

July 2023

Examining School Social Work Certifications across the Midwest States

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Recommended Citation

Lucio, Robert; Souhrada, Emilie; Inciti, Julie; and Mitchell, Brandon (2023) "Examining School Social Work Certifications across the Midwest States," *International Journal of School Social Work*: Vol. 8: Iss. 2. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2161-4148.1116>

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Examining School Social Work Certifications across the Midwest States

Abstract

School social workers are increasingly being recognized and employed in schools across the country to promote critical avenues of system-wide school-based support. However, limited research has explored state certification standards of school social workers to understand the implications on practice efficacy and roles to improve the overall capacity of practitioners. In this study, we examine licensing standards and practice across 13 Midwest states, leveraging key partners in each state of interest. Findings reveal a large variation in SSW preparation, certification, and licensing standards. Aspects discussed in the results include, degree requirements, preparation programs, state endorsement, pathways to licensure, evaluation components, board of education requirements, and direct service implications. We discuss the implications of our findings and delineate the complexities, inconsistencies, and outline strategies for future research. As schools increasingly come to rely and depend on school social workers, we must work to build consistency in state requirements, solidify training standards, and strive to build efficacy and strength of the field.

Keywords

School social worker, certification standards, preparation, licensing, practice, roles

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Introduction

School social work (SSW) practitioners are increasingly recognized as critical to promoting educational justice and mechanisms of support for youth in schools (Cox et al., 2022). As the field of SSW benefits from increases in recognition and hiring (White House, 2022), an array of both professional and school-based challenges persists. On the professional level, the efficacy of SSW practice may be hampered by inconsistent state certification standards (Mitchell et al., 2021) and varied practice recommendations and practice models (Frey et al., 2012) influenced by competition among national governing organizations (Kelly et al., 2023). Meanwhile, in schools, the importance of SSW is both emphasized and challenged by persistent educational inequities – many of which have been amplified by the pandemic (Phillippo et al., 2022; Sugrue et al., 2023)

Literature Review

The persistence of educational inequities underscores the need for effective SSW practice. In response to the ubiquity of educational injustices impacting the lives and development of youth, an array of research has been done to help evolve the field of SSW toward a more equitable and inclusive practice. To address both behavioral and academic inequities that are largely systemically driven, research has underscored the need for enhanced efforts toward educational justice (Ball & Skrzypek, 2020), anti-racist and ecological practice (Crutchfield & Eugene, 2020), trauma-informed (Joseph et al., 2020), strength-based and relationship focused (Scott et al., 2022), multi-tiered systems of support (Avant, 2016), data-driven (Stalnecker et al., 2022), restorative justice (Sedill-Hamann, 2022), and structural/systemic orientations to address racism and oppression (Crutchfield et al., 2020). Collectively, these domains of inquiry are important areas to align SSW practice and research, yet systemic barriers on the professional side may affect SSW practitioners as they attend to educational inequities and may impede justice-oriented practice (Ball & Skrzypek, 2020).

Although SSW practitioners are increasingly hired and relied upon in schools, several practice-oriented barriers persist, including low employment numbers, high caseloads, high student-to-professional ratios (Mann et al., 2019), role competition with other school mental health professionals (Kelly et al., 2023), and ineffective role orientation, such as the lack of cultural and structural attentiveness (Allen-Meares, 2008; Crutchfield et al., 2020). The American Civil Liberties Union recently captured the systemic under-employment of school-based mental health professionals; however, SSW appears to be the most under-utilized (Mann et al., 2019). The national averages of student-to-professional

ratios include school counselors (441:1), school psychologists (1,526:1), and SSW practitioners (2,106:1; Mann et al., 2019). Under-employment, as well as funding shortages for school-based mental health providers, may unintentionally fuel role competition as each professional domain fights for viability and sustainability in the school system (Kelly et al., 2023). On the professional level, SSW is also weakened by inconsistent and varied certification requirements and varied standards of practice (Altshuler & Webb, 2009; Mitchell et al., 2021).

Practice-oriented barriers may be shaped by the variation in SSW role obligations (Phillippo et al., 2013), training inconsistencies and inadequacies may also be exacerbated by professional inconsistencies on the national level, including organizational competition, and certification standards (Mitchell et al., 2021; Thompson et al., 2019). For example, several national organizations offer varied guidance for SSW practice and suggestions for state standards, including the School Social Worker Association of America (SSWAA), the American Council for School Social Work (ACSSW), and the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) (Kelly et al., 2023). Meanwhile, a national model has been developed on the scholarly level (Frey et al., 2013). Further, both NASW and SSWAA are in the process of independently updating standards and practice guidance for SSW practitioners. The overall lack of professional cohesion may be an impediment to professional respect and consistency in state certification standards (Kelly et al., 2023).

Inconsistent certification standards for SSW practitioners offer an emblematic example of state and national inconsistency (Mitchell et al., 2021). Altshuler & Webb (2009) provide a foundational understanding of school mental health certification standards, showing how SSW lags behind comparable fields of school counseling (SC) and school psychology (SP). Both domains of SC and SP have taken great strides to universalize their certification standards and have strong national organizations that have united and shaped consistent certification standards and fueled employment numbers (Altshuler & Webb, 2009). By comparison, SSW – although steadily increasing standards and consistency – is widely varied with respect to state certification standards, including the level of degree (i.e., BSW; MSW), practicum requirements (e.g., school placement; hours), and coursework requirements. Mitchell and colleagues (2021) note that 32 states now require an MSW, representing a 23% increase since Altshuler & Webb's research in 2009. However, both SC and SP require master's degrees in all 50 states. Even more troubling, SSW certificates related to specialized school practice are only prevalent in 13 states. In those states, there are differences in the specific course requirements, and the direct relevance of those courses to SSW practice, particularly as it relates to relieving educational inequities and promoting justice-oriented practice, is unclear (Mitchell, 2021).

Current Study

Understanding the variations in SSW certification standards and improving efforts to unify the field may improve the overall capacity of SSW practitioners. Enhanced and consistent certification standards may provide a foundation to address contemporary educational issues, including academic and behavioral inequities (Mitchell et al., 2021), and rising challenges associated with educational censorship and oppression related to race and diversity (Zimmerman et al., 2022). State certification consistency may support evaluative efforts of both the pre-service training and in-school service delivery and efficacy of SSW practitioners and ultimately may increase the respectability of the field and hiring presence in schools (Kelly et al., 2023). In light of these concerns, a vast array of knowledge is needed with regard to specific state variations in SSW certification standards, training, and pre-service educational components. The aim of this study is to fill in the gaps in the literature by examining key similarities and differences in SSW certification standards across Midwest states. Presenting a baseline of current state of requirements related to certification, education, pathways to certification, continuing certification, and roles will allow the identification of strengths and gaps in the SSW profession's ability to provide culturally relevant and justice-oriented services to youth, families, schools, and communities.

Methods

A university IRB was approved to examine SSW licensing standards and practice in 13 Midwest states, including Illinois (IL), Indiana (IN), Iowa (IA), Kansas (KS), Kentucky (KY), Michigan (MI), Minnesota (MN), Missouri (MO), Nebraska (NE), North Dakota (ND), Ohio (OH), South Dakota (SD), and Wisconsin (WI).

Content Analysis

For each of the Midwest states, the research team gathered and reviewed documents and websites, which included administrative codes, statutes, Board of Social Work (BoSW) documents, and Department of Education (DoE)/Department of Public Instruction (DPI) documents. The team extracted information from these documents related to SSW certification and licensure requirements, including degree, SSW preparation programs, DoE/DPI endorsement, pathways to SSW certification, BoSW requirements, and information about SSW roles or practices around special education.

Key Partner Interviews

Key partners were identified in each state through their SSW associations except where a SSW association did not exist. Partners in ND and SD were identified through SSWAA since no state association exists. Key partners were asked for their willingness to participate in an analysis of their SSW standards and practice. All partners agreed to participate, and questions were sent to the identified collaborators to answer, with follow-up interviews set up to understand the information provided fully. A total of 16 questions were asked around certification requirements and four around SSW practice. The questions included were similar to the data extracted in the content analysis, with additional questions clarifying context, and missing or conflicting information.

Data Analysis

Data were reviewed across the Midwest states to identify areas of strength and weakness in SSW licensing standards and practice. Information extracted during the content analysis and key partner questions were examined for each state which identified the key areas of requirements (e.g., degree, endorsement, pathways, knowledge) and practices (e.g., special education services). The research team used a collaborative approach to examine the information. The documents and sources of information from each state were examined independently by each team member and discussed until consensus was reached. In most cases, the information was evident in the state statutes or administrative code, but areas of missing or incomplete information were flagged for follow-up during the interviews with key partners. Interviews with key partners were attended by all members of the research team, while one member was designated to take detailed notes. The key partners were explicitly asked about areas that were not readily available in the documents reviewed, were missing, or where the information was unclear. The research team also reviewed and discussed the surveys and interviews, and a document outlining the SSW requirements was created for each state. Final compiled responses and findings were sent to each key partner to verify accuracy.

Ethical Considerations

The authors have no funding or conflicts of interest to report regarding this study.

Results

Degree Requirement

Six states (46.2%; IL, IN, IA, KY, MI, WI) require an MSW to practice as a SSW practitioner, while five states (38.5%; KS, KY, MN, MO, SD) require only a BSW as a minimum requirement. Two states (15.4%; ND, OH) have an MSW/BSW option. In OH, there is an option of registering with the state DoE (requiring an MSW) or certification through the Counselor, Social Work, and Marriage and Family Therapist Board (requiring only a BSW). Some specific districts have opted to require an MSW for the states that require only a BSW. ND has two options depending on the role, where an MSW is required to provide clinical services. It should also be noted that several states allow SSW practitioners to practice with a BSW if enrolled in a state-approved preparation program. See Table 1 for specific requirements by state.

Table 1.
Overview of SSW Certification

State	MSW Required	DoE/DPI SSW Endorsement	SSW Exam	Board of SW License	SSW Prep Program Required	Prep program basis
IL	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Competency
IN	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Coursework
IA	Yes	Options	No	Options	Options	Coursework
KS	No	No	No	Yes	No	NA
KY	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Coursework
MI	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Competency
MN	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	NA
MO	No	No	No	No	No	NA
NE	No	No	No	Yes	No	NA
ND	Options	No	No	Options	No	NA
OH	Options	Options	No	Yes	Options	Competency
SD	No	No	No	Yes	No	NA
WI	Yes	Yes	Options	Options	Options	Competency

School Social Work Preparation Program

Four states (38.5%; IL, IN, KY, MI) require the completion of a SSW preparation program as the only entry into SSW. Across the four states, IL's programs are created around the demonstration of specific competencies that are written into legislation or DoE/DPI regulation. This means the courses might vary between approved programs, but the underlying state standards are the same. Another three states (23.1%; IA, OH, WI) allow preparation programs to be one of several avenues into SSW. These states include either completing a SSW preparation program approved by the state DoE/DPI, or licensure as a social worker from the professional board, which regulates professional and clinical licenses.

For those states that require or have an option of a SSW preparation program, the structure of a preparation program is either centered around competencies or specific courses. In these states, specific universities deliver a SSW program approved by the state DoE/DPI. Four states have programs based on competencies, and where they are distributed across the curriculum is decided by the preparation programs (30.8%; IL, MI, OH, WI). Within these programs, SSW practice, SSW policy, and special education are among the most frequently taught courses. Three states (23.1%; IN, IA, KY) require specific courses, which vary from two to three courses. SSW practice courses are common across these states, while two also require a special education course, one requires SSW practice with families, and one requires SSW policy.

Six states (46.2%; KS, MN, MO, NE, ND, SD) have no preparation program at all as a requirement to become a SSW. This means these states do not require specific courses or professional licensure as a minimum entry into SSW practice. Three states (23.1%; IL, KY, WI) allow for the issuance of a temporary SSW certification if the applicant is enrolled in a preparation program that leads to regular licensure.

DoE or DPI SSW Endorsement

Six states (46.2%; IL, IN, KY, MI, MN, WI) require a DoE/DPI endorsement to practice SSW. Five states (38.5%; KS, MS, NE, ND, SD) do not require a DoE/DPI endorsement, while IA and OH (15.4%) offer an option to have an endorsement or a license with the state clinical social work board. Within the endorsement states, one state (7.2%; IL) requires a portfolio and a SSW-specific examination. Wisconsin has three options for its DPI-approved preparation programs: an examination, portfolio, or minimum grade point average. Overall, three states (23.1%; IN, MI, MN) require both a DoE/DPI SSW endorsement and a Board of Social Work (BoSW) license. Of the eight states that have DoE/DPI SSW certification, five (38.5%; IL, IN, IA, KY, MN) require continuing education requirements for renewal of this license. Three states (28.8%; MI, OH,

WI) do not require continuing education requirements for licensure renewal. Specific renewal requirements can be found in Table 2.

Pathways to SSW

Different states offer various tiers or levels of SSW licensure. Seven states (53.8%; IL, IN, IA, KY, MN, OH, WI) have a pathway to complete a preparation program from a CSWE and DoE/DPI-approved university SSW program. Additionally, WI has a pathway that does not require completing a preparation program for a regular DoE/DPI SSW license. Iowa's DoE offers a professional statement of recognition as one pathway for master-level social workers licensed through their BoSW. Ohio also has a social work registration allowing SSWs to practice in a school, though the role differs from those holding a regular SSW license. No states with a DoE/DPI license have direct reciprocity between states, where a SSW license from one state would be the only requirement for obtaining a SSW license in another state.

BoSW requirements

Seven states (53.8%; IN, KS, MI, MN, NE, OH, SD) require licensure through their state BoSW and three (23.1%; IA, ND, WI) provide options for BoSW licensure. Nine states (69.2%; IN, IA, KS, MN, NE, ND, OH, SD, WI) have a license renewal period every two years with a range of continuing education requirements of 20-40 hours. Michigan has a social work professional licensure renewal period every three years with 45 hours of continuing education. Some states have specific learning requirements that must be met within their required hours. Two to four hours of ethics are required in nine states (69.2%; IN, IA, KS, MI, MN, NE, ND, OH, WI) with a 2-year licensing renewal period, while MI requires 5 hours of ethics every three years. In addition, KS requires diagnosis as continuing education, and MI requires pain symptom management, human trafficking, and implicit bias continuing education. While not all states require SSW practitioners to be licensed through their BoSW or DoE/DPI, there are SSW practitioners in these states that choose to be licensed through their BoSW.

Table 2.
DoE/DPI & BoSW Renewal Requirements

State	If DoE/DPI Required		If BoSW Required		
	Renewal Period	CE Requirements	Renewal Period	CE Hrs	Required Topics
IL	5 yrs	120 hrs/5 yrs	NA	NA	NA
IN	Initial - 2 yrs Full - 5/10 years	Suicide prevention & CPR	2 yrs	20 hours/2 yrs	Ethics
IA	Initial - 2 yrs Full - 5 yrs	4 credits/5 yrs Suicide, Mandatory Reporter & Dependent Adult Abuse	2 yrs	27 hours/2 yrs	Ethics
KS	NA	NA	2 yrs	40 hours/2 yrs	Diagnosis Ethics
KY	5 yrs	24 hrs/ yr Suicide Prevention	NA	NA	NA
MI	NA	NA	3 yrs	45 hrs/5 yrs	Ethics, Pain Management, Human Trafficking & Implicit bias
MN	Tier 3 - 3 yrs Tier 4 - 3 yrs	Tier 3 -75 hrs/3yrs Tier 4 -125 hrs/5 yrs	2 yrs	40 hrs/2 yrs	Ethics
MO	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
NE	NA	NA	2 yrs	32 hrs/2 yrs	Ethics
ND	NA	NA	2 yrs	30 hrs/2 yrs	Ethics
OH	5 Years	None	2 yrs	30 hrs/2 yrs	Ethics
SD	NA	NA	2 yrs	30 hrs/2 yrs	NA
WI	Tier 1 - 1 yr renewable Tier 2 - 3 yr renewable Tier 3/4 - Ongoing	Background check & employment verification/5 yrs	2 yrs	30 hrs/2 yrs	Ethics

Special Education Evaluation

The role of SSW practitioners conducting special education evaluations is present in seven states (53.8%; IL, IN, IA, KS, MI, MN, OH) and varies by district in this role in three states (23.08%; MO, ND, WI). SSW practitioners do not conduct special education evaluations in KY, NE, and SD. Among the Midwest states, six states (46.2%; IL, KS, MI, MN, OH, SD) reported that SSW practitioners write social developmental histories, and three states (23.1%; IA, NE, KY) reported school SSW practitioners did not have requirements in this area, and IN, MO, ND, and WI reported that this practice varies by school district.

Provide Direct Services via an Individualized Education Plan (IEP)

Providing direct social work services through an IEP for students receiving special education services is a related service option through IDEA. In this Midwest state analysis, six states (46.2%; IL, IN, KS, MI, MN, OH) reported that it is common practice for SSW to provide direct services as part of an IEP. Five states (38.4%; MO, NE, ND, SD, WI) reported variations in social work services as part of an IEP and two states (15.4%; IA, KY) reported that providing direct services as part of an IEP is not common.

Discussion

Several components of a preparation program influence the experience of the aspiring professional and may have implications for their ability to perform effective skills and services. Some preparation programs require SSW practitioners to complete a practicum with an experienced SSW supervisor, while others require fewer hours or have no requirement for a school-based practicum. In only two states (IL & KY) it is clear that a school-based practicum is required to be a SSW. Where they exist, school-based practicums can ensure that SSW practitioners have the opportunity to demonstrate certain skills and meet specific standards. Preparation programs further vary in their credit requirements, whether school-specific courses are required, and the evaluation method (e.g., a passing score on a praxis, portfolio, or certain GPA). With such large differences between SSW preparation programs, there may be degrees of difference in SSW knowledge and competence as they enter the field. Thompson et al. (2019, p. 138) identified this variance noting: “SSWers engaging in ecologically oriented practices to a high degree are more likely to have a graduate degree and work in a state with certification standards.”

The variance in licensing requirements, training, and experience impacts a professional’s ability to move between states and even between school districts in the same state. No direct licensing reciprocity exists between states, and it can be

difficult to find information on licensing rules and policies in each state. Professionals may learn their qualifications may not be enough to enable them to obtain a license in a new state after applying, and often must take additional coursework, must possibly complete a supervised practicum, and must spend additional time, expenses, and resources to engage in the same work they had been already doing. Even when moving from within the same state to a new district, due to the lack of role clarity in the SSW profession (Carnes, 2023), the actual job description of a SSW may look very different. This means that a professional may be expected to have certain experience to perform their new job duties, which may add to the challenges of taking on a position in a new district. All of these challenges, including navigating the licensing process, role expectations, course and practicum requirements, and fees for licensure, pose barriers to professionals looking to relocate.

Additionally, professionals must check to determine if they will also need a DoE/DPI and or a BoSW license in the new state, which requires an additional exam and fees. It is not always straightforward whether or not a BoSW license is required to practice SSW. For example, in IA, personnel filling master-level social work positions must receive BoE authorization to practice as a school social worker in one of the following two ways, 1) Obtaining a B - 21 School Social Worker Authorization Professional Services License or 2) Statement of Professional Recognition. Both of these are obtained through the Iowa BoE. SSWs with the B - 21 School Social Worker Authorization Professional Services License are not required to be licensed by their BoSW. However, to obtain the Statement of Professional Recognition SSW practitioners must be licensed at the master's level with the Iowa BoSW. This complexity in licensing requirements can be confusing and can mean additional fees and examinations for the professional seeking to move.

Individuals interested in becoming SSW practitioners are impacted by the variation in licensing requirements between states, as well. Where states allow for social workers to act as SSW without a DoE license, professionals may not realize they are eligible to serve in this role and may not apply for those positions. In WI, there is a pathway to licensure for a professional with an MSW and a BoSW credential; however, not all social workers are aware of this pathway. The lack of clarity across licensure requirements may cause professionals not to apply for jobs that remain unfilled and needed in schools. This also creates the potential for districts to hire unqualified SSW practitioners because they simply don't know the correct requirements.

Limitations and Future Research

As with any study, there are limitations. We would like to note that this study only included Midwest states. During our search, we found that specific

information on licensing and certification requirements was extremely difficult to find and was often inconsistent across sources. We also found that the laws, regulations, and standards around these topics were constantly changing as we reviewed the information. Even when interviewing key partners to obtain state information, they didn't always have the answers or even know where to find them. Some of their responses were based on their own experiences.

We would recommend future studies look at different states across the United States to build a complete picture of SSW. This would also allow for the analysis of trends within states and across states to see if, in fact, more detailed standards translate into better outcomes for students, families, schools, and the communities SSW practitioners serve. For example, Ding et al. (2023) recently published a scoping review of school social work practice characteristics, revealing findings that validate and offer clarity to the field. Most notably, they highlight SSW practice, including mental and behavioral health, positive learning environments, cross-system collaboration, social-emotional learning, and aligning resources for youth and families. However, with the exception of Thompson et al. (2019), the impact of education, professional preparation, certification, variations in social work roles (e.g., special education-related services and evaluations), and licensing on SSW practice is still an understudied area of research. Understanding the link between specific elements of the standards and student and system outcomes is essential to identify which elements of preparation and licensing standards have the most significant impact on outcomes.

Additionally, it would be of interest to examine the amount of time that is needed to become a qualified SSW, balancing comprehensive training and feasible expectations for candidates. Another area to study is key partner perception of SSW services and how those perceptions influence role and compensation. The field would benefit from future research into more specific aspects of SSW preparation and licensing standards. Finally, we also recommend efforts by SSW associations to work with state associations, their state DoE, and BoSW to ensure the requirements are easy to find and understand.

Implications for SSW Standards and Practice

There exists a large variation in SSW preparation and licensing standards across Midwestern states, which could potentially impact the quality and consistency of SSW services. The lack of consistent requirements across states can adversely affect students. Students, families, and school and community leaders place trust in SSW practitioners and expect the professional has demonstrated competence in certain skills, which qualify them for the helping role. The actual quality of services depends, in part, on the SSW practitioners' preparation and training. This preparation is directed by state licensing policies to varying degrees and without

consistency across states, resulting in a range in quality of SSW practice and a lack of agreement related to the SSW role.

Differences in licensing and preparation of SSW practitioners have further implications for the hiring entity (Frey et al., 2022). To the extent that licensing and preparation differences lead to a lack of role clarity, hiring entities carry varied expectations about the background and proper role of the SSW. This results in various position descriptions and roles in schools, which can frustrate the hiring school leaders when expectations are unmet. This can also lead to pressure on the SSW professional to practice outside their scope and training and can lead to burnout as the SSW practitioner engages in work outside of their expertise (Carnes, 2023). This role confusion can likewise put SSW practitioners in adversarial roles toward their clients by placing them as discipline or truancy officers, which may undermine their work. Misunderstandings about SSW practice may impact the support given to a professional by the employer, affecting whether or not they are provided with a SSW supervisor or mentor, provided with appropriate professional development, or whether or not they are given a role in system leadership, coaching, and training. The entire system loses out if SSW practitioners are not seen as the macro/system experts that they are, able to support strategic planning, policy, procedures, and coalition building (Scott et al., 2022). Schools utilize SSW practitioners differently as special education-related service providers or as professionals able to conduct social developmental histories or play a role in evaluations. These role variations and expectations can lead to a variation in pay and may result in SSW practitioners obtaining smaller compensation packages than they are worth and impact schedules, contract days, and vacation. This may lead to a higher turnover rate that the hiring entity has to manage. Differences in licensing and training of SSW practitioners create challenges for schools and districts, as well as for individuals.

Since SSW is a complex and specialized field of practice that is affected by changes in education policy, research, and practice models, a requirement for continuing education is needed. A high level of credits, a requirement to complete school-specific courses, and the need to demonstrate competence through an evaluation method increase the chance that the professional will be able to provide high-quality services. Ongoing training in ethics and boundaries further ensures that the professional maintains a high level of trustworthiness and safety, yet only six states require this for SSW practitioners.

Whether or not a BoSW license is required has implications for accountability. Where it is required, there is an added layer of authority and accountability over the practice. A complaint against a professional against their BoSW license would be reviewed in light of the NASW Code of Ethics, and SSW practitioners may have their license suspended or revoked if they do not act within the standards set forth therein. In a state such as WI, where there is no

BoSW requirement, a SSW could violate the NASW Code of Ethics; however, if that behavior did not result in a staff handbook violation or meet the specific definition of “educator misconduct,” there would be no cause for the district or DPI to revoke the SSW license. This lack of accountability could result in harm or incompetent service. The requirement of a BoSW license also increases the likelihood the SSW receives continuing education in ethics and boundaries. When states require a BoSW license for SSW practitioners, there is an added layer of accountability and a reduced chance for professionals to act outside of the NASW Code of Ethics.

In recent years, recognition and discussion regarding test bias associated with the Association of Social Work Boards exam (DeCarlo, 2022) have underscored the need to explore the relationship between certification standards and test bias. Specifically, ASWB (2022) documented “eventual pass rates” by race/ethnicity, including 57% Black, 76% Hispanic/Latino, Native American/Indigenous, Asian 79.7%, Multiracial 86%, and White 90%. “Eventual pass rates” by age include 91% for the 18–29-year-old group and 64.8% for 50 and above. Considering these notable ASWB test disparities in race and age (Marson, 2022), some states have moved to abolish the state exam requirements altogether for initial and even clinical social work licensure. For example, Rhode Island no longer requires the ASWB exam, and other states (e.g., Michigan; Utah) have proposed legislation making its way through state legislatures (Brejiak, 2023; Richardson, 2023). Meanwhile, the National Association of Social Workers stands against the persistence of racial exam bias and supports states in removing exam requirements (Brejiak, 2023; NASW, 2023). Nevertheless, it is unclear the exact cause of the bias, whether it is a product of educational inequities, inconsistent state certification standards, testing and question bias, additional factors, or a combination – several questions remain unanswered. Furthermore, more research may be useful to help understand the relationship between test bias with state certification standards and educational training. Future research can help us explore the problem by continuing to hold a high standard of social work while working to ameliorate bias. As it currently stands, states that remove exam requirements may merely be dislocating bias, given the origins of bias are unclear.

Evaluation is another area where difficulties exist due to the variation in practice, expectations, and outcomes. As the push continues for SSW practitioners to become *indispensable* to the school system they serve (Cox et al., 2022), efforts toward data-driven, performance-based, and evaluative efforts can be leveraged to justify the long-term sustainability of SSW as equitable and inclusive leaders (Horton et al., 2022; Stalneck et al., 2022). Meanwhile, more consistency in preparation and licensing would result in an enhanced ability to evaluate the SSW practice in relation to agreed-upon competencies and expectations of the role.

It is worth noting that the SSW profession does not have one agreed-upon model or standards of practice and has a number of professional associations guiding the field. The National Association of Social Work (NASW) School Social Work Section, the School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA), the American Council for School Social Work (ACSSW), and the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) each weigh in on standards and practices, which adds complexity to the expectations and methods of practice. States or districts wishing to enhance their certification should consider looking at the requirements of other states and adopting those rules, regulations, and policies. For instance, states might consider having an MSW as a minimum standard in order to provide direct mental health services or even requiring specific knowledge about SSW. Each additional requirement has the potential to enhance the impact of SSW practitioners engaged with students, families, schools, and communities.

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