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CSWE Is Abandoning the Values It Exists to Protect

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) has one job that matters above all others. It sets the standards that define a competent social worker, grounded in the profession's ethics. The first draft of the 2029 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) fails that job. The draft strips racial justice and anti-oppressive practice out of the competencies every accredited Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) and Master of Social Work (MSW) program must teach, and it weakens their commitments to human rights, advocacy, and critique of the profession's own history (CSWE, 2022, 2026). CSWE is rewriting educational standards to fit a political climate hostile to the profession's core values.

The pressure is documented. So is CSWE's promise.

Federal pressure on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) began with executive orders in early 2025 (CSWE, 2025). In April 2025, President Trump signed Executive Order 14279, which targets accreditors that require what the order calls unlawful discrimination “under the guise of” DEI initiatives. The order directs the Secretary of Education to hold those accreditors accountable, “including through denial, monitoring, suspension, or termination of accreditation recognition” (Exec. Order No. 14279, 2025, Sec. 2(a)). Outside groups followed. On May 13, 2026, Do No Harm sent CSWE an open letter asking it to remove DEI mandates from its accreditation standards (Do No Harm, 2026).

CSWE's public response was firm. In February 2025, CSWE stated that competent social work education and practice advocate for a just and fair society and value the dignity and worth of all people (CSWE, 2025). In April 2025, CSWE President and Chief Executive Officer Halaevalu Vakalahi described a collective resolve to "not give in, give out, or give up" (Vakalahi, 2025, para. 1) and assured members that CSWE "remains true to its mission and purpose" (Vakalahi, 2025, para. 3). In a June 9, 2026, response, Vakalahi told Do No Harm that CSWE did not believe the executive order or any implementing Department of Education regulations specifically applied to CSWE (Vakalahi, 2026).

CSWE told the profession it would stand strong. CSWE told its critics the executive order did not apply to it. In June 2026, CSWE assured those same critics that the EPAS "are not fleeting, reflexive documents tied to recent political trends" (Vakalahi, 2026, para. 3). Four months later, the draft 2029 competencies eliminated the anti-racism and DEI language those critics targeted.

CSWE's explanation does not hold

CSWE has offered its reasons. It reports that restrictions on anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion (ADEI) terminology are now law in 19 states, covering roughly 40 percent of its accredited programs, and that advising programs has become increasingly difficult "while still using ADEI-specific language" (CSWE, 2026, Frequently Asked Questions section). CSWE also asserts that "the underlying values and expectations have not changed" (CSWE, 2026, Letter from CSWE Leadership section).

The same page confirms that programs in states with these laws can already adapt the 2022 competency language in their accreditation documentation to comply (CSWE, 2026). An accommodation for affected

programs already exists. Rewriting the standards for every program in the country goes well beyond what compliance in 19 states requires.

What the draft deletes

The 2022 Competency 2, "Advance Human Rights and Social, Racial, Economic, and Environmental Justice" (CSWE, 2022, p. 9), becomes "Promote Dignity, Respect, and Justice for All" (CSWE, 2026, Competency 2 section). Social, racial, economic, and environmental justice disappear from the competency. Across all ten draft competencies, human rights appears only as two passing phrases. The 2022 mandate to "eliminate oppressive structural barriers" (CSWE, 2022, p. 9) shrinks to "increasing access to resources and services" (CSWE, 2026, Competency 2 section).

The draft still contains this language elsewhere. Its educational policy on generalist practice says practitioners "advocate for human rights and social, racial, economic, and environmental justice" (CSWE, 2026, Educational Policy B/M4.1 section). CSWE kept the words in policy text and removed them from the competencies and behaviors that programs must assess.

The 2022 Competency 3, "Engage Anti-Racism, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (ADEI) in Practice," is eliminated. The 2022 text named racism, oppression, White supremacy, privilege, and intersectionality, and required anti-racist and anti-oppressive practice at every level of practice, research, and policy (CSWE, 2022, pp. 9–10). Its replacement, "Apply Person-in-Environment Perspective in Practice," never mentions racism or oppression (CSWE, 2026, Competency 3 section). Person-in-environment already runs through the 2022 competencies. Relabeling it as a new competency is cover for deleting the old one.

The pattern continues across the document. Competency 4 swaps an "anti-racist and anti-oppressive perspective" in research (CSWE, 2022, p. 10) for a "just and inclusive perspective" (CSWE, 2026, Competency 4 section). Competency 9 deletes the requirement to apply anti-racist and anti-oppressive perspectives in evaluation (CSWE, 2022, p. 12). Competency 8 deletes the practice behavior requiring students to "negotiate, mediate, and advocate with and on behalf of clients and constituencies" (CSWE, 2022, p. 12).

Policy practice without advocacy

The 2022 standard requires students to "use social justice, anti-racist, and anti-oppressive lenses to assess how social welfare policies affect the delivery of and access to social services," and to "apply critical thinking to analyze, formulate, and advocate for policies that advance human rights and social, racial, economic, and environmental justice" (CSWE, 2022, p. 11).

The draft requires students to "recognize how social policies affect well-being, service delivery, and access to resources and opportunities," and to "demonstrate an understanding of how to influence policy formulation, analysis, implementation, and evaluation" (CSWE, 2026, Competency 5 section).

In policy practice, the 2022 standard requires students to analyze, formulate, and advocate for policies that advance human rights and justice (CSWE, 2022, p. 11). The draft asks only that they understand how to influence policy (CSWE, 2026, Competency 5 section). Critical thinking, social justice, human rights, and anti-racism disappear from what students must demonstrate. A profession that defines itself by changing unjust systems would now graduate students who need only recognize that policy affects people.

Erasing the profession's history

The 2022 Competency 1 directs social workers to use rights-based, anti-racist, and anti-oppressive lenses "to understand and critique the profession's history" and to recognize "historical and current contexts of oppression in shaping institutions and social work" (CSWE, 2022, p. 8). The draft deletes both (CSWE, 2026, Competency 1 section). One reference to the profession's past remains, asking students to understand how historical factors shaped inequalities, "including the social work profession's role and response" (CSWE, 2026, Competency 2 section). The instruction to critique that history is gone, along with the words racism and oppression. In 2021, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) publicly apologized for the profession's role in policies and actions that harmed people of color (Pace, 2021). Five years later, the profession's accreditor proposes to stop requiring students to critique that history.

An accreditor's duty

CSWE's standards protect faculty and students at institutions where anti-racist content faces pressure without any state law requiring its removal. When an accreditation standard requires that content, those programs can point to it. Remove the requirement, and administrators and legislators gain a ready justification to cut it. CSWE is surrendering the protection it alone can provide, at the very moment programs need it most.

The draft is also incoherent on its own terms. Competency 1 still requires students to apply the NASW Code of Ethics (CSWE, 2026, Competency 1 section), which names social justice as a core value and states that social workers challenge social injustice (NASW, 2021). CSWE cannot credibly require adherence to the Code while removing the phrase social justice, one of the Code's six core values, from its own competencies.

Political climates change. Accreditation standards govern programs for years. CSWE introduces new standards every seven years, and it expects the 2029 EPAS to govern social work education through the mid-2030s (CSWE, 2026). Standards adopted to accommodate the current political climate will shape the education of social workers long after that climate passes. CSWE exists to uphold the profession’s values and protect the people social workers serve, regardless of who holds power. Afterall, social workers are dedicated to speaking truth to power. Their accreditor should do the same.

What CSWE must do

The Board of Accreditation and the Commission on Educational Policy should withdraw the draft competencies and take five steps.

1. Restore a standalone competency on human rights and social, racial, economic, and environmental justice.
2. Restore anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion as a competency, with anti-racist and anti-oppressive practice in the measured behaviors.
3. Restore the Competency 5 behaviors requiring students to analyze, formulate, and advocate for policy.
4. Restore the requirement to understand and critique the profession's history.
5. Explain publicly why the accommodation already available under the 2022 EPAS was insufficient and disclose whether federal political pressure or legal risk assessments informed the revisions.

Speak now

The public comment period on the first draft closes at 11:59 p.m. Eastern Time on November 20, 2026, through CSWE's online feedback survey. CSWE is also holding 2029 EPAS roundtables and an information session at its Annual Conference in Atlanta on October 23 and 24 (CSWE, 2026).

This is a time for courage. Social workers must be unflinching in our commitment to deconstruct oppression in all its forms. By stripping the language of racial justice and anti-oppression from the competencies under political pressure, CSWE is turning its back on the history of social work and choosing cowardice at the moment the profession needs courage from its accreditor.

Faculty, deans, directors, students, field instructors, and every professional association in social work should make their voices heard, directly to CSWE, in writing and in public. The profession wrote its values into its ethics code. It should refuse to let its accreditor write them out of its education.

Influencing Social Policy (ISP) is a nonprofit organization founded in 1997 that engages social workers in policy research, practice, and teaching to advance social and economic policies that promote human well-being and social justice. For nearly three decades, ISP has worked to strengthen policy practice in social work education, and it founded the Macro United Conference.

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