HB 743 - Addition of School Social Work Services to the Texas Education Code

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Purpose
The goal of HB 743 is to adequately recognize and address the social and behavioral health needs of children in Texas schools in order to help them achieve academic and personal success. Many Texas school children are faced with significant obstacles to learning, such as: bullying, child abuse, substance abuse, gang violence, teen pregnancy, domestic violence, suicide, and other personal crises. A school social worker is uniquely trained to provide social work services that identify and address these complex problems and meet the needs of the whole child. Adding social work services to schools and school districts allows teachers and administrators to focus on their work yet still provides valuable assistance and support to students.

Currently, there is not a definition in the Texas Education Code for school social work services.

Background
Social workers receive coursework and on-hands training to achieve a degree in this field. HB 743 would give a school district the flexibility to hire a social worker with any type of license (Licensed Bachelor’s Social Worker, a Licensed Master’s Social Worker, or a Licensed Clinical Social Worker) that they choose.

Recent legislation has called on school districts to find additional ways for school districts to protect and support children and families. For example, HB 1386 (Texas 82nd Legislative Session) requires that a school district develop and implement policies on suicide prevention and other behavioral health issues. In the 83rd legislative session, the Texas Education Code (TEC § 33.904) was amended to ensure that each school district and open enrollment charter school designate an employee as a foster care liaison; another position ideally suited for a school social worker. In the 84th Session, SB 133 was passed, requiring mental health first aid training for school resource officers and employees who regularly interact with students. This is an area that school social workers have direct knowledge in.

Key Elements of a School Social Worker
• Work to enhance a school district’s academic mission by addressing social, emotional or societal factors that impact a student’s success.
• Part of the collaborative mental health care team that provide high-quality, evidence-based practice for a wide range of mental health services.
• They match their skills to the requests and concerns of schools, which are as diverse as the people of the State of Texas.
• Utilize a strengths-based approach which views students and communities as parts of systems. When relationships within these systems are cultivated, the opportunity for student achievement is maximize.
• Activities include: counseling, crisis intervention, child abuse prevention and reporting, consultation with school personnel, community collaboration, school improvement planning, and policy and program development in the areas of bullying, substance abuse, teen pregnancy.
• School social workers are licensed by the Texas State Board of Social Worker Examiners and are bound by a professional Code of Ethics.

Commonly Asked Questions:
Why are School Social Workers important?
According to the National Alliance of Pupil Services Organization (NAPSO):

“School Social Workers understand that many students face social, emotional, learning, cultural, and economic barriers, which must be addressed in order for these students to be successful in school. The student outcomes related to school social work services are increased student achievement, safety, attendance, social-behavioral competency, and family and community involvement.”

“Social workers should be part of the basic formula of any school mechanism. The reality is that our teachers and administration don’t have the time or expertise to handle the complex challenges that students walk in with every day. School counselors are stuck doing schedules and compliance. Social workers can handle the needs and coordinate resources in the ways our kids need.”

- Paul Castro, Head of Schools, KIPP Houston

“In the near twelve years that I have served as a school administrator, I have worked alongside a Social Worker at each campus. When chosen to lead an emerging middle school, the first addition I made to my staff was a social worker position. It was a decision that I feel was one of my best. In eight years as a campus principal, I rely upon social workers to help support and care for students and their families. The unique training and experience they bring enables a school to meet the needs in ways that previous generations never experienced.”

- Michael McDonough, Principal of Bellaire High School, Houston ISD

How do students benefit from school social work services?
School social workers pick up where teachers and other school staff leave off. They are equipped to address the social and psychological issues that can block academic progress. Through counseling, crisis intervention and prevention programs, they help young people overcome the difficulties in their lives, and as a result, give them a better chance at succeeding in school.

Will adding this language take jobs away from existing school personnel or other licensed counselors?
No, the role of school social workers is unique because of their training and the nature of their function at the school. Every campus needs teachers, guidance counselors, grant coordinators and other existing staff. Adding this language is only intended to give legitimacy to the role that school social workers can and should play in a school setting.

Does this language mandate a school to hire a school social worker?
No. School administrators will not be forced to have a school social worker on their campuses. However, if they chose to use available funds to add the services of a school social worker, they would now have a clear definition of what role they can play.

Will there be a cost to the Texas Education Agency as a result of this language?
No. In fact, during the 2011-2012 school year, TEA provided clarification to school districts about the type of funding (State Compensatory Funds) that could be used to pay for the services of a school social worker.