There is an unwritten traditional path that most school leaders follow throughout their career trajectory, often beginning in the classroom and slowly moving up the ranks as school site administrators before taking leadership roles at a district or county level. Not too many have their roots in social work.

My path has never been traditional. I dropped out of high school during my first year. I became a mother to a child with a severe disability at 16. I also earned my bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees while raising my children.

My life trajectory does not fit into any template, but neither do the many lives of the close to 2 million school-aged children in Los Angeles County. That reality propelled me into a career in school social work.

The recognition of Social Work Month in March reminds me to pause and reflect on how my perspective as a social worker has played such a significant role in how I view the transformational power of schools, and most significantly, the impact that student access to on-campus mental health services can have on overall community wellbeing. School mental health professionals, including counselors, social workers, and psychologists, play a vital role in creating positive, safe, and affirming school environments.

School social workers are trained mental health professionals who can assist with mental health concerns, behavioral concerns, positive behavioral support, academic, and classroom support, consultation with teachers, parents, and administrators as well as provide individual and group counseling/therapy. They act as a link between the home, school and community and connect indirect services to students, families, and school personnel to promote and support students' academic and social success.

Mental health challenges existed long before the pandemic and U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy's recent advisory on the youth mental health crisis affirms that they will persist long after. Our schools need mental health professionals on staff to support the overall wellbeing of students.
In 2017-2018, the National Center for Education Statistics found that **two of the major factors limiting schools from providing mental health services** are (1) inadequate access to licensed mental health professionals and (2) inadequate funding. In that same year, about 51 percent of public schools (or 42,200 schools) reported providing diagnostic mental health assessment services to evaluate students for mental health disorders\(^1\).

If a silver lining to the pandemic exists, it is that our society has begun to understand how essential mental health support is to overall wellbeing and resiliency, positively impacting students’ school performance and overall success. We anticipate increased federal and state funding to support the recruitment and retention of mental professionals in our schools, as our country acts with a sense of urgency to address the impact of the pandemic on mental health.

As we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic into a new era of education that prioritizes social-emotional support, I want to encourage young people and community members to explore careers in school social work. We need professionals invested in the success of our communities and the wellbeing of students.

Social work is a rewarding profession that provides you with an opportunity to make a difference in people’s lives when they need it the most. So, explore a career in social work, knowing that it will open a world of opportunities based on your population of interest, domestically or internationally. Whether it be in education or any other sector, the possibilities are endless!