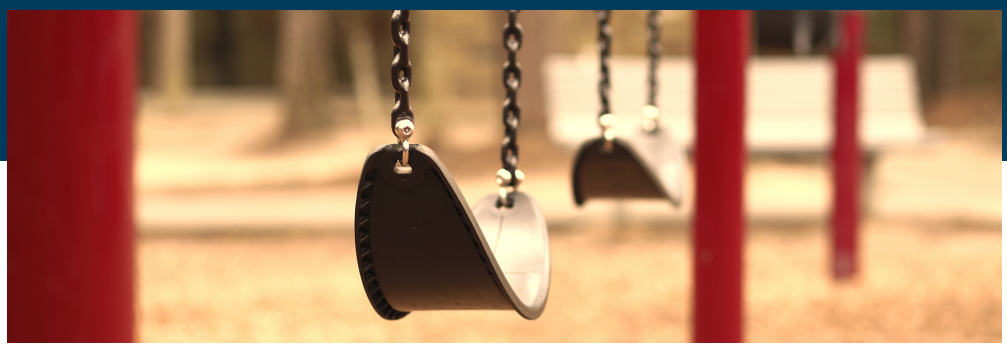
OPENING SCHOOLS SAFELY IN THE COVID-19 ERA

School Social Workers' Experiences and Recommendations



A RESEARCH BRIEF FOR POLICYMAKERS

Michael S. Kelly, Loyola University Chicago • Ron Avi Astor, UCLA • Rami Benbenishty, Hebrew University
Gordon Capp, California State University, Fullerton • Kate R. Watson, UCLA

COVID-19 has presented a worldwide challenge for schools. Issues of safety, isolation, mental health, hunger, housing insecurity, and physical health are all amplified. With calls for systemic change by the Black Lives Matter movement, the question of how to reopen and reinvest in schools that serve under-resourced communities and students of color has gained prominence and urgency. Calls for reinvestment shed light on longstanding and significant systemic opportunity gaps, as well as decades of neglected needs within such schools and communities.

School social workers (SSWs) have long been in these schools battling for racial, social, and economic justice — and making sure that families, teachers, and students have the resources and services they need. Our national study of 1,275 SSWs presents their voices and suggestions in connection with COVID-19, the reopening of schools, online services, and how reinvestment in low-income communities and schools should transpire. Given SSWs' ecological view and historical commitment to under-served communities, their voices should be heard in planning school reopening. Based on our study, we recommend the following actions:

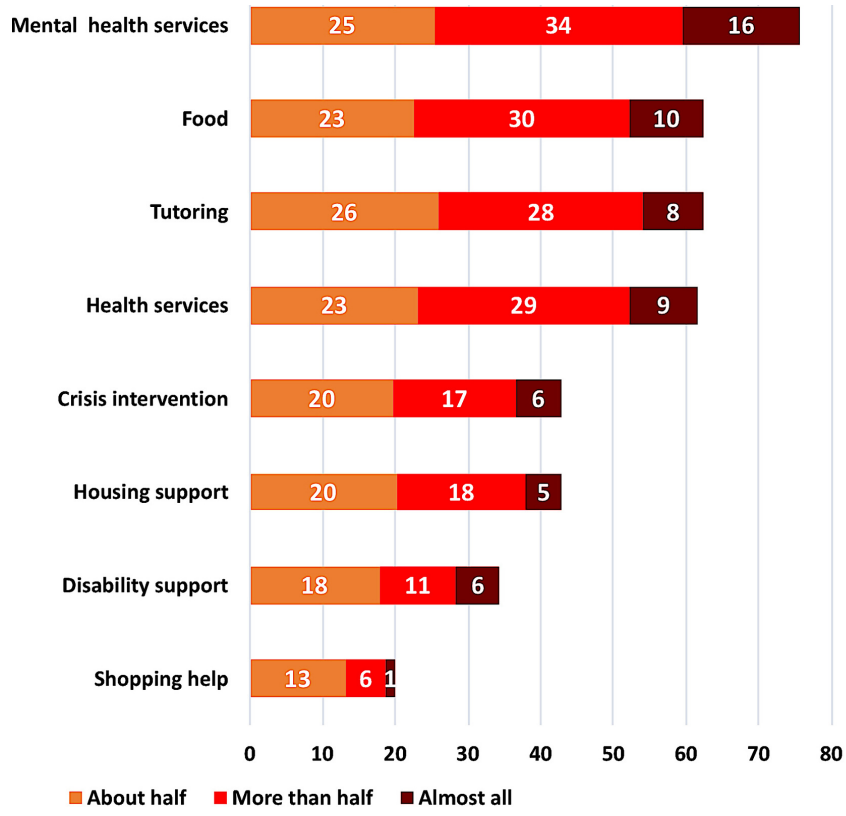
- **CREATE A RAPID-RESPONSE TEAM** of school professionals from multiple fields to develop a systemic, national response to support schools
- **PRIORITIZE THE RESPONSE** to the most hard-hit schools and communities
- **DEVELOP THREE EVIDENCE-DRIVEN NATIONAL PLANS,** one for in-person instruction, one for online, and one for a hybrid
- **PROVIDE ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS AND RESOURCES,** including more trained social workers sent to the most stressed schools and communities

Which Schools Need the Greatest Supports?

- The majority of SSWs in our sample provide supports and services in low-income schools and communities. In half of the schools, the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced lunch was more than 60%; in a quarter of the schools, the percentage of eligible students was 90% or above.
- These schools serve a large proportion of Black, Latinx, and other minority students (see Table 5 in the technical report).
- School settings include preschool to high school (see Table 4 in the technical report).
- We see **great needs in food, housing, physical health, and mental health.** Students and families will be unsupported unless schools and communities reorganize to provide for such basic human needs with the help of local, state, and federal government.

Percent of Schools With Half or More Students With Unmet Needs

For complete results, please see Table 7 in the technical report.



It is not possible to learn academics or social-emotional skills if students are hungry and do not have a stable place to live.

There has been much discussion pertaining to online delivery of instruction, services, and education. More needs to be focused on how the pandemic has affected the very basic needs for human existence in low-income schools that serve students of color. Strategies for the new academic year that only address academics and social-emotional needs, when **there are large numbers of students and families that do not have basic needs being met** such as food to eat and stable housing, misses the mark for schools with the greatest needs. It is not possible to learn academics or social-emotional skills if students are hungry and do not have a stable place to live, or lack the technology to access instruction and progress further.

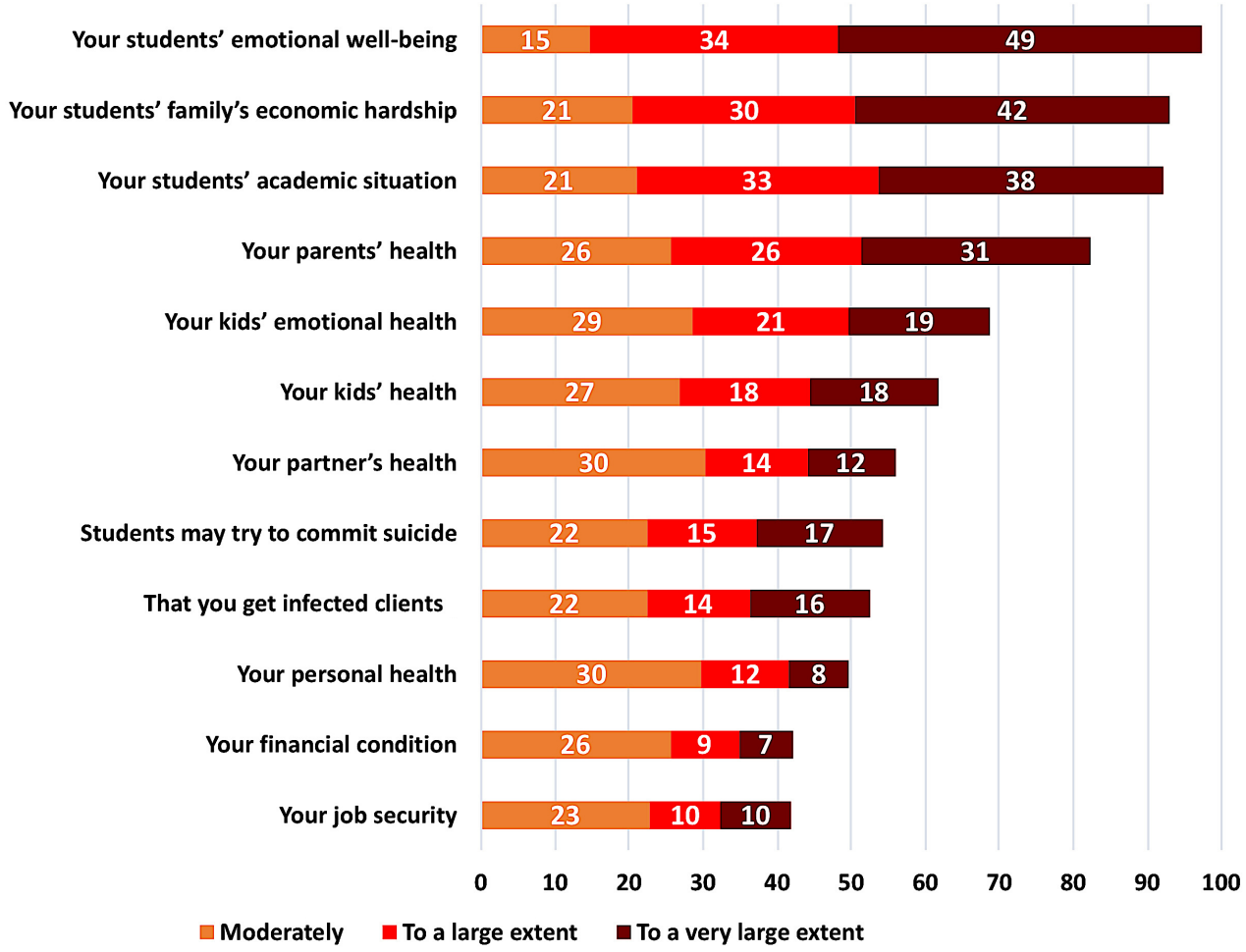
From a capacity perspective we are dealing with a pandemic in communities and schools that have very few basic resources and supports. Examples from the study:

TRAUMA AT HOME: SSWs in our study report that sizable proportions of students are suffering from difficulties due to discrimination, family discord, child abuse, language difficulties, and community violence among other issues (see Table 9 in the technical report). Plans for returning to school in the fall must consider specific ways communities, educators, and support staff can be trained and supported to deal with large numbers of students who experience trauma during the ongoing pandemic.

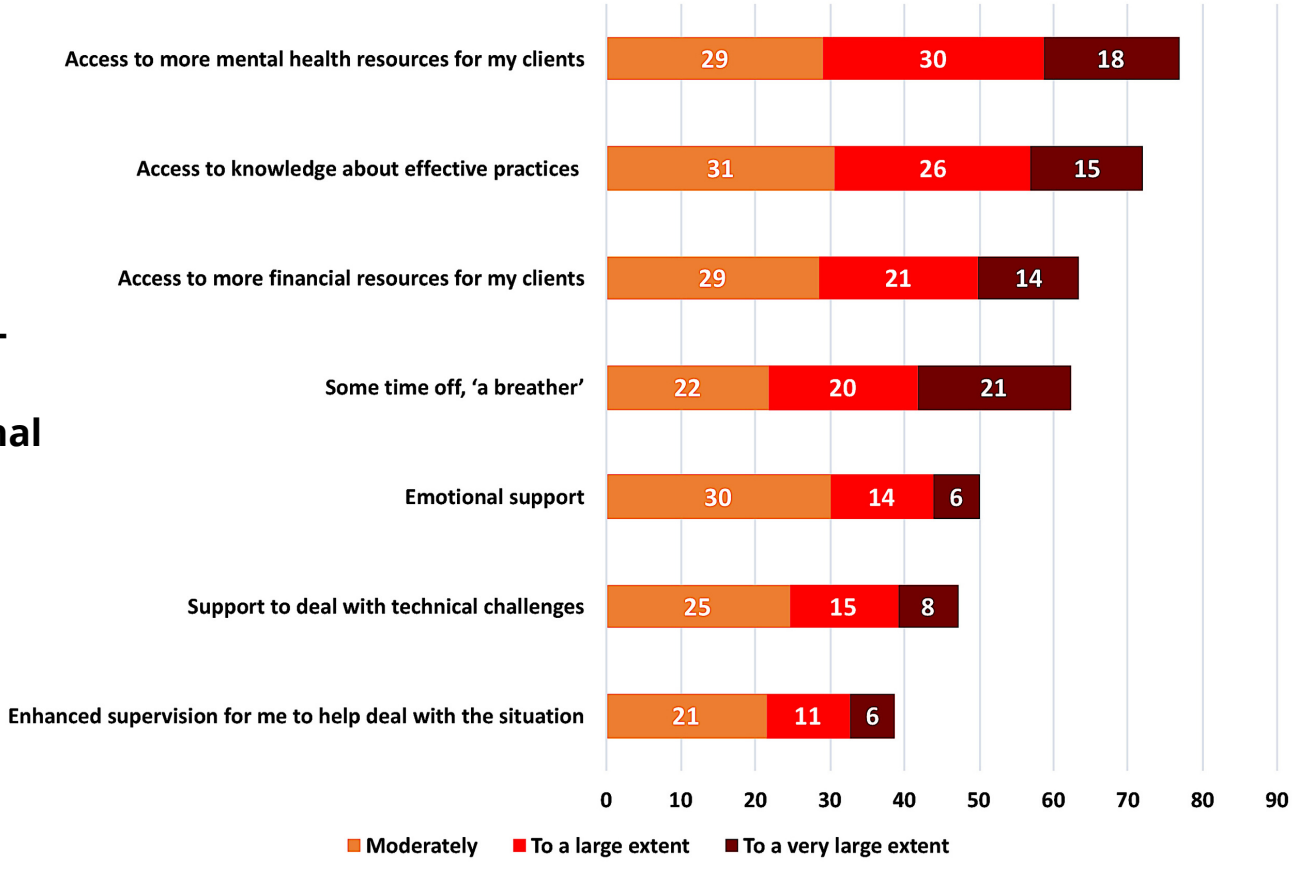
STANDING WITH EDUCATORS: SSWs are called to perform the same Herculean tasks that face other educators and school staff in this pandemic. Overall, they describe a remarkable spirit of collaboration, support, focus, and mission in helping families, students, and those who work in schools (see Table 11 in the technical report). Even so, our respondents had concerns that this work is being done with few resources, outside supports, or governmental guidance (see qualitative responses in Appendix I). More resources and support are needed to help sustain the strong work done so far and to further reach out to families that schools have not been able to yet reach.

SAFEGUARDING SOCIAL WORKERS: SSWs had massive pandemic-related worries about their students, staff, schools, and their own families and personal health. Greater supports, like the personal protective equipment (PPE) given to health care professions, are needed for educational staff and social workers who are on the front lines of the pandemic. National plans should include specific measures to protect SSWs and school staff. (See Tables 19 and 20 in the technical report for complete findings).

School Social Workers' Pandemic-Related Worries



School Social Workers' Pandemic-Related Professional Needs



Major Recommendations and Requests for Congress and Professional Organizations

We need a “Manhattan Project”-style initiative that pulls together professional experts representing all relevant professions — educators, administrators, school psychologists, counselors, social workers, nurses, and other health professionals — to create strategic plans for the upcoming school year. Currently, each school district is on its own to develop such plans. Based on our findings, we recommend the following as schools plan for reopening:

- We need a **national group of experts** to create a detailed national plan for three scenarios related to how schools and school districts should organize reopening and sustainment of services. We need plans, both short- and long-term, for the following scenarios:
    - Going fully online
    - Going fully in-person
    - A hybrid of partially in-person and partially online

- We must create a **national technical assistance center** to help states develop plans and implement reengagement services.

- We need a national master plan to **reach out, reengage, and rebuild supports** for the up to 30% of children who never attended school or attended rarely during the pandemic. Without an urgent, sweeping effort, this group could turn into a lost generation. We need a “Marshall Plan for Schools” to reengage students.

We must develop protocols of best practices so that each school does not need to reinvent the wheel.

- We must ensure all students, school staff, and schools have **sufficient equipment** to access the internet to engage in course work, school activities, and receive services.

- We need a **massive expansion and reallocation of school social workers, nurses, psychologists, and trained professional adults** in school settings with the highest needs. These professionals should address mental health, but also basic needs such as food, housing, medical services, and transportation, if possible. This expansion needs to be supported with temporary modifications in current requirements for qualifications and supervision.

- We must develop protocols of **best practices on methods of service delivery** that work so that each school does not need to reinvent the wheel. These best practices need to be disseminated widely and effectively by professional organizations.

- **Professional development** by schools and professional organizations should be modified to address the new circumstances. Training institutions of school-affiliated professionals should include in their curricula the latest methods (e.g., telehealth) so that new professionals are trained to deal with the national reopening strategy and the very strong possibility that some or all of our public schools will need to do some form of remote/online learning in the coming years.

- Strong organizational strategies are needed to provide **social-emotional support for social workers** on the front lines.

These recommendations are especially important as the country expands the social safety net through schools and hires more social workers, nurses, and other professionals to address the physical, mental, and academic needs of school staff, students, and families.

About This Policy Brief

This policy brief presents data from a national survey of school social workers created by researchers and practice professionals at Loyola University Chicago; UCLA; California State University, Fullerton; and Hebrew University, based at the website schoolsocialwork.net (SSWN), and co-sponsored with the School Social Work Network (SSWNetwork), National Association of Social Workers (NASW), School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA), The American Council for School Social Work (ACSSW), and Society for Social Work and Research (SSWR) School Special Interest Group (SIG).

We intend for this data to inform professional practices and responses by major professional organizations, by state-level legislative branches, and by federal policy makers. For complete findings, please see our technical report (Kelly et al., 2020a).

Suggested citation: Kelly, M.S., Astor, R.A., Benbenishty, R., Capp, G., & Watson, K. R. (2020b). Opening Schools Safely in the COVID-19 Era: School Social Workers' Experiences and Recommendations, Policy Brief. UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs, Department of Social Welfare.

See also: Kelly, M. S., Astor, R. A., Benbenishty, R., Capp, G., & Watson, K. R. (2020a). Opening Schools Safely in the COVID-19 Era: School Social Workers' Experiences and Recommendations, Technical Report. UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs, Department of Social Welfare.