports.

She received a PhD in social work from Barry University, a master’s degree in social work from Columbia University, and a Bachelor of Arts in psychology with a minor in social work from Fordham University at Lincoln Center in New York City. For nine years, Laurel worked in administration in the field of gerontology and then pivoted to spend over 31 years in school social work services.

During these years Laurel worked arduously to develop policies, create programs, grow staff, and build collaborations with community partners to support the students in Broward County Public Schools. She wrote and was awarded grants more than $8.3 million to develop innovative programs to support the academic achievement of all students and especially black males. One such signature mentoring program implemented during her tenure was the Mentoring Tomorrow’s Leaders Program that was initially funded by a $5 million award from the United States Department of Education.

Laurel is committed to the success of the school social work community.

AREAS OF EXPERTISE

My area of expertise is administration, with emphasis in areas of policy development, staff training and management, and program planning and implementation. I am particularly skilled at building collaborative relationships to encourage engagement with inter- as well as intra-professional projects. I am also skilled in grant writing to leverage funding to support creative programming to fill gaps in service.

WHAT I ENJOY ABOUT MY WORK

I truly enjoy mentoring young professionals and particularly like to assist them in discovering and identifying their strengths while seeking to provide them with growth opportunities to build on their strengths.

CHALLENGES FOR SOCIAL WORKERS IN MY PRACTICE AREA

School social workers (SSWs) are “guests” within the educational setting. This poses a particular challenge because school personnel, acting in loco parentis, usually want to be updated on, and have access to, ALL students’ information, and that includes students in the SSW caseload. This poses an ethical dilemma for SSWs, who are not able to freely share due to confidentiality and ethical standards that guide the professional practice.

School social workers are the lead mental health professionals in each school, providing clinical services to students, families, and at times to staff as well. There seems to be role confusion because often this mental health role is mistakenly accorded to other support professionals. There is clearly a need for additional education to clarify the various roles.

Caseloads are incredibly high. More funding is needed to hire additional people so that each school may be assigned a full-time school social worker to address needs comprehensively and in a timely manner.
NASW invites current social work practitioners to submit brief articles for our specialty practice publications. Topics must be relevant to one or more of the following specialized areas:

- Administration/Supervision
- Aging
- Alcohol, Tobacco, and Other Drugs
- Child Welfare
- Children, Adolescents, and Young Adults
- Health
- Mental Health
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- School Social Work
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