Leadership through Political Social Work: Initiating Legislation to Re-Establish School Social Workers in Schools

Mia Prohaska
Pacific University

Follow this and additional works at: http://commons.pacificu.edu/cassoc

Part of the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation
http://commons.pacificu.edu/cassoc/39

This Capstone Project is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts and Sciences at CommonKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in Social Sciences Capstone Projects by an authorized administrator of CommonKnowledge. For more information, please contact CommonKnowledge@pacificu.edu.
Leadership through Political Social Work: Initiating Legislation to Re-Establish School Social Workers in Schools

Abstract
The Oregon public education system is struggling and has one of the highest dropout rates in the country. The welfare of Oregon students is being compromised due to a lack of mental health and social supports in the K-12 school system. The office of Oregon State Representative Joe Gallegos recognizes the extreme need for professionals trained in mental health support, trauma informed care, and family systems intervention. This Senior Capstone analyzes the legislative process and barriers Gallegos’ office addressed in the formation of a policy that aims to reintroduce social workers into the Oregon public school system. The goal of this bill is to decrease dropout rates and absenteeism within the school system while increasing student welfare and success, bringing the state closer to the 40-40-20 goal. By collaborating with schools, families, and organizations Gallegos’ office has used a grassroots approach to the creation of this bill to ensure successful passage and implementation.

Document Type
Capstone Project

Degree Name
Bachelor of Social Work

Department
Sociology, Anthropology, Social Work and Public Health

First Advisor
Jessica Ritter, PhD, MSSW, BSW

Subject Categories
Social Work

Rights
Terms of use for work posted in CommonKnowledge.

This capstone project is available at CommonKnowledge: http://commons.pacificu.edu/cassoc/39
Leadership through Political Social Work: Initiating Legislation to Re-Establish School Social Workers in Schools

Mia Prohaska

April, 2016
ABSTRACT

The Oregon public education system is struggling and has one of the highest dropout rates in the country. The welfare of Oregon students is being compromised due to a lack of mental health and social supports in the K-12 school system. The office of Oregon State Representative Joe Gallegos recognizes the extreme need for professionals trained in mental health support, trauma informed care, and family systems intervention. This Senior Capstone analyzes the legislative process and barriers Gallegos’ office addressed in the formation of a policy that aims to reintroduce social workers into the Oregon public school system. The goal of this bill is to decrease dropout rates and absenteeism within the school system while increasing student welfare and success, bringing the state closer to the 40-40-20 goal. By collaborating with schools, families, and organizations Gallegos’ office has used a grassroots approach to the creation of this bill to ensure successful passage and implementation.

INTRODUCTION
MARCUS’ STORY

Marcus was a fifteen year old student who lived in rural Oregon. His father was out of the picture and his mom struggled with severe addiction. Throughout Marcus’ childhood he acted as a caregiver for his younger siblings. In school he was often reprimanded for being late and having a hard time focusing. What his school didn’t understand was Marcus had to spend each morning getting his siblings ready for school, causing him to be late. While Marcus was working to put food on his siblings’ plates, and clothes on their backs, the school was punishing him without providing the support he desperately needed. Eventually DHS intervened and separated Marcus from his four siblings. He struggled with drug and alcohol use because he was grieving the loss of his siblings. He was incredibly bright and talented at athletics. With the help of a trained professional, Marcus could have achieved amazing feats. However, the school didn’t have the resources to help Marcus cope with his traumatic childhood. In the end Marcus started abusing substances and showing up to school less and less; until he didn’t show up at all.

Marcus’ story is more common than people might realize. This is just another story of one student who fell through the cracks because the school couldn’t provide him with the social support he needed.

HISTORY AND ROLE OF SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK

Social workers have been an integral part of the American school system since the early 1920’s. Playing a vital role in the positive development of youth. It is one of the oldest forms of social work practice in the United States. However, during the late 80’s to early 90’s the involvement of social workers within the school system dramatically declined (Gallegos, 2015).
This is the direct consequence of fiscally conservative bills that restrict school funding, like Measure Five; a bill that restricted school funding in Oregon. When school funding started to receive cuts, schools were no longer able to afford social workers (OPB, 2015). Now social workers are sparsely in the Oregon school system. When social workers are integrated into the school system today, they are often shared by a multitude of different schools, spreading their time and resources too thin.

Yet, social workers are equipped to address conflicts that youth deal with, like mental health issues, poverty, abusive homes, bullying, oppression, and sexual identity (Frey and Lanskter, 2008). It is important that students have a trained professional at school to confide in when dealing with life changing and potentially dangerous conflicts, especially since there are 1.2 million students dropping out of schools each year (NASW, 2015). School social workers bring something unique to the school setting that is different than the role of a school counselor or school psychologist.

The presence of social workers in American schools positively contributes to the well-being of youth. This review of the literature includes 10 articles that address the ways in which social workers contribute to the success of students by: Using early intervention, collaborating with teachers, supporting mental health and sexual identity needs, heightening academic and student leadership achievement, reducing violence and bullying within the school system, and advocating for students dealing with systemic oppression. This review of the literature will also highlight why social workers can best address these needs, as well as the roles social workers play within the school systems.
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

PURPOSE AND PRACTICE OF SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK

The School Social Work association of America defines a school social worker as a,
“trained mental health professionals with a degree in social work who provide services related
to a person's social, emotional and life adjustment to school and/or society. School Social
Workers are the link between the home, school and community in providing direct, as well as,
indirect services to students, families and school personnel to promote and support students'
academic and social success” (SSWAA, 2015). School social workers receive unique training
that provides them with the ability to connect home, community, and school together to facilitate
healthy relationships between the three, they are able to use this to their clients benefit. School
social workers are able to connect the youth and their families with needed community
resources. One example of this is connecting students with mental health resources.

School social workers are also able to impact school's welfare in positive ways by using
micro, mezzo and macro-level skills. By conversing with students and addressing personal issues
they are able to make an impact on the micro level. They are able to help on the mezzo level by
hosting school programs that benefit students and staff. In advocating for policies that support
student success (ex: funding for afterschool programs) they can make a difference on the macro
level (Frey, Alvarez, Dupper, Sabatino, Lindey, Raines, Streeck, Mclerney and Norris, 2013).
Having a professional who can target the micro, mezzo, and macro needs in the school improves
the student’s welfare on both an individual and systemic level.
Social workers have a strict code of ethics formed by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2008) that they must adhere to when practicing to ensure ethical practice while working with vulnerable populations. The Code includes using evidence-based practice, cultural competency, advocating for vulnerable students, respecting client self-determination and maintaining confidentiality unless students report harm to self or others (NASWDC, 2015).

Some critics may argue that social workers and school counselors have the same role within the school system however, this is a misconception. In Washington State, a chart was created by a team of mental health professionals to show the difference in the roles between social workers, psychologists and counselors. All three mental health professions facilitate community collaboration, provide consultation/crisis interventions, and advocate for the student’s well-being and report abuse, but social workers have the unique ability to act as a home/school/community liaison and perform home visits with students who are having serious struggles at school. Social workers are also able to conduct behavioral, social and emotional assessments, and develop academic social skill interventions (Washington SSWAA, 2013). These skills help vulnerable students who are not being reached by other school services. School social workers address issues within the school that other mental health professionals may not have the training to do, because of their educational background in systems theory and strength based perspective (Washington SSWAA, 2013). Social workers are not meant to replace counselors or psychologist, but to collaborate with counselors and psychologist in addressing the many needs schools and students have.

Social workers help to relieve the stress of teachers and contribute towards creating a healthier school environment. The National Association of Social Workers acknowledges social
workers are trained in connecting families to promote student success, and are trained in offering social support to students in the school setting. With their training in family connection, social workers are able to curb the national dropout rate (NASW, 2015). School social workers can develop strategies to address school violence, including sexual violence and bullying. They can perform individual and group counseling, including crisis counseling, as well as, support youth experiencing a range of problems such as homelessness, mental health issues, abuse, neglect, teen pregnancy, and substance abuse. School social workers can also provide behavioral assessments on youth who have behavioral difficulties in the classroom and complete home visits to serve as a link between families and schools. School social workers have the unique educational training, and resource allocation skills, to address the diverse needs of schools and students.

EARLY INTERVENTION AND TEACHER-SOCIAL WORKER COLLABORATION

Allen Meara a leading social workers in school intervention says, “Intervention in primary or elementary school can help prevent a downward spiral of events leading to school failure and dropout” (Allen-Meara, 1995). When social workers offer effective strategies on how to deal with mental health, communication skill, and other relevant issues early on, students are less likely to make poor choices in the future, and develop effective coping mechanisms they can utilize throughout their lifetime (Viggiani and Bailey-Dempsey, 2002). That is why the presence of social workers in elementary schools is so essential. A study done by Viggiani and Bailey Dempsey looked at how students benefited when social workers and teacher collaborated together to address elementary student success (Viggiani and Bailey-Dempsey, 2002). The
methodology used in this study took four classrooms. They took two kindergarten classrooms, and two third grade classrooms, from schools that struggled with poverty and student behavior issues. This study is a cross sectional qualitative/quantitative study looking at grades, parental participation, behavioral issues, student success and teacher success. One kindergarten class and one third grade class had social workers collaborating with their teachers for student success (n=36). The control group included a kindergarten and third grade class and did not have social workers collaborating with their teachers for student success (n=40).

According to the authors “The results of the study indicate that the intervention group surpassed the comparison group in attendance maintenance and in a number of behavioral variables” (Viggiani and Bailey-Dempsey, 2002). This study indicates that students were able to decrease behavioral issues and felt more supported. Students said they preferred to have social workers present in the school. Student attendance and report card scores also rose. Social workers were also able to use system theory to integrate parents into the school system and increased the amount of parental participation in student success. Teachers felt like they were able to do their jobs more effectively because of their collaboration with social workers. This study indicates that the immersion of social workers in early education system is hugely beneficial for the students, teachers, and parents (Viggiani and Bailey-Dempsey, 2002). Social workers are able to provide teachers the social support they need to best connect with their student, and allows parents or other legal guardians to play a role in their child's learning.

Hogan and Busch researchers in the field of social work say, “Both school social workers and teachers come to their work with the shared mission of helping children and shared personality attributes of helpfulness, thoughtfulness, consideration of others, and cooperation”
Social workers receive intensive training on cultural competence and systemic oppression during their schooling. While teachers certainly focus on empowering students, they have less educational training on cultural competence and systemic oppression, making it harder for teachers to reach out to students from diverse backgrounds (Bronstein and Abramson, 2003). The study: Understanding Socialization of Teachers and SocialWorkers: Groundwork for Collaboration in the Schools, indicates that social workers are able to provide teachers with the aid they needed to reach out to students and families from diverse backgrounds. This improved student’s overall academic success. The social workers in this study were able to help to teachers connect with the student and their families in a meaningful way. Bronstein and Abramson’s study showed the different ways social workers were able to help, using micro, mezzo and macro practice. Social workers were able connect with families, offer community services, assist with program development and develop school policies that advocate for the success of a diverse student body (Bronstein and Abramson, 2003). Social workers brought the values of self-determination and confidentiality into the school setting. Respecting student’s self-determination and keeping students personal disclosures confidential (unless there is a threat in student or others safety) were key tools in building student rapport. When students can talk about the dilemmas they are dealing with in an open and non-judgmental setting they are able to flourish. Social workers were also able to share the value of confidentiality and respecting student’s self-determination in the classroom setting with teachers, helping teachers achieve best practice (Bronstein and Abramson, 2003). This allowed students to feel more supported and safe in their environment.
Social workers must be encouraging and patient when working with teachers. A study in Hong Kong emphasized how beneficial it can be for the student body when social workers and teachers build strong rapport. To a social work research in Hong Kong, interviewed fifteen social workers about their experiences collaborating with teachers. One social worker talked about her experience building rapport with teachers. “Gradually some teachers would ask you how you perceived your work. I would tell them sometimes the work was really difficult, but on the other hand I would have a sense of satisfaction when I saw the students growing up happily. We can share our views with teachers. This is a good channel for exercising positive influence on teachers, and they can recognize a sense of hope in their work” (Shirley, 2009). Both social workers and teachers share the common goal of wanting students to grow and be happy.

This study revealed how social workers can be a positive influence on teacher behavior (Too, 2009). Social workers were able to encourage teachers to use the strengths-based perspective and positive reinforcement with students. This lead students to feel supported by their teachers, making it easier for the student to complete their academic tasks. Social workers were also able to positively reinforce teachers and help students communicate their appreciation for their teachers. This helped teacher’s feel appreciated for all their hard work (To, 2009). When teachers feel appreciated for all their efforts, they are less likely to burnout and are able to perform better.

One social worker in Hong Kong even planned hiking trips with the students and teachers. This allowed students and teachers to interact with each other without the stress of school, which built student-teacher rapport. Social workers in this study helped teachers create positive youth development programs (To, 2009). One of the social workers created a class that
covered what she considered the four core life values: Emotions, peers, family and sex. The
students responded positively to the lessons, and teachers were able to collaborate with the
school social worker to implement the lessons. This created an overall effective class that
provided a safe space within the school (To, 2009). At the time of this study another social
worker was working on creating a class called “Three D’s - Direction, Dream, and
Development”. This class was a collaborative effort between the social worker and teacher. The
class would teach students leadership, goal planning and civic engagement. The social worker
was able to find teachers who could lead the class, and at the time of this study she was working
with the teacher to help cultivate their skill (To, 2009). This collaborative relationship between
social worker and teacher is extremely beneficial to program formation in the school system.

All of these studies indicate that when teachers and social workers are able to collaborate
together, students are able to achieve more positive outcomes in the school system. Social
workers are able to lead positive youth programs within the school that nurture student
leadership, and build strong rapport with the students. When teachers are given the social support
they need from social workers, they are better able to focus on their role as an educator. The
collaborative relationship between teacher and social worker helps a school system flourish,
instead of being a place where vulnerable students fall through the cracks.

SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS HELPING STUDENT WITH SEXUAL IDENTITY
High school is a time when adolescents start exploring their sexuality. This can be very difficult for queer youth. Studies show the average age millennials are coming out is seventeen (gayteen.about.com). Schools must be equipped in supporting students who are discovering their sexual identity. When students don’t have the support they need while figuring out their sexual identity the results can be dire. LGBTAQ students are two to three times more likely to commit suicide (gayteen.about, 2015). In fact thirty percent of all suicides are linked to a sexual identity crisis (gayteen.about, 2015). Social workers can be key players in decreasing LGBTAQ suicides.

A study by Jong was done to look at how social workers can assist transgender students. The researchers asked the social workers about the work they do with transgender students, and possible strategies they could offer to help those students understand their sexual identity. One woman in the study talked about her experience with a trans-male student, and how she was the first person he reached out to for support (Jong, 2014). Most social workers in this study indicated a desire to help with student’s transition period, and wanted to advocate for trans students in the school system. They also wanted to connect trans students with resources, and wanted to help trans students find a LGBTQA community in the student body (Jong, 2014). While social workers in the study ranged in political and religious beliefs and personal biases when it came to LGBTQA students, they all wanted to advocate for the well-being of the student. It should be noted that social workers need to have training that covers best practice for LGTQA students. Social workers must continue their education throughout their careers to keep their personal biases in check.

Gay affirmative practices have been a recent part of social work literature and training. Social workers are able to take the knowledge they gain from their schooling and apply it to the
school setting. By recognizing the challenges LGBTQA youth face and addressing those challenges, social workers have the potential to save the lives of vulnerable LGBTQA students (Crip and Mccave, 2007). Crisp and McCave’s study outlines the risk factors LGBTQA students deal with and ways for social workers to address those risk factors. Morrow states, “At a time when peer pressure and the need to fit in is most salient, GLB youth often feel ‘different’ from their peers (Morrow 1993). Consequently, they may experience additional stress as a function of their GLB identity and the stigma and oppression associated with it which puts them at risk for experiencing a variety of emotional and physical challenges (Ciro, 2005). These challenges include coming out and disclosure, mental health and substance use issues, sexuality and sexually transmitted diseases, and harassment and violence” (Crip and Mccave, 2007 pg. 406). LGBTQA students are vulnerable in a society that still stigmatizes people for their sexual identity or orientation.

Effective social workers understand the importance of empowering vulnerable youth while also practicing cultural competence. Social workers are able to practice cultural competence by using correct terminology. This might mean asking students for their pronouns and understanding terminology the LGBTQA community has reclaimed, such as the word “Queer.” This can also mean recognizing offensive slurs and correcting students when hearing those words in the school setting (Crip and Mccave, 2007). To practice with cultural competence in the school setting, social workers must also understand different cultural backgrounds and educate themselves on intersectionality. A definition of intersectionality would be “the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent...
LGBTAQ students with resources in the community, such as community support programs, scholarships for LGBTAQ youth, and spiritual centers that have open LGBTAQ policies. They can also provide informational resources for youth who are trying to understand their sexual identity or are trying to explain their sexual identity to their parents.

Social workers are also able to aid in the coming out process for LGBTAQ youth. (Mallon, 2001) suggests that practitioners’ tasks with GLB youth vary based on the stage of the coming out process the youth is experiencing. The GLB (Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual) scale guides social workers so when a youth is exploring their sexuality, they can encourage the exploration and give positive feedback. Social workers can also provide students with informational materials about sexual identities, as well as form a support group for students so they are able to discuss their sexual identity. If a student is sure that they are gay/lesbian/trans/bi/ace/etc., social workers can educate the school about that student’s sexuality and address any negative reaction in the school. Social workers can also work on building the student’s self-esteem and provide them with coping mechanism for negative social reactions (Crip and Mccave, 2007). Providing information is key in helping students accept their sexual identity, and ultimately accept themselves.

If social workers are competent in using gay affirmative practice within the school system, LGBTAQ students will receive the emotional support they need. However, if we don’t have social workers practicing these methods within the school system we are putting LGBTAQ students at risk. Like 15 year-old Jaiden Bell, an Oregon student who committed suicide in 2013 after experience extreme bullying and a lack of LGBTAQ support from within the school.
A 2011 study reported on dosomething.com, indicates that one in every five students experienced school violence/bullying. Thirty-three percent of those students reported that they had experienced a physical altercation in school (Dosomething, 2011). Do something also reported that urban areas experiencing poverty are twice as likely to experience violent crimes (Barton, Cloey, & Wenglinsky, 1998). An analysis on school violence by Barton, Cloey, and Weglinsky (1998), states, “Several research studies have shown that chronic exposure to violence can adversely affect a child’s ability to learn” (Barton, Cloey, & Wenglinsky, 1998). American schools are supposed to be a safe space where students can focus on academics and personal achievement. However, in 2007, students talked about how they were more afraid of encountering violence in the schools than at home (Wheeler and McClain, 2009). It is problematic that one in five students have to fear for their emotional or physical safety.

Social workers have the necessary skills to combat school violence and bullying. Research shows social workers have a history of successful violence prevention programs that target families and the community (Wheeler and McClain, 2009). The NASW has informed protocol that addresses school violence and bullying. This protocol involves recognizing that school violence reflects: social, moral, and economics challenges within society. The NASW all states that all students, teachers, and staff have the right to attend a school where they feel supported and safe in. It a social worker's job to create comprehensive violence prevention programs that involve parents, teachers, and community. Social workers must train school staff on violence risk factors and prevention models, providing special care to vulnerable students.
who need mental health support and to act as an advocate within the school system (Wheeler and McClain, 2009). Social workers have key guidelines formed by the NASW they must follow when dealing with school violence, so they can promote student and school safety.

A qualitative study by Astor, Behre and Wallace was completed by surveying 1,200 national social workers looking at their experiences with school violence and the work they have done with school violence prevention programs (Astor, Behre, Wallace & Fravil, 1998). Results indicate that school social workers are involved in interventions such as home visits, crisis intervention, social skills training, and counseling services for children who struggle with anger management and their families. However, many school districts do not recognize all the work social workers put into reducing school violence (Astor, Behre, Wallace & Fravil, 1998). Results also indicate that 90% of social workers desire more training around violence prevention programs. They desire to maintain the safety of students, faculty and themselves when practicing in a school environment, especially in urban environment that experiences high poverty rates (Astor, Behre, Wallace & Fravil, 1998). While social workers showed a desire to have more training in the graduate level about violence prevention, they are working within their schools to help reduce violence. The majority of social workers in this study showed willingness to learn more about school violence so they could practice more effectively in the school setting (Astor, Behre, Wallace & Fravil, 1998). Showing a shared desire from social workers for professional growth around school violence.

A study by Whitfield was done looking at the effects social workers have on reducing student anger and helping students with anger management skills. Eight adolescent males (n=8) were used for a single-subject, multiple baseline study that evaluated their anger-control before
and after working with a social worker who used cognitive behavioral practices. The progress of the students was measured by the Child Behavior Checklist, and the Self Control Scale (Achenbach, 1991). The student evaluation was filled out by teachers, parents, and themselves. The results proved that over a twelve week period of time the eight students benefited from cognitive behavioral social work intervention (Whitfield, 1999). These eight students showed improved anger management skills, healthy expression of anger, and fewer behavioral problems after working with a social worker.

In this study, the sample size was rather low, but the intervention was successful (Whitfield, 1999). When social workers can work with students on their behaviors and relationships, students are better able to identify what causes anger, how to control anger impulses, and how to express their feelings. These anger coping skills are detrimental to student wellbeing and have the ability to prevent students from engaging in future violent behaviors (Whitfield, 1999).

Whitfield’s research demonstrates that social workers have a key role to play in combating school violence. While there is room for professional growth, social workers have strong guidelines set in place by the NASW to promote student and school safety. Students in schools have benefited from social work violence prevention programs. Violence prevention programs that are effectively implemented into the school systems have the potential to save the lives of students and staff.

**CONCLUSION FROM THE LITERATURE**
School social workers have the ability to positively impact the wellbeing of youth. Social workers receive the training to effectively collaborate with teachers, help students achieve academic success, use early intervention to improve student outcome, help students explore/accept their sexual identity, and reduce school violence and bullying. Social workers have the educational background that allows them to advocate for the success of vulnerable population in the school system (SSWAA, 2015). With vulnerable populations struggling to graduate, it is absolutely necessary that we reintroduce social workers into the school system.

Heather Alden, the 2012 social worker of the year says, “We need to get in there and do the work. We may do our work in a classroom, at a table, under a table, outside of a home on the front porch or through a screened door. We may do our work with puppets and clay or graffiti and spoken word, before school or during lunch...nonetheless, we do the work” - Alden National Social Worker of the Year (SSWAA, 2015). It is important that we encourage our schools to include social workers as part of the permanent staff. This means pushing for policy reform that requires every school in the state to have a social worker present. While this may be a huge project, the effects of a policy like this passing will be profound. It is essential that our society invests in the mental health and wellbeing of our youth. When we invest in our nation's youth, we are investing in our nation's future. We need to think of youth like Marcus and how his life trajectory could have been different with a social worker present in his school.

**POLICY ANALYSIS: Initiating Legislation to Re-Establish School Social Workers in Schools**
INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW OF PROBLEM

In order for our state to thrive we must have a healthy and educated workforce (Joseph Gallegos, 2016). However, Oregon is ranked 48th in the U.S. for education. In fact only 72% of Oregon students graduate, and that number is even lower for minority students (OPB, 2015). Oregon is struggling with student absenteeism and has one of the shortest school years in the nation. Students are falling through the cracks and teachers are overwhelmed as they are struggling to teach to some of the biggest class sizes in the nation. What the Oregon K-12 public school system needs is a professional that can understand the needs of vulnerable students and connect with families with resources in the community, someone who is educated in trauma based intervention, strength based perspective and systems theory, and can use these tools for improving student well-being. In sum, schools in Oregon need social workers.

Being a social worker himself and a member of the higher education committee, Representative Joseph Gallegos has a strong understanding of the importance of reintroducing social workers into the Oregon school system. He is also well aware of the educational struggles Oregon has come to face. Our office has heard from teachers time and time again how much they need someone who can empower and meet the needs of students falling through the cracks. It is this feedback that helped Gallegos’ office initiate the formation of a policy that reintroduces social workers into the Oregon school system. The problem Gallegos’ office aims to address is the lack of social welfare support for students in the Oregon education system. We need social workers in the school system who have the tools necessary to help process the student experiences of trauma and violence. We need social workers who are able to bridge the gap between school and family thereby helping families become a part of their student’s educational
experience and overall success. We also need social workers who can work with teachers and school faculty, educating them about cultural competence, and creating safe spaces for minority students on campus. For example, a social worker could establish an LGBT club or a Black Students Coalition or Latino Students Coalition to create safe spaces for minority students. Teachers need social workers who have the time and resources to address the risk factors that students encounter. This extra professional support is shown to reduce teacher burnout and create better student success (Viggiani and Bailey-Dempsey, 2002). This collaborative relationship is good for the teacher and the social worker.

The most vulnerable youth populations include: minority students, low income students, students who identify as LGBTQ and students who struggle with physical or mental health disabilities. Students in low income areas, both urban and rural, are most susceptible to dropping out and struggling with risk factors (House, 2010). Students who are often absent for personal or family reasons fall behind in school, which can cause them to drop out. A social worker can connect students to community resources for their personal needs such as mental health support, in kind benefits or family support, so they are able to attend school, which can greatly improve a student's outcome and reduce dropout rates in Oregon.

It is difficult to determine what grade levels are most susceptible to risk factors. Every elementary, middle and high school that we visited insisted that their students would benefit from a social worker's presence the most. Elementary schools told us that young children need early intervention of risk factors happening in order to stop future destructive behavior. Middle schools told us that middle school students are in the middle of puberty and transitioning into adulthood, and therefore they need a trained professional they can talk to about these life
changes. High schools told us that students are struggling with very serious issues such as school violence, substance abuse and sexual exploration, and need someone who can empower students struggling with a variety of issues.

The solution to this problem is heavily dependent upon what we are able to pass. In an ideal world, the proposed policy would aim to immediately start the reintroduction of social workers to all schools in Oregon. However, we need to be politically astute and mindful of the political climate. For example, we may have to start with a pilot program that can prove the effectiveness of social workers in the school system. Or we might just have to find a way where social workers have access to jobs that were previously only accessible to school counselors. Gallegos’ office would like to avoid this however, because it could cause more problematic relationships between social workers and counselors. Additionally, Gallegos’ office sees the usefulness of both social workers and counselors in the school system since they play complimentary but different roles in schools. We may have to consider only introducing social workers into schools with the highest needs. Gallegos’ office believes that every school could benefit from a social worker, however if we are limited in the amount of social workers we are able to introduce, schools with the highest need such as high poverty, high dropout rates, low attendance, and diverse populations would have priority.

**PROCESS OF GATHERING INFORMATION AND SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

In order to be successful in the creation and implementation of the bill it is important that we collaborate with everyone who will be affected by it. To achieve this goal, Gallegos’ office
hosted three focus groups. Each focus group had a purpose of identifying the risk factors that youth are struggling with in schools and the tools needed to alleviate these risk factors. This allowed us to determine the barriers to introducing social workers to the schools system and find solutions that will benefit Oregon schools. Our first focus group was with social work professors in the State of Oregon. It was hosted at Portland State University and twelve social work professors from PSU, Pacific University and University of Portland attended the event. They were given two questions: 1) What are the needs and barriers to reestablishing Social Workers in Oregon Schools? 2) What are the resources and curriculum needs/barriers to reestablishing School Social Workers in Oregon schools? We passed out each question separately and gave the social workers who attended the event ten minutes to answer each question. Then we discussed what each social worker had put down for each question, and had an open discussion to identify needs and barriers. The barriers that the social work professors identified were: social workers’ relationship with counselors and the Teacher Standards and Practices Commission (TSPC); funding for school social workers; identifying the roles of social workers in the school system; and training schools on how to utilize their social worker effectively.

The TSPC is in charge of education licensure in Oregon. The primary problem is that they only offer licensure for school counselors with a counseling degree and not to those with a social work degree. Some professors felt it would be an extra barrier for social workers to receive licensure from both the NASW and the TSPC. However, other professors discussed the need for cooperation with the TSPC in order for the bill to be successful. If social workers were able to gain support from the TSPC, counselors might see that as a threat to their jobs. That is
why it is so necessary to separate the roles that counselors and social workers would play in the school system.

During our focus group, the professors who attended identified why social workers are imperative to the school system and what they can bring that differentiates them from a school counselor. Professors agreed that social workers could be a trauma-informed and mental health specialist for the school. Professors reported social workers can also play the role of a family connection specialist, connecting families with the schools to optimize student success as well as a specialist for students dealing with risk factors such as poverty, hunger, abuse, addiction and other serious dilemmas that affect student success.

Funding of course is the biggest barrier. Gallegos’ office is still figuring out where we hope to obtain the funding for this bill. Professors discussed that it is imperative we do not take funding from other important programs, but instead work to find the most sensible funding source. Social work professors also discussed how important it was for teachers to understand how to best utilize their school social worker. A professor suggested that a six hour training within the school was the best way to accomplish this goal. However, other professors worried about school staff not having enough time to participate in such a training. We must be aware of time constraints and work with the schedules of school faculty if we were to require schools to have a six hour training session on how to best utilize their school social worker.

With regard to developing a certification for school social workers, professors felt it was important that social workers are exposed to the school setting before receiving their certification. One suggestion for certification was that social workers could take an online thirty hour course that would require direct service hours in Oregon schools. One professor suggested
we could use the online courses that are offered in Washington for school social worker certification. One barrier that was identified is that Oregon currently only has three MSW programs, so one of the three programs would need to have a strong emphasis in school social work, in cooperation with our bill.

The second focus group that our office facilitated was with school personnel from the Oregon K-12 public school system ranging from teachers, administrators, social work youth coordinators, and counselors. I was the facilitator and organizer of this group. We had fifteen participants from various K-12 schools in the Hillsboro area, though one of the participants drove all the way from La Pine, OR. The focus group session was ninety minutes long. Similar to the first focus group, we gave each participant three question and participants were given ten minutes to reply to each question. After participants replied to each question, our focus group discussed the participant’s responses. The questions were: 1) What barriers do you see in integrating social workers into the Oregon school system, and how can we face those barriers? 2) What are risk factors you see in the schools and what barriers do you face to alleviate these risk factors? 3) What solutions or guidance’s can assist you in aiding students? (What do you need to best aid the wellbeing of Oregon youth?)

The barriers school faculty members identified had to do with transparency in the roles social workers would be playing in the school system. Participants emphasized the importance of setting clear roles that social workers would undertake that differentiate from the roles of counselors and other school specialists. Social workers, who act as youth coordinators in the schools, offered how their roles differentiate from counselors. They shared that students who are dealing with academic issues and short term distress work with their counselor, while students
dealing with long term issues especially around family and systemic issues work with their social worker. There is some overlap, but the social workers who are already present in the schools reported that they are able to work effectively with other school faculty members.

This focus group also expressed concerns about funding and adequate space for social workers. Funding is a barrier that Gallegos’ office recognizes and is an anticipated concern, while space is something that had not been considered up to this point. Schools have limited space and are currently struggling to provide enough classroom space and supplies to support students. School faculty members shared their concerns about not having a space for social workers to meet with students. The focus group was split about their opinions on this matter. Some participants believed that they could make it work with a tight space, while others worried that if they didn’t have a safe office space, students’ confidentiality may be compromised. This feedback helped give our office extra perspective on a barrier that we may have not otherwise recognized.

This focus group of school faculty members identified risk factors that Oregon students are struggling with, including but not limited to: family issues, disengaged students, poverty and homelessness, lack of classroom resources, substance abuse, and lack of parent involvement. Students are also struggling with trauma, language barriers, lack of transportation, gang involvement, and lack of culturally competent practice. Many of the risk factors identified in the schools were in areas that social workers received specialized training in. (NASW, 2015). While our office expected to see many of these risk factors, the sheer amount of families that are disconnected from the school really emphasized the need for a family connections specialist.
One teacher disclosed a heart breaking story of two students who are late every morning and struggling academically because their parents are suffering from alcohol addiction. The teacher who shared this story acknowledged how much those students need the presence of a school worker who can conduct a family assessment and plan an intervention with the parents of those two students. She recognizes that these two students are already acting out in the classroom and their behaviors will only worsen if they do not receive an intervention soon.

Another school worker talked about how desperately schools need professionals that can assist with issues of poverty and homelessness. She is already working with many families experiencing homelessness in the area, helping to ensure their students still have access to school and extra academic supports. Gang activity and substance abuse was also raised as a very substantial problem within the school district, and teachers reported it starting as early as middle school. Every school faculty member who attended agreed that schools need professionals who can intervene and work with students struggling with these risk factors; professionals who have received training and experience in working with people who suffer from addiction.

Trauma was the most identified issue that school faculty members reported. Students are experiencing trauma at an early age and are carrying their trauma with them each year. Many faculty members reported working with students who have high ACE (Adverse Childhood Experiences) scores. The ACE test is a scale used to measure a student’s level of trauma. Having a high ACE score can lead to detrimental long-term health effects, both mentally and physically. (Harris, 2015). Faculty members agreed that students experiencing trauma do not receive the help they need in the school system and struggle both academically and socially because of the trauma they experience and internalize.
School faculty members identified the following needs in their schools: More time spent with students who are struggling; smaller class sizes; more funding; and better training and support for teachers, especially in trauma-informed care. School faculty members also wished for fewer students, housing and family stability for students, and professionals who can address student absenteeism. While the introduction of social workers may not be able to help with the funding issues schools struggle with, it does have the power to help with decreasing absenteeism, teacher support around trauma-informed care, and family and housing services.

School counselors who attended the meeting expressed the need for more counselors in the school system and talked about how they were more likely to support legislation that supported counselors, rather than reintroducing social workers. Their reasoning for this was that counselors are already established, and believe they have a longer history with the school system, even though the history of school social workers is of equal length. Some teachers reported that they are supportive of the bill but wanted us to generalize it to “mental health specialists.” Other faculty members agreed that the reintroduction of social workers was the best course of action. These viewpoints helped our office identify where the support is and where the opposition will be. It also clarified the confusion that many have about the role social workers play and the training they receive.

The third focus group consisted of community organizations that work with students. These are organizations that work directly with students or they work on policy and creating systemic changes that will positively impact students such as International Refugee Community Organization, Portland ORMO Community, Latino Network, Partnerships of Safety and Justice, and Stand for Children, and the Center for Intercultural Organization. This meeting was
organized and implemented in the same manner as the previous focus groups. The facilitator of this focus group was Demi, a fellow practicum student who is earning her Master’s in Social Work at PSU. Many of the results we received were consistent with the results of our other two focus groups. This focus group did an exceptional job explaining cultural competency issues in the school system to our office. The three questions asked were: 1) *What are some stressors you witness or notice (from the community organizations perspective) that you see students face within a classroom or school setting from the organizational environment you serve?* 2) *What are areas of risk factors and barriers you witness students face from a community organization perspective?* 3) *What tools or guidance do you think can assist students in your organization to prosper in a classroom and school setting for best outcomes?*

One of the stressors that many of the organizations reported was a huge disconnect between the guardians of students and the school. The Center for Intercultural Organization, one of the organizations that attended this meeting, is aiming to empower parents by giving them the tools they need such as: translated forms, finding times that work with their schedule, and transportation so families are able to be part of their students educational experience. Organizations reported that families feel disconnected regarding the roles they are supposed to play in their students schooling. Every support group we have met with so far has agreed that family support and involvement is imperative to positive outcomes of the student. If a student is having to deal with abuse, immigration issues, and trauma the family needs to be involved with the school to find the most appropriate solution for the student. By looking at the many systems in a student's life, instead of ignoring everything happenings outside of the school setting, the school can partner with the family to empower the student. Participants felt that if social workers
were able to connect families and bring cultural competency into the school, a huge stress would be lifted from the students. They also expressed the need for schools to move away from the “zero tolerance” policy and instead embrace a more solutions-based model that works with student’s needs, instead of throwing them out of the school system.

Community organizations emphasized how much stress can be inflicted upon students because of cultural barriers. A man from IRCO shared a problematic story of students who would be extremely hungry throughout the day, however they couldn’t consume the snacks their school provided them with because it contained an ingredient that they were not able to eat for religious reasons. If the school had a professional who was aware of the student’s cultural food restrictions when the students first started attending school, the school could have found an alternative to feed hungry students. Students should never be struggling to pay attention because they cannot eat what is being served to them. There was also mention of students not being able to attend after school meetings or extra support hours with teachers because meetings would be scheduled during worship hours. The schools are run with a Christian mentality that only acknowledges the Christian religions holiday schedule. Schools do not have the tools in place for students with different faiths to practice their beliefs. This can be extremely challenging and discouraging for students who are trying to practice their faith while continuing their education. That is why schools desperately need an advocate who can accommodate the needs of different faiths and work with students so they feel welcome and able to succeed in the school setting.

An employee of IRCO also mentioned that refugees are often placed into classes based upon their age and not their skills level. They are pushed through the school system without having the tools to learn. Some graduate with minimal literacy. It is imperative to have a
professional who can work with the schools to help create an individual educational plan for each refugee student. Having a social worker's presence would provide many refugees students with a professional who can meet the trauma needs and culture shifts they are struggling with.

The community organizations that attended this focus group agreed that students need a professional who can help them feel comfortable with their dual cultural identities. Students who come from different cultural backgrounds are much more likely to feel isolated because of cultural barriers (Mcbrien, 2005). Schools need a professional who can help students feel proud of their heritage and culture, combating the self-loathing feeling that dual cultural students deal with due to a lack of cultural competency in the school system. Schools also need a professional to work with students in the schools to stop bullying, which many students with dual cultural identities, or students who are LGBTQ report facing. Students who are bullied lose a sense of confidence and start to fear attending school. This causes a disconnect, which can ultimately lead to a student dropping out or suffering academically and emotionally, even leading to suicide (AAETS, 2014). This helps to demonstrate that a social work professional presence in the schools has the potential to be lifesaving.

Teaching students the importance of accepting diversity is important for the development and betterment of this county. We need professionals in the schools who can create safe spaces for students, while also educating the general student population and school faculty, on the importance of acceptance of cultural differences. Perhaps the social worker could create a lesson plan around cultural competency or host activities that students would be required to participate in, or work with teachers to implement lessons on diversity and acceptance into their academic plan.
The rest of the barriers reported in this focus group aligned with what all the other focus groups reported seeing: trauma, family disconnection, too many students and not enough care providers, addiction, lack of funding for school programs, and of course the lack of early intervention. Everyone emphasized early intervention is so desperately needed in order to prevent students from failing or dropping out later down the line. Everyone also agreed that if we catch problems early on, we can prevent students from struggling throughout their academic experience and increase their chance of success.

The tools emphasized during this focus group also heavily coincided with the tools others focus groups reported needing such as a mental health specialist in the school, early intervention and education, a trauma specialist, and better funding. This focus group dove deeper however into the idea of having a professional who can properly integrate Systems Theory when working with students and their families. It is important to support the many different systems students are dealing with such as: family, friends, faith, afterschool interests, cultural identity, sexual identity, surrounding community, and using all those systems to create a plan that best works for the student, instead of just viewing them in an “academic vacuum.” Participants discussed the benefits of having a professional who can connect with different community organizations to help bring new resources and programs to the schools, like programs that offer free homework help or can help with students dealing with poverty and food insecurity. It is important that schools are utilizing the resources in the community.

To summarize the findings from all three focus groups, there are consistent themes with regard to what schools need in order to improve the welfare of students. Schools need a professional who is trained in trauma-informed intervention, who can plan and implement early
intervention, who understands and can educate others on cultural competence, and someone who can connect schools and families together to promote student success. Gallegos’ office believes that a social worker is the most qualified to address these needs. It is social workers’ academic training in family systems intervention, cultural competency, trauma-informed intervention and early intervention that would make them the best professional fit for the needs of the public schools (NASW, 2015). There is no profession that fits this description better than that of a social worker.

**SUPPORTERS AND OPPOSITION**

These focus groups helped us to gather a much better idea of what coalitions and groups of people will be supportive of our bill as well as who might oppose our bill. The support and opposition will also be dependent on where the funding comes from. For example, teachers and the Oregon Education Association (OEA) are in support of the bill as long as it does not cut funding from school programs that are essential to students, such as art programs. If we don’t take money from schools and with the support of teachers and OEA we believe we can gain the support of the teachers union. The teachers union holds a lot of power in funding, politics and overall numbers. Without their support our bill would face great difficulty passing. Having the support of the Teachers Union and OEA is vital to the passage of our bill.

The community organizations we met with were extremely supportive and excited about the bill. These organization's leaders believed that community organizations that share similar goals to their own organizations such as educational access for Oregon students, Latino rights, refugee support, and serving those struggling with poverty would support having social workers
present in schools. The community organizations and school faculty members our office met with let us know that they hope to continue aiding us with the creation of our bill and will continue to offer support and feedback.

NASW Oregon has also been very supportive of the bill and has offered to use the resources they have available to help support this legislation. Their lobbyist has met with us each month to go over the progress we are making and ask in what ways he can help. There are members of both the House and Senate that have shared a desire to support the bill and others that we believe will be supportive of the bill.

While we have not yet organized an official focus group with families and students, Representative Gallegos has talked about the goal of this bill with his constituents, and he has received a good amount of support for the bill. There is a strong unified agreement that schools need to have better support to meet the growing needs of students and school faculty. Gallegos’ office believes that families and students will be supportive of the bill as long as there is a transparent understanding of the roles that social workers will play and how it will help their students. This bill is the answer many people have been asking for years. As long as the funding does not make cuts to current school programs, many schools and members of the community who support an increase of social services in the school system will be supportive of this bill concept.

The opposition for this bill does exist, and many school counselors working in schools are not pleased with the idea of this bill. Counselors see it as a threat to their job security, or believe that additional funding needs to be distributed to school counselor’s rather than social workers because they are more established in the school system. Additionally, there are some
school and community members who believe that having this bill focus specifically on social workers and not generalized to mental health specialists is a problem. They believe that the title of social worker is too specific and that we will be isolating other mental health professionals.

There will also likely be opposition from those who are fiscally conservative once this bill gets a fiscal estimate attached to it. If the amount is large (and most likely it will be), the Ways and Means committee will be a big determinant on the passage of this bill. If we are able to have enough testimonies and support around this bill, especially from the Oregon education system, TSPC and school unions, they will be more likely to rule in favor of the bill. This bill is most likely going to be introduced through the House side. There will be opposition from fiscal conservatives on the House side, but as long as the Democrats keep their super majority, the bill has a better chance of passing.

The struggle will be passing the bill through the Senate side, where there is not a super majority and the Democratic presence is much more moderate. This is where it will be essential to have organizations, schools, and constituents emailing Senators letting them know their support for the bill. If we are not able to show strong support from schools, community organizations, lobbyists and constituents, the bill will die in the Senate. We especially need to target Chair Peter Courtney as the bill has the potential to die on his desk like many progressive bills have done so in the past. Gallegos’ office and the supporters of this bill need to be sure that the death of this bill does not become a bargaining tool to appease fiscally conservative members of the Senate. The power of unified voices is a powerful tool and as long as our supporters come together to put strong pressure on the Senate, the bill is less likely to die. A good way to start is
by using school lobby days and social work lobby days as a way for supporters to rally together and visit each office voicing their support for this bill.

**GOAL OF LEGISLATION**

The goal of this bill is to reintroduce social workers into the Oregon school system to reduce the amount of students facing: absenteeism, mental health crisis, trauma, poverty, dropping out, violence, addiction and systemic oppression. The roles that social workers will be playing, and that will be stated in the bill, is a trained professional that can help students deal with long term problems that are affecting their school success. One example of this would be helping a student have access to food support. Social workers will also act as an educator on cultural competency in the schools. Social workers will work towards the creation of safe spaces and advocating for the voices of vulnerable students. For example, a social worker could collaborate with teachers to aid them in adding more Latino representation and history into their academic programs. Social workers will also act as family connection specialists working to have families, and other systems that impact students, be part of student's intervention plans.

While the exact language of this bill has not yet been formulated, our hope is for social workers to play the following roles mentioned above and to have those roles very clearly stated within the bill. We are currently looking into creating two bills to accomplish the goal of reintroducing social workers. The first bill would be a two-year pilot program reintroducing social workers to high-risk schools in Oregon. The schools we choose for the program will be located in different areas to ensure that we have urban, suburban and rural representation. We know that we would like to target each grade level, but feel especially strong about targeting
elementary schools as the need for early intervention is so vital. After the two year pilot program, we hope to use the evidence we gathered from the program to inform the roles social workers would be playing in the Oregon school system and to then reintroduce social workers to all Oregon schools, or at least all high-risk schools in Oregon.

The bill will also require social workers to have a Master’s in Social Work and be certified to practice school social work by either The Board of Social Work, the TSPC, or both. It would require schools to receive mandatory training on how to best utilize their social worker. There will be no confusion on the roles the school social worker will be playing. We also want to have school administrators be part of the hiring process for their school social worker, as an administrator is strongly aware of the needs of their school.

FRAMING AND STRATEGY TO GET BILL PASSED INTO A LAW

The framing of this bill is essential to the passage of this bill. That is why our focus groups were so important. It is clear from all the feedback we received that we must have clear guidelines on the roles social workers will be performing in the school systems. It will be very important to emphasize the risk factors social workers will alleviate such as family and housing insecurity, absenteeism, school violence, student mental health crisis, and most importantly student trauma. We must demonstrate why social workers are the most equipped to deal with these important issues. We will provide evidence for how intervening at the K-12 levels will save the state money in the long run with prison, health, and welfare costs. If students have the tools they need to be successful, they are going to be able to give back to society and benefit the state
of Oregon. However, if these risk factors are not addressed while students are in school, there is a much higher chance of them dropping out and engaging in dangerous activities, which can lead to serious costs our local communities and to the state.

We are currently considering attaching this school social work policy to HB 4002, the absenteeism and trauma bill that passed during the last session thereby linking social workers as the answer to supporting HB 4002 and reducing absenteeism and trauma in Oregon schools. This bill needs to be framed as something that is necessary to the Oregon school system by showing the success of other states who have school social workers. If we can demonstrate the value that social workers will bring to the school system, and the success of other states such as Washington and California, we are more likely to gain support.

Our desire is to make sure we are framing this as a cooperative effort with teachers and school faculty. If we do not have the schools’ support, this bill will not pass. We need to frame this bill as something teachers and school faculty members helped create. Having as many teachers and student organizations testify and write their representatives and senators about the importance of this bill, will be important. Yes, also the Teacher’s Union.

This bill must be written in a way that demonstrates the separate roles that counselors and social workers will play in very transparent and easy to follow formats. We have heard multiple times from multiple sources how important it is that the roles social workers will be playing in the school are clear and not infringing upon counselors. It is imperative that part of our strategy includes showing how social workers could benefit counselors by alleviating them from their casework so they are able to focus more on short term student problems and academics. We should also continue to provide evidence on the ways social workers benefit teachers by reducing
teacher burnout and aiding the students in their classroom who need extra support (Viggiani and Bailey-Dempsey, 2002). It is essential to the passage of our bill that social workers are seen as an ally to both counselors and teachers.

**BIGGEST OBSTACLES**

The biggest obstacles will be finding funding that is not going to take away from the Oregon school system, establishing a program that can certify school social workers, and combating misconceptions that schools and the general public have about social workers. We need to be looking for funding that is not coming from the already very thin pockets of the Oregon school system. This means looking at alternative streams of money such as federal grants, or looking at different tax pools that are in the state of Oregon. We have heard some suggestions to look at the possible tax revenue from SB 91, the recreational marijuana bill. However, Representative Gallegos worries that taking funding from SB 91 could lead to an unstable source of funding because of the possible increases and decreases that SB 91 is susceptible to. But our office is still considering using SB 91 as a tool to fund this bill. There is also federal grant funding available for programs combatting student trauma within school systems, and this funding could possibly help with our bill. There is also the possibility of increasing taxes to help fund this program. However, increasing taxes can be a major barrier because the overall population is very sensitive to tax increases. Even the “Better Oregon” bill that hopes to increase the taxes of corporations that make more than twenty five million in sales a year, to use towards our education system and health system, has received push back. I believe that if we were to increase taxes in order to fund this policy, we must be increasing taxes of the
wealthy and not the taxes of the very populations we are trying to help. We need to explain to Oregon voters and state legislators how investing in this program will eventually lead to a financial return when fewer Oregon students are in jail or struggling with addiction and other health issues.

It is also important that we have enough certified school social workers who are able to work in the school system. While our office has found that a lot of social workers are eager to work in the school system, we still need to make sure they are certified to do so. This means either having the TSPC certify social workers or the Board of Licensed Social Workers. This also means having a curriculum in place that social workers are able to complete in order to get their certification and learn about best practices in the Oregon school system. We must also develop a training that demonstrates to schools how to best utilize their school social workers. The creation of this process would need to be a joint effort between the Oregon school system and the Board of Licensed Social Workers. The joining of the Board of Licensed Social Workers and Oregon school system could potentially lead to the creation of a School Social Workers Board. This will take a lot of time and energy from both schools and social workers who are already spread pretty thin. Still it is imperative to student success that the collaborative relationship between schools and social workers grows stronger. In order to overcome this barrier we need strong leaders from both the school side and social work side to overcome the divide to work together to create a program that would best educate social workers on best practices in the school system. This program would also have to vary with the populations they are working with. For example, a social worker working with a 10th grader in Newberg is going to have a very different experience than a social worker working with a 2nd grader in Gresham.
It is essential that the training provided to each school social worker is strong enough to allow social workers to perform effectively in both rural and urban settings.

If you look at the themes from our focus groups, the needed professional description fits the training and qualifications of a social worker perfectly. Still we saw a lot of pushback about making this a “social work-only” bill. Many believe that “mental health specialist” might be a better title, but the problem with this generalized title is that schools need more than just a mental health specialist; they need someone who understands culture and community intervention as well as early intervention. They need a professional who understands the systemic oppression these students are facing and knows how to address it, as well as someone who can work with families from a variety of different backgrounds and beliefs. It is this cultural competency aspect that makes our office believe that social workers are the most appropriate for this job.

Unfortunately, many believe social workers are just another mental health profession or are only trained in DHS child welfare type work. It will take education and evidence to convince the Oregon State Legislature, as well as the schools, that social workers are the best for the job. This is why we are considering a pilot program, in order to have much needed data to demonstrate the positive impact social workers would have on the Oregon K-12 public school system.

**PREDICTIONS FOR 2017**

It is Representative Gallegos’ hope that he can introduce this bill in early 2017. This means that we will have to find a representative or senator to sponsor the bill, since
Representative Gallegos will be resigning. We have brainstormed several representatives who might be able to carry this bill. After it is developed, the office of Representative Gallegos will start shopping the bill around to different representatives, in hopes that a member of the Oregon state legislature will be interested in introducing the bill to the floor during the 2017 session. If we are able to find a chief sponsor, we feel they will be more inclined to either support the pilot program idea or the concept to introduce social workers solely to very high need schools, or perhaps choosing to combine both concept ideas to have a pilot program in high-risk schools.

The pilot program will have to provide supportive evidence on the positive impact school social workers have on the school system, evidence that would include: increased student attendance; increased student achievement; a decrease in addiction, suicide, and bullying; as well as better inclusion of families in student education. If we are able to demonstrate increased student welfare from our pilot program, we can then introduce another bill that will reintroduce school social workers into all schools in the Oregon education system. The whole process could take up to 5 years or more before we start seeing social workers in every school in Oregon. Still each year we hope that this legislation will increase the state's understanding on what a social worker can provide to the schools and bridge the way for more social workers to be introduced each year. I do believe we will be able to successfully pass a pilot program for school social workers if we continue to gather school and community support. Our office will continue to connect with schools and communities about the importance of this bill and encourage allies to write their Representative and Senator urging passage of the bill.

CONCLUSION
There is still a great amount of work that needs to be done in order to successfully reintroduce social workers into the Oregon school system. That is why it is so imperative that we continue to make progress on this essential movement that has the potential to positively impact the lives of thousands of Oregon students. If we want our state to grow closer to the goal of reduced dropout rates and better college attendance, we must start addressing the growing needs of many of our students at both the micro and macro levels. Both the research literature and focus groups showed the positive impact that social workers can have in the schools. The inclusion of social workers in many other states is as common as counselors or teachers. The Midwest, for example, has improved student success by the continued presence of school social workers (MSSWA, 2016). It’s time that Oregon citizens demand the same social support in their public schools. Oregon needs to prevent students who have so much potential for success from dropping out of school. It is not acceptable to be 48th in the nation when it comes to the educational success of our students. Oregon needs advocates in the school system who can be a champion for students facing adversity. Oregon needs social workers.

Work Cited


