December 2, 2018

Letter to Kim Mead, President, WEA

Hello, Ms. Mead,

   You and I haven't met, but I have seen you at events and want to thank you for your leadership of WEA. I appreciate your passion for students and educators and the hard work that you and everyone at WEA does for all of us around the state.

  I am a school social worker with North Thurston Public Schools and the new president of the Washington Association of School Social Workers. I know you and WEA have been hearing from our members in connection with your email advocating for more counselors, nurses and therapists. Many of my members were discouraged not to have been mentioned in this group, so I'd like to speak to that if I may. As school social workers, we feel privileged to serve the social, emotional and mental health needs of students in our state. We are a fairly small group of ESA's and are, of course, WEA members. Social worker values of social justice and activism go hand in hand with union involvement, and we have been active participants over the years in support of the work of WEA. I, and many of our members, have served as building representatives and attended numerous rallies.

   We are very pleased to see that WEA has identified as one of its legislative priorities, increasing staffing to meet students' mental health and social emotional needs. In fact, we have a legislative priority at the upcoming session as well, to increase the school social worker ratio in the prototypical schools staffing model. School social workers work alongside school counselors, psychologists and nurses, and are the professionals who are most closely connected with community mental health agencies. We not only provide counseling and referral services for students and families, but we have built relationships with local agencies to open avenues for treatment for students with intensive needs. While some Districts have contracted for mental health services, we instead promote the hiring of school social workers, as we are trained to understand school structures and cultures, collaborating with school staff in ways that we strongly believe are more effective and supportive than stand-alone, contract therapists. We are also trained to understand and effectively support students with disabilities, students of color, and other special populations. A concern that was shared with some of my members was that using the term "social worker" might bring to mind state workers - in fact, our work more closely aligns with that of health care social workers.

   We recently achieved a milestone for our members with the passage of 2SHB 1377, which articulates that school social workers, school psychologists, and school counselors are the school professionals that address the mental health needs of Washington's students. Moving forward, we will be taking action to grow our profession and serve students alongside these colleagues. We hope WEA will support our actions, and we would welcome the opportunity to better acquaint you and your staff with our work.

    Would it be possible for me to meet with you and/or Shawn Lewis (the public affairs person who responded to emails from our members) and talk further about our work? In the meantime, we would ask  WEA add us to the legislative priorities list, including on the page on the WEA website <https://www.washingtonea.org/ourvoice/2019-legislative-goals/> stating under United for Students: ~Support safe schools by funding professional counselors, school social workers, paraeducators, and other staff to meet the mental health, social, emotional and safety needs of students. I would appreciate hearing from you with a day/time that I could come meet with you and any other WEA staff to tell you more about school social workers, and to come together in support of students in Washington.

   Thank you for your consideration and for all you do for students and educators in Washington!

Liz Nelson, President

Washington Association of School Social Workers