



## School Social Work Association of America Resolution Statement

### **A Trauma-Informed Approach to Students with Emotional Disturbance**

The School Social Work Association of America endorses the position that all students who have behavioral problems that interfere with their ability to learn in the general education classroom have the right to be evaluated for the services and disciplinary protections of students who are considered to have an emotional disturbance (ED) under the provisions of IDEIA 2004 or Section 504.

When the Education for All Handicapped Children Act was passed in 1975, the criteria for the disability category, emotionally disturbed deliberately excluded children labeled socially maladjusted. This term was never defined in the legislation nor in the most recent regulations issued by the Department of Education in 2006. This situation has created confusion and controversy for more than forty years. Research shows that the distinction has primarily been used to deny services to children who have broken school rules. Those states that make the distinction have significantly lower placement rates for ED than states that do not make the distinction. Currently, less than 1% of the estimated 5% of children with emotional/behavioral disorders are served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. It should be noted that African American and Native American students are more likely to be labeled with emotional disturbance, while Latina/o and Asian students are underrepresented among this disability category.

Some experts have tried to differentiate between the two categories based on volition – those who were emotionally disturbed were viewed as driven by their own emotional problems while those who were socially maladjusted were viewed as deliberately choosing to engage in acts of delinquency. This distinction is untenable for three reasons. One is that both interpersonal theory and communication theory see all behavior as communicative. Secondly, these theories form the basis for completing functional behavioral assessments by which schools are mandated to determine the purpose of a child's misbehavior regardless of diagnosis. Third, a trauma-informed approach considers a student's experience of their social-cultural context as well as the effects of implicit bias. For students of color, these perceptions of "social maladjustment" and emotional disturbance may be further complicated by racial bias and lack of cultural competence in the assessment and identification process. Thus, the behavior of African American children may be perceived as more severe; while the behavior of Latina/o children may be viewed from a "cultural deficit" perspective and not defined as an "emotional disturbance."

The law specifically allows that children who are deemed socially maladjusted are eligible for services if they are also emotionally disturbed. Most children who are socially maladjusted exhibit many of the characteristics of an emotional disturbance, including: an inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships; inappropriate types of behavior or feelings; a general, pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression; and a tendency to develop physical symptoms, pains, or fears, associated with personal or school problems.

Even if one were to restrict the use of socially maladjusted to those who have a DSM diagnosis of conduct disorder or history of criminal arrest, there remains a high possibility of co-morbidity with other eligibility categories, such as Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, learning disabilities, or depression. Furthermore, the DSM-5 (APA, 2013) explicitly states,

A diagnosis does not carry any necessary implications regarding the etiology or causes of the individual's mental disorder or *the individual's degree of control over behaviors that may be associated with the disorder...* Even when diminished control over one's behavior is a feature of the disorder, having the diagnosis in itself does not demonstrate that a particular individual is (or was) unable to control his or her behavior at a particular time (p. 25).

Federal and state courts have also not agreed on which behaviors constitute social maladjustment. Thus, the primary evaluation issue for schools should be: Does this child's behavior interfere with her/his academic achievement or functional performance? If the answer is yes, then the child should be eligible for services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or Section 504.

### **Recommendation**

Students with an emotional disturbance are best served when they are served by a multi-tiered system of support. At Tier 1, students should receive direct instruction about appropriate behavior and consistent reinforcement of that behavior. At Tier 2, students with behavioral problems should be taught targeted social skills and self-management strategies. At Tier 3, students with behavioral problems should be evaluated by a multidisciplinary team that uses multiple methods (rating scales, interviews, and direct observation) and multiple informants (students, teachers, and parents). Part of this evaluation should be a consideration of the student's adverse childhood experiences. Qualifying students are best served by Individualized Education Programs that identify the social, emotional, and behavioral domains that are affected by a student's traumatic experiences using evidence-based interventions and regular progress monitoring.

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