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MEMORANDUM OF SUPPORT

AB. 6763 Ortiz

The New York State Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers, representing more than 8,500 social workers across the state, strongly supports this legislation which seeks to require at least one licensed social worker in each elementary, intermediate, middle, junior high and senior high school.

Social work staffing levels in many districts around the state have been diminished and complicated by years of budget cuts and increased pressure to achieve costs savings. Such budget constraints have come at a time when performance-based standards are being streamlined and the demand for services rendered by school social workers are at an all time high. The districts who suffer most are those who have the most limited resources and the most at-risk and special needs students.

School social workers are licensed by the New York State Education Department's Office of the Professionals (as a licensed master social worker or licensed clinical social worker) and certified as a pupil-personnel professional by the New York State Education Department's Office of Teaching Initiatives. They are one of the few resources in schools for addressing personal and social problems known to interfere with students' ability to learn. They serve as a liaison between the school, home, and community and work with students, families, faculty, and administration to improve students' academic achievement and social, emotional, and behavioral competencies while working to ensure that students are mentally, physically, and emotionally present in the classroom, and promote respect and dignity for all students. This is achieved, in part, by providing 1.) Counseling and crisis intervention, 2.) Case management to coordinate delivery of and access to appropriate school social work services 3.) Addressing social, emotional, and mental health needs to ensure better academic outcomes, 4.) Providing assistance to teachers in designing behavioral interventions, 5.) Home visits to meet the family of students in need of social work services in the home environment, and 6.) Working with students, families, schools, and communities to promote attendance and address the causes of poor attendance. Many of the problem issues present in schools today are intrinsically linked to school truancy, including poor academic performance and delinquent behaviors. School Social Workers unique person-in-environment approach is well suited to address truancy and to get at the root cause of the problem issues; simultaneously addressing other socio-emotional issues and enabling the school to complete their primary mission of effectively educating students.

While school social workers are a valuable resource in adequately addressing the aforementioned issues, a serious workforce disruption has taken place and continues. Currently, New York State does not require districts to provide school social work services. Over the past several years, rising healthcare and pension costs along with significant reductions in educational spending and increased pressure to

achieve cost-savings have forced districts and schools to enact unprecedented cuts and consolidations. As a result, districts have laid off school social workers resulting in the emergence of four problems:

1. **The complete elimination of all school social workers with no plan in place for provision of social work services or mental health care in some school districts.**
2. **Shifting responsibilities of the school social workers to school counselors (or other unlicensed school staff);** Many schools and districts are laying off school social workers and erroneously shifting their responsibilities and job-tasks to unlicensed staff such as school counselors, administration, and entry-level support staff. This is very concerning, particularly because clinical social workers provide mental health services, which require licensure under New York State Education law. It is reported that school counselors are being asked to perform tasks that are specifically restricted to licensed mental health professionals such as school social workers. Despite such lay-offs, the need for school-based mental health services has continued to grow and be a primary point of access for mental health care provided to children and adolescents. Up to 80% of mental health services provided to children and adolescents occur within a school setting and one in five children and adolescents will experience a significant mental health problem during their school years.ⁱ ⁱⁱIt is vitally important that when students seek or require mental health services, they are met by providers who, as licensure seeks to ensure, possess the adequate knowledge and skills to deliver high quality mental health services. Unlicensed staff lacks sufficient skill, knowledge, experience and oversight to provide mental health services. Utilizing unlicensed staff to perform tasks which are restricted to licensed professionals is a detriment to the welfare of New York's student population and carries with it increased risk of liability to districts, schools and unlicensed staff providing such services. Clearly defined ratios would address this issue; protecting the welfare of the public while simultaneously improving the way districts address truancy, student drop out and promote academic success.
3. **Increasing the remaining school social workers student caseloads to alarming levels;** While NYS has a robust workforce of school social workers, their distribution tends to be clustered in school districts with greater resources, and scarcer in many of the State's rural counties. Alarming, NASW-NYS has received reports of school social workers operating with a student caseload of over a thousand, and in some cases, over two-thousand, far exceeding national standards for school social work services which recommends a ratio of one school social worker to each school building serving up to 250 general education students, or a ratio of 1:250 students.
4. **Contracting with private nonprofit community-based organizations to provide school social work services;** Many district's Board of Education have eliminated school social work positions and have contracted with the private sector to provide these services. This is gravely concerning because such contracts are outside the authority of the respective Boards and are contrary to the intention of creating school-based social work certification, and including school social workers as fully integrated teaching professionals.

The vital role of the school social worker in promoting a safe learning environment has recently been underscored by the NYS Education Department's Safe Schools Task Force who in September 2014 submitted to the Regents P-12 Education Committee its final recommendations which had been culled from a multi-phased review process which took place from 2013-2014. The resulting 36 recommendations put forth by the task force *in order of importance* determined that the number one priority was to "advocate for the investment in and expansion of support staff in schools, including school social workers, psychologists, counselors, nurses and school attendance staff." In light of the task force's strong recommendation for expanded access, and the above noted negative consequences in schools where access to quality mental health services by certified school social workers is insufficient or nonexistent it is clear that this legislation is necessary to establish a minimum threshold of access.

While NASW-NYS recommends that the State establish and implement school social worker-to-student population ratio requirements (one school social worker to each school building serving up to 250 general education students, or a ratio of 1:250 students) that are in alignment with nationally establish standards to ensure adequate staffing and availability of school social work services to all students across the State of New York, we view this legislation as a step in the right direction.

ⁱ Foster, S., Rollefson, M., Doksum, T., Noonan, D., Robinson, G., Teich, J. (2005). School. mental health services in the United States, 2002–2003.

ⁱ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (1999). *Mental health: A report of the surgeon general*. Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.