

Research

School social workers deal with a wide range of social, emotional, and academic issues

A Lifeline for Troubled Students

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What do school social workers do? And how are they different from school counselors? I decided to find out, making a city middle school my first stop.

The assistant principal who showed me to a cubby-sized office shared by two social workers wasn't surprised to find empty desks. "They bounce all over," he explained, pointing to a whiteboard where the social workers had jotted their morning appointments. One was meeting with a pediatric nurse about a severely asthmatic child, and the other was visiting a family that had adopted a child

By Susan Black

who was hearing impaired.

The National Association of Social Workers says these professionals' days are filled with a steady stream of students who need help. A focus group of New York City's school social workers, convened by NASW in May 2004, said referrals from teachers, principals, and parents consume much of their time. On top of that, many troubled kids stop school social workers in hallways or show up at their office pleading for help.

Much of their work requires stamina, patience, and quick thinking. A high school social worker in the focus group described a "fast-paced, typical morning" in her 4,000-student school, during which she worked with a teen suffering from depression, a girl who was being sexually harassed, a group of gay and lesbian teens who were being taunted by other students, a teen who was about to move from foster care to her father's custody, a girl who had deep self-inflicted wounds, and a group of rebellious kids who persistently cut classes.

Working with younger students can be just as challenging—and equally exhausting. A prekindergarten social worker said she's on call to soothe 4-year-olds' fears and calm their tantrums. Another told of working with a pediatric neurologist and an occupational therapist to help a particularly "disruptive and occasionally dangerous 6-year-old boy" settle down and learn with his first-grade classmates.

Clearly, as Susan Miller points out on the Career Counselor page of the *Los Angeles Times* website, "some school social work duties overlap with the duties of



school counselors.” But, she says, “unlike school counselors, school social workers generally do not deal with career and academic advising. They use their expertise in psychosocial systems to make sure that a student’s support system is functioning well.”

Providing a safety net

A veteran social worker in northern Michigan told me students appear in her office with problems that were almost unheard of a few years ago. “I never dreamed that I would be working with kids—some as young as 12—who are addicted to gambling,” she said. “And I never foresaw the day when kids would show up with self-inflicted cuts from knives and razor blades, and burns from matches, cigarettes, and even torches.”

Dream on.

School social workers told the NASW focus group that they routinely tackle problems like these, plus other “dreaded realities,” such as domestic violence, gang violence, and child abuse. Kids who experience these problems usually are too upset to learn. Passing tests and getting high grades are often the last things on their minds.

Many school social workers faulted school leaders for demanding high test scores but ignoring realities that interfere with kids’ learning. “My school defeats its own purpose,” one said, referring to her principal’s single-minded emphasis on state tests. “He doesn’t understand that reaching out and rescuing kids in crisis would help raise our school’s overall achievement.”

Rescuing kids often means providing a safety net and, in dire cases, a lifeline, says Patricia Sullivan, a social worker in the New York City schools. She furnished much-needed help for a 15-year-old boy who attempted suicide to escape his father’s brutal beatings. She worked with the boy for three years, until he marched across the stage at his high school graduation.

And she provided a safety net for a 12-year-old girl who tried to save her brother as he lay dying from a gunshot wound. Sullivan picked up where other agencies

left off—including those that provided psychiatric care and medication—and gave the girl ongoing emotional support and encouragement. Now the girl is about to graduate from college with honors. She signed a thank-you note to Sullivan, “All the achievements I make, we make.”

A changing profession

A social worker I spoke with described how she sorts out problems.

“It’s simple,” she explained. “If it bleeds, I use speed. If it can wait, I set a date.” Moments later a teacher called on her office “hot line,” and she rushed off to investigate bruises and welts on a third-grader’s neck and shoulders. As she left, I wondered how she—and other social workers like her—would cope with proposed changes in their profession.

Andy Frey of the University of Louisville and David Dupper of the Uni-

versity of Tennessee-Knoxville describe an emerging theory that has school social workers “targeting systems rather than students.” (See sidebar.) In the new model, social workers would be expected to work side-by-side with school leaders to:

- Improve their school’s culture and climate;
- Establish and communicate standards for acceptable school behavior;
- Design and promote classroom programs that blend academic and social learning;
- Eliminate school barriers to learning, such as tracking and ability grouping; and
- Abolish zero tolerance and other policies that contribute to high dropout rates. (See “Beyond Zero Tolerance,” September 2004).

Judith Shine, president of the School Social Work Association of America, agrees that school social workers need to

A good fit

All school social work focuses on the “goodness of the fit” between students and their family, community, and school, say social work experts Andy Frey and David Dupper.

But in many schools, the fit isn’t as good as it could be. Frey and Dupper recommend using this “clinical quadrant” to rethink school social workers’ roles and responsibilities:

- **Quadrant A:** Working primarily with individuals, families, and small groups, social workers concentrate on improving their school’s learning environment, consulting with teachers and parents, establishing school-family-community links, and providing clinical help to students.
- **Quadrant B:** Working primarily with large groups, such as whole teaching staffs, social workers organize community groups, evaluate school programs, and work to change district and school policies and practices that interfere with students’ learning and development.

■ **Quadrant C:** Working primarily with individuals and small groups of students, social workers provide psychotherapy, family therapy, and crisis intervention.

■ **Quadrant D:** Working primarily with large groups, such as teachers and parents, social workers lay the groundwork for improving individual students’ lives and learning through such initiatives as child abuse awareness for staff, social skills training for students, and truancy prevention with parents.

Social workers spend most of their time in Quadrant C and too little time in A, B, and D, Frey and Dupper contend.

Instead, they say, social workers should “move from one quadrant to another with relative ease, and distribute the time spent in each quadrant on the basis of students’ needs.”

Source: Frey, Andy, and David Dupper. “A Broader Conceptual Approach to Clinical Practice for the 21st Century.” *Children & Schools*, January 2005, pp. 33-44.

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do more than deal with “crisis after crisis.” Shine urges the group’s members to be “change agents” for students, families, and school systems.

In a 2003 resolution titled “Helping Students Stay in School,” the association recommends tackling “systemic barriers to learning and graduation.” Social workers can reduce the number of dropouts, SSWAA says, by developing systemwide plans and programs such as:

- Curriculum-based lessons on social skills and life skills;
- Mentoring programs;
- Alternative routes to earning high school credits;
- Career and technical skills training;
- Learning opportunities based on different learning styles;
- Smaller school and class sizes;
- Smooth transitions for students; and
- School-community collaboration.

Identity problems

Social workers understand kids, but do they understand systems? Are they willing and able to step up to whole-school reforms? So far, the answers aren’t encouraging.

For starters, says Kristine Tower with the University of Nevada, Reno, school social workers need to overcome an “image crisis” that keeps them sidelined in many schools.

In her 2000 study of social workers in Nevada’s 17 school districts, Tower found that special education teachers and administrators are more positive about counselors and psychologists than they are about social workers. She also found that many teachers view their school’s social workers as outsiders.

Jacqueline Agresta, a social worker with New York’s Long Beach City School District, reports a similar identity problem. Few administrators “know what so-

cial workers do,” she says. As a result, many administrators place higher value on school counselors and psychologists.

And Agresta turned up another serious barrier to recasting social workers as districtwide change agents: Most social workers, she says, don’t want to change. Her 2004 study shows that social workers would rather spend more time on individual and group counseling and less time on consultation with teachers, administrators, and community agencies.

The Medicaid connection

The way many school social workers are paid is another serious problem.

Frey and Dupper report that 95 percent of the school social workers in New York, Illinois, New Jersey, and Michigan are paid, at least in part, through special education funds. Many school districts receive Medicaid reimbursements for social work services such as providing treatments outlined in special education students’ IEP treatment plans and referring students to outside agencies for evaluations, therapy, and medication.

Medicaid reimbursements for mental health services are likely to “keep school social workers entrenched” in special education, Frey and Dupper contend. Several states allow social workers to accept Medicaid funds only for counseling services, a restriction that limits them from working on school reform initiatives.

Frey and Dupper are wary of some Medicaid stipulations. For example, requiring social workers to pull kids out of classrooms for individual or small group counseling is “sporadically effective.” And targeting services only for students who meet specific psychological criteria means general education students receive fewer social work services.

Many school social workers see Med-

icaid reimbursements as an “enticing option,” but Frey and Dupper say it’s an option they should “pursue cautiously.” That’s wise advice, given that Medicaid could, sooner or later, put a time limit on reimbursements.

It’s hard to see what’s ahead for school social workers, but I hope the profession can overcome these problems for its own good—and for the good of the kids who rely on them for help.

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