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The Psychotherapy Action Network, a global network of mental health providers founded in Chicago and dedicated to promoting the availability of optimal mental health treatments, stands with the members of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) in advocating for increased presence of school social workers and psychologists in public schools. We believe that efforts to nurture children’s healthy development hold the greatest promise for us, for them, and for future generations, while insufficient mental health resources for children can compromise capacities to learn and thrive, and even lead to potential catastrophe in the lives of those in most need.

We believe that CTU’s initial requests are exceedingly reasonable, as staffing cuts and unfilled positions have created a dearth of vital resources for students. Specifically, “the CTU’s initial proposal sought clinician-to-student ratios of one full-time social worker for every 250 general education students and every 50 special education students, [and] one full-time psychologist for every 500 students.”¹ These ratios are supported by national professional organizations, as “the National Association of School Psychologists recommends one school psychologist for, at most, 700 students. In CPS [Chicago Public Schools], the ratio in 2017-18 was one psychologist per 1,760 students, and one social worker per 1,238 students— close to five times what is recommended by the National Association of Social Workers. Further, from 2012 to 2018, the number of school social workers declined by 12 percent.”²

The CTU speaks for children, for the city, and for us all when it demands that open positions be filled, that budgeting formulas reflect actual student needs and that schools put the education and care of children as our highest statewide priority. PsiAN laments that overstressed mental health professionals in schools are not even in a position to make adequate referrals for intervention, let alone provide such intervention themselves. This situation encourages the creation of a pipeline of under-treated, yet potentially over-diagnosed, over-medicated and stigmatized children whose internal needs are sacrificed to behavioral demands, rather than children who are nurtured to grow in the contexts of their families and schools.

Further, PsiAN encourages the use of relationally-based psychotherapy when a child or their family is finding it difficult to navigate rough waters. Psychotherapy of this kind can create for all in the family system a safe space in which difficulties can be understood

¹ <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-met-cps-strike-issues-viz-20191018-htmlstory.html>

² <https://www.ctulocal1.org/posts/adequate-school-staffing-among-key-ctu-contract-demands/>

and worked through and the innate strengths of the family can be developed or recovered. It can contribute in crucial ways to the development and maintenance of resilience in growing children. This sort of intervention has been shown to make a decisive difference in the lives of children, who otherwise are at risk for becoming lifelong so-called “mental patients” who fail to learn and fall through the cracks of a society they might otherwise help to build.

PsiAN believes that the accessibility of interventions guided by these principles is a social justice issue. It’s the very families needing safety the most who also have the least access to these resources. For this reason, we support the demands of the CTU. We hope that the wise guidance these educators offer regarding what children really need will be adopted quickly, for the good of us all.

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