



International Network for School Social Work

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Electronic Newsletter November 2018

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What School Social Work is Like in the United States

School social work has a long history in the US. During more than 100 years the specialty has changed and grown, culminating in social workers supporting school children in almost every state and resulting in a large body of experience, knowledge and support for the practitioner. It is estimated that there are about 30,000 school social workers in the country with most of them employed by the school system and some working for agencies that have contracted to provide social work services to schools. Most school social workers in the US have annual contracts, reasonable working conditions and an adequate salary. With about 50 million school aged children living in the US, school social work is available to many of them and in some states the school social worker is at the forefront of providing support, including mental health services, to schools. Ideally there would be one school social worker per school and where students have special needs there would be more than one per school, yet in many places there are no school social workers at all or the school social worker serves several schools and is not able to offer sufficient services.

School Social Work Role

Most school social workers provide the full range of services for the school population, so the role is extremely varied, making for an interesting career that keeps the school social worker constantly learning and developing new skills. A smaller number of school social workers is employed to serve specific populations such as students with disabilities, homeless students or students who are dropping out of school, so they develop specialized skills. Most school social workers find that competing needs demand their attention, so that they often are responding to a crisis situation rather than developing programs to meet the long-term needs of the entire school population.

A one-page pdf from the SSWAA provides a useful summary of the usual school social work services. https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/426a18_efad06f06f4f4329985d5d1961603352.pdf.

In this video <https://www.campussafetymagazine.com/news/how-school-police-and-social-workers-can-partner-to-improve-campus-security/> two school social workers in the State of Colorado discuss how social and mental health problems affect school safety and how school social workers provide services to alleviate a variety of problems and to prevent problems that could develop into unsafe situations. The video covers some of the common tasks of a school social worker and emphasizes the importance of working with the rest of the school team to solve children's problems.

Resources for school social workers in the US

School social workers in the US are fortunate to have a number of valuable resources, including professional associations, journals, textbooks, websites and professional conferences.

Professional Associations

In addition to national associations, there are regional associations and many of the 50 states have state associations, providing services such as learning opportunities, lobbying, websites, position papers and liability insurance.

Journals

The *School Social Work Journal* has been published by the Illinois Association of School Social Workers since the late 1970's. Questia has a portal to articles in the *School Social Work Journal* with free previews and excerpts available at <https://www.questia.com/library/p439754/school-social-work-journal>. NASW publishes *Children and Schools*, focusing largely on school social work.

Some recent books on school social work

- Allen-Meares, Paula, ed. 2015. *Social work services in schools*. 7th ed. New York: Pearson, Allyn, and Bacon.
- Franklin, Cynthia, Mary Beth Harris, and Paula Allen-Meares, eds. 2012. *The school services source book: A guide for school-based professionals*. 2d ed. New York: Oxford Univ. Press.
- Frey, A. J., M. E. Alvarez, and C. A. Sabatino, et al. 2012. The development of a national school social work practice model. *Children and Schools* 34.3: 131–134.
- Kelly, Michael S. 2008. *The domains and demands of school social work practice: A guide to working effectively with students, families, and schools*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press.
- Massat, C. R., M. Kelly, and R. T. Constable. 2016. *School social work: Practice, policy, & research*. Oxford: Lyceum.

Some current issues for school social workers

School social workers deal with complex problems that come about through the interaction of members of the client system of child, family, school, community and society. Schools are changing to keep up with the fast changes in society. Against this background of change, there are many issues for school social workers to deal with in order to stay relevant, effective and accountable.

Studies over the last few decades show that school social workers continue to practice using mainly a clinical casework approach. They are innovative and creative in providing this service and are often the main provider of mental health service, but they are less active in developing programs and interventions for the school population as a whole. The pressure to serve individual pupils first, including those in crisis, has continued to prevent school social workers from being more proactive in influencing policies, working on school climate and developing prevention programs.

Public schools are constantly challenged to raise pupils' performance, reach higher standards and at the same time assist school children with a wide range of social and personal problems. School social workers are also expected to demonstrate successful outcomes by using practices that are shown to be effective. It is becoming more important for school social workers to use data, technology and research creatively to produce measurable results such as improved school attendance, fewer discipline problems and reduced drop-out levels.

School social work is an exciting and challenging profession in the US and a vital part of the multidisciplinary teamwork that is increasingly important to school systems in fast changing times.