

Funding Needs in Public Schools: Social Workers Advocating for Ethical Decision-Making

Jaelyn Childs and Christopher Robinson

Abstract: Sustainable funding plays a pivotal role in the effectiveness and longevity of educational systems, with particular emphasis on public schools. This article explores the concerted efforts of mental health professionals, dedicated educators, community leaders, and diverse advocates who are working tirelessly to drive meaningful improvements within the public school system. As recent legislative changes and regulatory measures have led to significant reductions in funding, it is increasingly vital to prioritize the stability and future of children enrolled in these schools. Ensuring that every child has access to a robust and supportive education is essential for their development and well-being.

Keywords: advocacy, necessity, ethics, equity, funding, resources, sustainability

Introduction

At the time of writing this article, I (Childs) am currently a junior majoring in social work with a minor in psychology. Throughout my courses, it has become abundantly clear that one of my roles as a mental health professional is to advocate for and speak on behalf of individuals who may not be able to represent themselves. It is essential to treat all people with respect and dignity, regardless of their background. Advocacy is a crucial aspect of social work, which includes ensuring that individuals have access to the resources they need.

As children progress through the rapid stages of growth and development, we recognize that they require adequate funding for school lunches, educational resources, books, and fair wages for teachers to ensure a reliable and sustainable education system. These resources are essential not only for children to stay academically afloat but also to enjoy their school experience.

I aspire to work at both the micro and mezzo levels of social work, and I plan to dedicate a considerable portion of my career to working within the public school system, where my services are most needed. Given the ongoing political challenges, such as budget cuts and program shortages, we find it especially important to advocate for public schools in low-income areas to receive the proper resources. This includes ensuring that students have access to clean, up-to-date textbooks, modern technological tools that align with today's digital landscape, and extracurricular activities that promote healthy development.

Collectively, Dr. Robinson and I view extracurricular programs—both inside and outside of schools—as vital for reinforcing positive and productive activities that support children's academic and personal growth. These programs should include funding for after-school tutors, recreational centers, sports equipment, and the establishment of school sports teams. Additionally, we believe funding should be allocated to vocational training programs where various trade professionals, such as electricians, plumbers, cosmetologists, and dental technicians, can educate students about different career opportunities.

We passionately believe that advocating for children in public schools is crucial. They deserve all the necessary resources to succeed and thrive in life, and it is our responsibility to ensure that these needs are met.

Advocacy and Ethical Decision-Making in Public Schools

Advocacy and ethical decision-making are crucial for all mental health professionals and clinicians. These principles ensure that clients receive the necessary resources and support to live comfortably. From my perspective, the work of mental health professionals is grounded in ethics and advocacy, regardless of their specific occupation or setting.

We understand that funding in the school system is crucial for providing students with the necessary tools to succeed and actively engage in the learning process. This is particularly significant in public schools located in underprivileged areas, where funding disparities often reflect systemic inequalities. Public schools in high-income areas receive more funding and offer numerous programs that promote social, physical, and cognitive development. These programs make schools more engaging and beneficial for students in wealthier neighborhoods. In contrast, I have observed that children in low-income areas often lack access to new books, after-school programs, and recreational activities due to inadequate funding (Jones et al., 2020). Advocacy and ethical decision-making are crucial to ensuring that resources are distributed equitably, enabling all students, regardless of their socioeconomic background, to have the opportunities they need to thrive.

Emerging policies have prompted me to see the need for mental health professionals to advocate for ethical decision-making in politics, particularly concerning school funding. Together we see that adequate funding ensures that schools can employ qualified teachers, social workers, and other essential professionals. Ethical policymakers and advocates who prioritize the well-being of students strive to secure equal and equitable educational rights (Cruz et al., 2022). However, we have noticed that political debates often influence funding decisions, leading to disparities between public and charter schools. We both find this unfair and unethical because all schools should have the financial stability and resources necessary for students to succeed. When political agendas dictate funding allocations, we believe that social workers and ethical policymakers must take the lead to ensure that student needs remain the top priority.

To me, policies have the power to either contribute to or dismantle systemic oppression. In the school system, we see that funding plays a critical role in shaping students' futures. Insufficient funding limits opportunities for social mobility, and I worry that children who lack the necessary educational resources may develop negative perceptions of school, discouraging them from pursuing higher education or trade school. Without access to these pathways, they may struggle to secure stable careers, perpetuating cycles of poverty and oppression (Karna et al., 2025). We believe that advocating for equitable school funding in politically charged environments can help create economic opportunities and strengthen the future workforce. In my view, education is the foundation for upward mobility in both socioeconomic and social status.

Furthermore, advocacy and ethical decision-making ensure that policies are implemented with transparency and in the best interests of students and the communities they serve. Together we feel decisions should be guided by data, student needs, and community input rather than political agendas. In the public school system, I view advocacy and ethical decision-making as vital tools for upholding student rights, addressing educational disparities, and promoting equity in politically charged landscapes.

How I Believe Mental Health Professionals Can Adapt and Apply Intervention

When funding has been eliminated, and social workers and other school-based professionals have advocated extensively to regain financial resources without success, it becomes crucial for us as professionals to develop creative and innovative ways to continue supporting children and young scholars.

One way I would adapt is by identifying organizations willing to collaborate with nonprofits, mental health clinics, and universities to provide free or low-cost services. This ensures that students continue receiving adequate support from multiple sources. I also see a crucial role for social workers in writing grants and otherwise requesting funding for specific needs within a school or district (Richter et al., 2022).

Additionally, I would support mental health professionals in training teachers and aides on trauma-informed care and basic mental health concepts. This allows educators to recognize and address maladaptive behaviors in students promptly and effectively. Early intervention is the best form of intervention, as it addresses issues before they escalate into more significant problems.

I believe that support groups can also be implemented to provide students with a platform to express their concerns about funding cuts in the school system. I view community engagement as a vital tool for advocating for the financial resources that public schools require (Heinrich et al., 2023). Encouraging parents, students, and school professionals to participate in petitions, town hall meetings, and school board meetings can be a powerful way to push for equitable funding.

Fundraising, in my view, can serve as an additional means of addressing budget shortfalls in public and charter schools, enabling the community to contribute financially toward enhancing the educational environment. When funding is cut, it is vital to allocate the remaining budget efficiently by prioritizing teacher salaries, mental health professionals' wages, and essential student resources. These may include heating and air conditioning, a sanitary learning environment, running water, alternative meal options, sustainable textbooks, and other necessary learning tools.

Both of us understand that addressing funding cuts in the school system requires a multifaceted approach involving extensive advocacy, alternative funding strategies, and efficient budgeting measures.

Conflict Theory and Critical Race Theory

The Conflict Theory, derived from Karl Marx (1867/1976), helps me understand the scarcity of resources and how power dynamics play a crucial role in the competition between different socioeconomic groups. This theory highlights social inequalities, particularly in the need for funding within public schools, which I see as a pressing social issue. The lack of necessary resources affects children's ability to learn and thrive within the educational system.

Conflict Theory provides me with a framework for understanding the reinforcement of socioeconomic inequalities. In wealthier neighborhoods and communities, residents have more political influence and pay higher taxes, which translates into better-funded schools. These schools benefit from numerous educational and fundamental programs, updated textbooks, advanced technology, nutritious lunches, and a diverse range of staff members, including multiple social workers, teachers, aides, and specialists who support students' well-being.

In contrast, we have observed that schools in low-income areas often have limited or insufficient resources, perpetuating a cycle in which underprivileged, underfunded students struggle to compete for opportunities such as employment, higher education, and homeownership. We also understand that social mobility is another critical aspect of Conflict Theory, as education plays a key role in improving one's socioeconomic status. However, public schools in low-income areas often have outdated materials and fewer resources, making it difficult for students to achieve the same level of success as their wealthier peers.

Another relevant perspective I have explored is Critical Race Theory (CRT; Crenshaw, 1991), which examines how systemic racism is embedded in policies and institutions. CRT helps social workers understand the disparities present in public school systems, where schools in affluent communities benefit from higher tax revenues, while schools serving Black and Brown students often lack the necessary resources for quality education.

We recognize that historically, racist policies such as redlining and segregation have contributed to the underfunding of schools, placing Black and Brown students at a disadvantage due to inadequate educational resources. In today's political climate, I see that privatization has further exacerbated these disparities. Many politicians advocate for school choice, diverting resources away from already underfunded public schools disproportionately affecting marginalized communities.

CRT also addresses the criminalization of Black and Brown youth in public schools. We both have noticed that a shortage of mental health providers in underfunded schools limits students' access to counselors who could help them process their emotions and develop healthier coping mechanisms. Instead, many schools prioritize funding for police officers, reinforcing harmful stereotypes that label Black and Brown students as dangerous, irrational, or violent.

This is connected to Charles Horton Cooley's (1902) Looking-Glass Self Theory, which suggests that people shape their self-perception based on how they believe others perceive them.

When children grow up in a school system where they are treated as threats from an early age, it reinforces negative self-perceptions and contributes to the school-to-prison pipeline. Misallocated educational funding further perpetuates this cycle, as resources are not distributed in a way that prioritizes student success and well-being.

As social workers, we view Critical Race Theory as a viable framework for understanding how historical racism continues to shape today's social inequalities. However, I have also noticed that some politicians argue that race should not be considered in policy decisions, dismissing the historical factors that have contributed to disparities in school funding. This perspective disproportionately affects marginalized communities and school systems with fewer resources and less economic assistance, further entrenching educational inequities.

How Mental Health Professionals Can Mitigate the Issue

I believe that mental health professionals can help mitigate the issue of underfunding in public schools by advocating for the rights of students and teachers, serving as a voice for those who cannot speak for themselves. I intend to engage at all levels of the legislative process—local, state, and federal—to contribute to planned changes that benefit everyone. Additionally, I plan to advocate for policies that address systemic racism and promote equity for underserved communities.

Another way we, as social workers, hope to address this issue is by collaborating with advocacy groups to raise awareness and garner the attention of policymakers. This ensures that the concerns of individuals in low-income communities and underfunded schools are heard and addressed. I find it both unethical and inhumane for public schools to lack essential resources and amenities.

As a social worker, I would like to participate in grant writing for causes I find meaningful. Writing grants is another form of advocacy that sheds light on critical issues and emphasizes the need for additional resources.

Furthermore, we believe prioritizing funding for teachers, aides, and mental health professionals in schools—rather than diverting funds to school policing—can help create a more supportive educational environment. Addressing the issue of school underfunding requires a multifaceted approach that considers historical context, institutionalized racism, and ethical decision-making.

The Driving Forces of Empowerment and Resilience

In my academic journey, from my first year to my current junior year, I have noticed that advocacy and resilience have been recurring themes in my life. These concepts are essential for uplifting individuals, families, and communities in times of turmoil. When schools lack sufficient funding, social workers, counselors, and other helping professionals must foster resilience and empower students to focus on their strengths rather than the challenges they face.

Mental health professionals, including Dr. Robinson and I, can achieve this in the future by organizing mentorship programs where teachers, aides, social workers, and counselors meet with students individually to provide guidance and connect them with available resources. Within these mentorships, we believe resilience and empowerment can be cultivated by equipping students with effective coping mechanisms to navigate life's difficulties.

I see that empowerment and resilience can be taught in many ways, particularly in the school setting. This includes critical thinking, financial literacy, and extracurricular activities, which can be supported through fundraising and donations from parents and community members. We also believe promoting diversity in the school system is a powerful way to foster resilience and empowerment, as representation matters. When students see role models who share their race, gender, or disability, they learn that their identity is not a barrier to success.

Fostering resilience, empowerment, and courage requires motivation and positive reinforcement. Giving students verbal affirmations and encouraging them to strive for excellence helps instill confidence and ambition. In the school setting, building resilience and empowerment requires emotional support, skill development, and strong community engagement through partnerships with various organizations.

References

Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>

Cruz, R. A., Lee, J.-H., Aylward, A. G., & Kramarczuk Voulgarides, C. (2022). The effect of school funding on opportunity gaps for students with disabilities: Policy and context in a diverse urban district. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*, 33(1), 3–14.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1044207320970545>

Heinrich, C. J., Colomer, A., & Hieronimus, M. (2023). Minding the gap: Evidence, implementation, and funding gaps in mental health services delivery for school-aged children. *Child and Youth Services Review*, 150, Article 107023.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2023.107023>

Horton Cooley, C. (1902). *Human nature and the social order*. Charles Scribner's Sons.

Jones, T. M., Fleming, C., Williford, A., & Research and Evaluation Team of Seattle Public Schools. (2020). Racial equity in academic success: The role of school climate and social-emotional learning. *Child and Youth Services Review*, 119, Article 105623.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105623>

Karna, U., Lee, M. S., List, J. A., Simon, A., & Uchida, H. (2025). Measuring racial educational disparities over time amongst top achievers. *Nature*, 639, 976–984.
<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-024-08536-0>

Marx, K. (1976). *Capital: A critique of political economy* (Vol. 1). Penguin Books. (Original work published 1867)

Richter, A., Sjunnestrand, M., Romare Strandh, M., & Hasson, H. (2022). Implementing school-based mental health services: A scoping review of the literature summarizing the factors that affect implementation. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(6), Article 3489. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19063489>

About the Authors: Jaelyn Childs, BSW (she/her) is Graduate, Department of Social Work, Coppin State University, Baltimore, MD (jaelynchilds12@gmail.com); Christopher Robinson, EdD, LMSW (he/him) is Associate Professor, Department of Social Work, Coppin State University, Baltimore, MD (chrirobinson@coppin.edu).