



## ADDRESSING MENTAL HEALTH IN SCHOOLS

In the wake of the recent tragedy in Connecticut, many are searching for solutions to prevent a tragedy like this from occurring again. One solution is to provide a comprehensive approach in how we address the mental health needs of children and youth in our schools. Research indicates the best way to address these needs is to provide a *continuum of care that includes Specialized Instructional Support Staff that has specific skill sets and training to address the needs of the whole child, coordinate school-linked mental health services and collaborate with outside mental health agencies and organizations working with our students and families.*

Within the school community, best practice supports a multi-disciplinary approach comprised of a variety of Specialized Instructional Support Personnel with different backgrounds, training and skill sets that includes but is not limited to: School Social Workers, School Psychologists, School Nurses, School Counselors and Chemical Health Specialists. For example, Licensed School Social Workers are dual licensed by the Board of Social Work and the Board of Education. As the vital link between the home, the school and the community, School Social Workers have unique training and knowledge about mental health to address the emotional needs of children using evidence-based interventions such as:

- Providing individual and group counseling,
- Evaluation and assessment
- Crisis prevention and response such as suicide assessments and child maltreatment
- Violence Prevention and Intervention
- Conflict mediation
- Social emotional learning standards, etc.

The unique knowledge, training and expertise of School Social Workers incorporate a systems approach to address the mental health needs of children and youth. School Social Workers not only provide services to individuals or groups of students but they also support families and collaborate with community agencies and other professionals (such as school-linked mental health professionals) as well as coordinate these community resources for the student and their families.

The multi-disciplinary team approach can lead to enhanced student outcomes as it fosters a holistic approach to the social, emotional, physical health and academic needs of children and families. This approach also supports the collaborative pooling of skills and exchange of expertise among Specialized Instructional Support Staff, school-linked mental health providers and outside mental health agencies and organizations.

**Up to three quarters of children** receiving professional care for a mental health problem obtained services through a school based program.

The U.S. Surgeon General considers **schools to be a major setting for the potential recognition of mental disorders in children and adolescents**, while acknowledging that trained staff and options for referral to specialty care are limited. (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1999).

**About 36 percent of youth with any lifetime mental disorder received services to treat the mental health disorder**, and only half of these youth who were severely impaired by their mental disorder received professional mental health treatment. The majority (68 percent) of the children who did receive services had fewer than six visits with a provider over their lifetime. (Merikangas KR, et. al, 2011)

**Only 13% of children from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds receive mental health services** according to Rachel Masi and Janice Cooper (2006) *Children's Mental Health National Center for Children in Poverty Fact Sheet*,

School Social Workers are the vital link between home, school, and community. All School Social Workers are dual licensed by the Board of Social Work and the Board of Education. As mental health professionals and practitioners, we are highly qualified to address the emotional barriers that interfere with the overall functioning of children and youth in our schools through prevention and evidence based interventions.