

Longitudinal Analysis of School Social Work Practice in Wisconsin: Wisconsin School Social Worker Survey – 1998-2016

For more information from the School
Social Work Practice Guide visit:
[https://dpi.wi.gov/sspw/pupil-
services/school-social-work/contents](https://dpi.wi.gov/sspw/pupil-services/school-social-work/contents)

Description

The Wisconsin School Social Work Survey was developed to identify 1) what areas of responsibility Wisconsin school social workers are involved in (e.g., special education, school attendance, mental health, homelessness), and 2) what professional strategies and programs they are using to address these areas of responsibility (e.g., consultation, advocacy, home visits, counseling).

There are 38 areas of responsibility and 40 professional strategies and programs on the 2016 survey. Respondents were asked to estimate the amount of time they spent on each item using the following scale:

1. High – indicating involvement at least a few times weekly
2. Medium – indicating involvement at least once weekly
3. Low – indicating involvement at least once monthly
4. Infrequent – indicating involvement less than monthly
5. Not at all

By using this scale (as opposed to some other method, such as asking respondents to estimate the amount of time they spend on each item), respondents are able to complete the survey in minimal time, while still allowing them to differentiate the time devoted to these different issues and services. Time necessary to complete the survey is a critical variable in the response rate.

The survey has been administered using a census sample (attempting to make it widely available to as many school social workers in the state as possible) on a triennial basis (1998, 2001, 2004, 2007, 2010, 2013, 2016) by the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) with the important support of the Wisconsin School Social Work Association (WSSWA). The survey has changed little over its seven administrations, primarily asking for additional information in later years.

Survey Highlights

School districts appear to be assigning school social workers to fewer school buildings compared to past years.

The percentage of school social workers reporting any time devoted to policy development and research have each increased by approximately 20% over previous surveys.

Below are some trends, based upon a review of the weighted scores and rankings over the seven surveys. Wisconsin school social workers have reported focusing more time in recent years on these areas of responsibility:

- Basic human needs
- Homelessness
- Mental health
- Section 504 assessment and coordination

Wisconsin school social workers have reported focusing less time in recent years on these areas of responsibility:

- Alcohol and other drug abuse
- Bilingual and bicultural issues and English language learners
- Child abuse and neglect
- Discipline
- Juvenile delinquency
- Parent-child relationships
- Pregnancy prevention
- School-age parents
- Special education
- Students at risk for not graduating
- Students living in out-of-home care
- W-2

Wisconsin school social workers have reported spending more time in recent years with these programs and professional strategies:

- Data-based decision-making
- Evaluation of professional practice
- Group work and counseling
- Intradistrict collaboration
- Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)
- Pupil services teaming
- Research
- Restorative justice
- Staff development, training and in-services

Wisconsin school social workers have reported spending less time in recent years with these programs and professional strategies:

- Assessment of students
- Before, after and summer school programs
- Comprehensive school counseling program
- Parent conferences
- School-home liaison and home visits

Response Rates

The first survey was available in hard copy only. It was distributed, completed, and returned during meetings of school social workers throughout the 1998-99 school year. This method yielded a 28% response rate.

Prior to the second survey, DPI gained the capacity to communicate by email with people outside the agency. The 2001 survey was emailed (numerous times throughout the 2001-02 school year) as an attachment to Wisconsin school social workers who had joined an email group targeting the profession. Respondents were responsible for printing, completing, and mailing the completed survey. The 2001 survey had a significantly higher participation rate of 41.5%.

The subsequent surveys have been available in an electronic format only. School social workers learned about the survey through email correspondence with a link to the survey embedded in the email. Electronic notices were sent several times over four to six months each survey administration. This method helped increase response rates to 50-55% since 2004.

Response rates by CESA for the 2016 survey are reflected in Table 1 below. The response rate by school social workers in CESA 2 is roughly twice as high as the proportion of school social workers in that region of the state.

Table 1. Distribution of School Social Workers by CESA

CESA	# of Survey Respondents by CESA	% of Sample	# of School Social Workers by CESA	% by CESA
1	147	45.2	271	48.7
2	85	26.2	136	13.5
3	1	0.3	2	0.3
4	4	1.2	13	2.3
5	13	4.0	19	3.4
6	26	8.0	39	7.0
7	25	7.7	53	9.5
8	4	1.2	9	1.6
9	10	3.1	6	1.1
10	5	1.5	3	0.5
11	5	1.5	5	0.9
12	0	0.0	1	0.2

Analysis

Weighted aggregate scores were calculated, in order to reflect the overall level of involvement with each of the 1) areas of responsibility and 2) professional strategies and programs. These weighted scores were then used to 1) rank the items from highest to lowest weight (i.e., amount of time devoted to that particular item), and 2) compare changes over time. Weighted scores were calculated for each item in the following manner:

1. Convert the number of responses to a weighted number.
 - a. Multiply the number of “high” responses by four.
 - b. Multiply the number of “medium” responses by three.
 - c. Multiply the number of “low” responses by two.
 - d. Multiply the number of “infrequent” responses by one.
2. Add all of the weighted numbers for each item and divide it by the number of respondents to create an aggregate weighted score for each item. Using this method, the highest possible weighted aggregate score for any single item is 4.00 (i.e., if all respondents were to indicate “high” for a particular item).

Comparisons across the seven surveys must take into consideration that the first survey did not give survey participants the option of “infrequent” as a response. Consequently, slightly lower weighted aggregate scores in the first survey are actually comparable to the other six surveys.

Results

At what grade levels are school social workers working?

In 2001, the survey was modified to ask respondents the grade levels at which they work. Responses are provided in Table 2 for the past six surveys and indicate a consistent distribution across the years. The total numbers of responses in each year are greater than the total number of respondents, because most school social workers reported working at multiple grade levels.

Table 2. Grade Levels at which Survey Respondents Work

Year	PreK-2		Grades 3-5		Grades 6-8		Grades 9-12	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	%	%
2001	139	61.5	149	65.9	100	44.2	92	40.7
2004	174	63.0	189	68.5	131	47.5	116	42.0
2007	166	61.0	188	69.1	126	46.3	96	35.3
2010	182	59.3	182	59.3	123	40.1	128	41.7
2013	170	56.3	179	59.3	131	43.4	122	40.4
2016	181	58.4	191	61.6	131	42.3	124	40.0

How many school buildings are school workers assigned to?

School districts appear to be assigning school social workers to fewer buildings compared to past years. The percentage of school social workers reporting being assigned to one school building increased by 13.1% from 2010 and the percentage of school social workers reporting being assigned to two school buildings increased by 14.2% from 2010. Actual numbers are represented in Table 3.

Table 3. Number of Assigned School Buildings

# of School Buildings	# of Respondents	% of Respondents
0	8	2.5
1	146	44.9
2	97	29.8
3	21	6.5
4	16	4.9
5	7	2.2
6	4	1.2
7 or more	26	8.0

How much time do school social workers devote to special education?

Respondents were asked to report time spent on special education within ten-percentage-point ranges. More than four in five school social workers report spending 50% or less time on special education, which may reflect the increased emphasis of Wisconsin school districts' to meet the educational needs of students through strategies organized into a multi-level system of support (e.g., Response to Intervention, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports).

Table 4. % of Time on Special Education

% of Time on special Education	% of Respondents
0-10	14.5
11-20	24.5
21-30	17.6
31-40	16.7
41-50	9.4
51-60	6.6
61-70	2.8
71-80	0.0
81-90	1.9
91-100	6.0

What experiences from other areas of social work do school social workers bring to the school setting?

The 2013 and 2016 surveys asked what social work certifications, licensure, and experience (other than school social work) respondents possess, as they bring valuable, direct knowledge and skill sets from other systems into the school environment. Certifications and licensure through the Wisconsin Department of Safety and Professional Services were reported as follows: certified social worker – 8.0%; certified advanced practice social worker – 26.7%; certified independent social worker – 4.3%; and licensed clinical social worker – 11.7%. Social work experience (other than school social work) is reported in Table 5 in descending order.

Table 5. Other Areas of Social Work Experience

Areas of Social Work	Number	%
Mental health/clinical practice	90	27.7
Child protective services	73	22.5
Foster care	61	18.8
Juvenile justice	60	18.5
Medical/health/hospital	53	16.3
Supervision/administration	37	11.4
AODA	33	10.2
Adult education	23	7.1
Domestic violence	21	6.5
Corrections	19	5.8
Consulting	16	4.9
Adoption	15	4.6
Sexual assault	11	3.4

What issues are school social workers addressing?

Table 6 lists the top 15 areas of responsibility in the 2016 survey. For each item, the table lists the rank from the 2016 survey, the average rank for the previous surveys, the 2016 aggregate weighted score, and the average aggregate weighted score for previous surveys. Trends can be discerned from

examination of both rankings and the aggregate weighted scores. Compared to previous years, Wisconsin school social workers report focusing more of their time on mental health and homelessness and less of their time on children at risk for not graduating, special education, parent-child relationships, and child abuse and neglect. Appendix A lists the ranks and weighted scores for each Area of Responsibility on the survey for each of the seven surveys.

Table 6. Top Areas of Responsibility – 2016 and averages of previous six surveys

Area of Responsibility	2016 Rank	Average Rank in Previous Surveys	2016 Aggregate Weighted Score	Average Aggregate Weighted Score
Mental health	1	3.5	3.57	3.37
Attendance, truancy, dropouts	2	2.5	3.48	3.47
Behavior management	3	3.3	3.35	3.37
Children at risk	4	2.2	3.35	3.47
Basic human needs	5	6.0	3.32	3.17
Special education	6	4.5	3.16	3.34
Conflict resolution, anger management	7	6.0	3.12	3.04
Family trauma, change	8	7.3	3.07	3.12
Crisis	9	8.0	3.06	3.12
Homelessness	10	14.5	3.06	2.36
Parent-child relationships	11	4.7	2.98	3.31
School climate and environment	12	12.2	2.80	2.58
Resiliency and protective assets	13	12.3	2.60	2.56
Anti-victim education	14	14.8	2.44	2.33
Child abuse and neglect	15	10.8	2.39	2.71

What professional strategies and programs are Wisconsin school social workers using to address these issues?

Table 7 lists the top 15 professional strategies and programs in the 2016 survey. For each item, the table lists the rank from the 2016 survey, the average rank for the previous surveys, the 2016 aggregate weighted score, and the average aggregate weighted score for previous surveys. Upon examination of changes in both rankings and the aggregate weighted scores over time, Wisconsin school social workers report in 2016 spending more time on pupil services teaming, group work and counseling, PBIS, and data-based decision-making and less time as a school-home liaison and doing assessments of students. This may reflect a change in how Wisconsin school districts are choosing to allocate school social work services to support a multi-level system of support. Data-based decision-making, school-based management teams, and social-academic intervention groups (SAIGs) are central to PBIS. Slightly less than one in five Wisconsin school social workers serve as PBIS internal coaches in their respective schools and approximately one in 25 Wisconsin school social workers are assigned responsibilities as PBIS external coaches. Appendix B lists the ranks and weighted scores for each of the Professional Strategies and Programs on the survey for each of the seven surveys.

Table 7. Top Professional Strategies and Programs – 2016 and averages of previous surveys

Professional Strategy or Program	2013 Rank	Average Rank in Previous Surveys	2016 Aggregate Weighted Score	Average Aggregate Weighted Score
Advocacy for students and families	1	1.5	3.69	3.59
Individual student counseling	2	3.0	3.45	3.40
Consultation	3	1.83	3.35	3.51
Referral and information	4	3.67	3.22	3.36
Pupil services teaming	5	10.0	3.08	2.81
Case management	6	5.3	3.01	3.21
Group work & counseling	7	13.5	2.93	2.37
PBIS	8	11.5	2.89	2.74
Crisis intervention, coordination	9	7.5	2.85	3.02
Data-based decision-making	10	14.0	2.84	2.62
Building consultation team	11	10.7	2.75	2.84
School-home liaison, home visits	12	7.0	2.70	3.09
Assessment of students	13	7.5	2.59	3.06
School-community partnerships	14	14.3	2.54	2.40
Rtl	15	17	2.50	2.46

How are Wisconsin school social workers involved in systemic activities?

A number of the professional strategies listed in the survey involve activities designed to bring about systemic change to a school or school-community. School social workers are specifically trained to examine systems and make them more responsive to students. Because some of these strategies often are lower-frequency activities, it can be more descriptive to share how many Wisconsin school social workers are involved at any level, rather than how much time is devoted to them.

For each identified Professional Strategy or Program, Table 8 lists the percentage of Wisconsin school social workers indicating any level of involvement on the 2016 survey. The percentage of school social workers reporting any time devoted to policy development and research have each increased by approximately 20% over previous surveys, while other areas have remained relatively flat.

Table 8. Wisconsin School Social Worker Involvement in Systemic Activities

Professional Strategy	2016 Survey %
Grant-writing/management	47
PBIS	90
Policy development	68/85
Program coordination	79/85
Program development	79/85
Program evaluation	79/82
Research	70/80
Rtl	92
School-community collaborative partnerships	94
Staff development, training, in-services	94

How are survey results utilized?

School social workers possess diverse knowledge and skills to improve educational outcomes for students. School districts typically focus school social work services on the issues that present the greatest challenges for students in their respective communities. The results of the Wisconsin School Social Worker Survey are used to help describe school social work practice in Wisconsin and how it is (and is not) changing over time. This information can be especially helpful to local school district officials who wish to 1) compare their school social work services to other school districts state-wide, and 2) consider adding school social work services to better support students experiencing challenges to their school success.

Appendix A - Wisconsin School Social Worker Survey

Areas of Responsibility	2016		2013		2010		2007		2004		2001		1998	
	Rank	Score												
Alcohol, tobacco & other drug abuse	26	1.47	24	1.83	22	2.15	18	2.07	14	2.42	14	2.60	10	2.44
Anti-victim education, protective behaviors	14	2.44	12	2.56	12	2.83	15	2.16	16	2.27	18	2.247	16	1.94
Attendance, truancy, dropouts	2	3.48	2	3.45	4	3.45	2	3.41	1	3.44	2	3.63	4	3.42
Basic human needs	5	3.32	5	3.27	6	3.35	5	3.12	6	3.08	8	3.04	NA	NA
Behavior management	3	3.35	3	3.39	2	3.46	3	3.22	2	3.41	5	3.44	5	3.27
Bilingual, bicultural, ELL	27	1.39	28	1.49	27	1.77	23	1.72	23	1.83	30	1.53	27	1.33
Child abuse and neglect	15	2.39	14	2.54	15	2.72	10	2.51	9	2.69	9	2.90	8	2.89
Children at risk	4	3.35	1	3.48	1	3.62	1	3.43	8	2.95	1	3.68	1	3.66
Comprehensive school health	NA	NA	35	1.08	35	1.29	22	1.72	22	1.89	23	1.89	20	1.49
Conflict resolution, anger management	7	3.12	11	2.95	10	3.15	6	3.00	7	3.04	7	3.20	7	2.92
Crisis	9	3.06	8	3.10	8	3.29	8	2.96	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Cultural competency, race issues	16	2.32	19	2.08	21	2.21	17	2.10	18	2.08	17	2.24	17	1.74
Discipline	18	2.08	17	2.30	17	2.43	16	2.13	12	2.56	13	2.69	9	2.51
Eating disorders	31	1.02	36	1.06	37	1.20	33	1.07	33	1.22	32	1.30	32	1.08
Family trauma, change	8	3.07	9	3.06	9	3.19	9	2.93	5	3.19	6	3.24	6	3.12
Gender issues	25	1.52	32	1.35	32	1.48	29	1.29	29	1.40	29	1.58	31	1.10
Gifted and talented	34	0.67	38	0.73	38	0.79	35	0.70	34	0.89	35	1.05	33	0.78
Homelessness	10	3.06	10	2.98	11	2.91	12	2.42	15	2.28	21	2.01	18	1.55
Human growth and development	28	1.39	29	1.38	31	1.50	26	1.49	25	1.60	25	1.83	26	1.35
Inclusion	18	2.29	18	2.12	18	2.42	20	1.82	19	2.06	16	2.43	12	2.31
Juvenile delinquency	23	1.72	22	1.93	19	2.31	19	1.99	17	2.27	15	2.56	15	2.19
Learnfare	NA	NA	34	1.09	34	0.70								
Mental Health	1	3.57	4	3.28	3	3.45	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Parent-child relationships	11	2.98	6	3.17	5	3.36	7	2.97	4	3.31	4	3.53	2	3.54
Pregnancy prevention	32	0.93	37	1.06	33	1.35	31	1.20	30	1.37	28	1.58	30	1.16
Resiliency, protective assets	13	2.60	13	2.56	14	2.75	11	2.44	11	2.61	11	2.79	14	2.21
Safety, violence prevention	17	2.30	16	2.41	16	2.71	13	2.40	13	2.54	12	2.75	13	2.25
School age parents	33	0.75	34	1.19	34	1.33	32	1.14	32	1.27	31	1.50	23	1.39
School climate and environment	12	2.80	15	2.46	13	2.79	14	2.33	10	2.65	10	2.81	11	2.42
Section 504 assessment and coordination	20	1.93	30	1.38	36	1.25	34	1.00	31	1.36	27	1.75	19	1.51
Self-Injury	NA	NA	23	1.84	25	1.89	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Sexual assault prevention	30	1.20	33	1.22	29	1.63	30	1.27	28	1.47	33	1.24	29	1.20
Special education	6	3.16	7	3.14	7	3.33	4	3.20	3	3.39	3	3.56	3	3.43
Students living in out-of-home care	22	1.87	20	1.99	20	2.22	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Suicide prevention	19	1.95	21	1.94	23	2.01	24	1.66	20	1.99	20	2.01	21	1.46
Suspension, expulsion	24	1.56	25	1.82	26	1.88	25	1.61	24	1.72	22	2.01	24	1.39
Transition plans	29	1.38	27	1.50	28	1.77	28	1.37	26	1.50	26	1.80	28	1.29
Wellness	21	1.92	26	1.79	24	1.93	21	1.74	21	1.92	19	2.19	25	1.39
W-2	31	1.16	31	1.37	30	1.60	27	1.39	27	1.50	24	1.85	22	1.40

School social workers rated items as “High” (at least a few times weekly), “Medium” (at least once weekly), “Low” (at least once monthly), “Infrequent” (less than once monthly), or “Not at all.” Weighted scores were calculated by assigning a value of “4” to high ratings, a value of “3” to medium ratings, a value “2” to low ratings, and a value of “1” to infrequent ratings. Weighted scores from 1998 must be considered in light of the survey that year not having the “infrequent” rating available.

Appendix B—Wisconsin School Social Worker Survey

Professional Strategies and Programs	2016		2013		2010		2007		2004		2001		1998	
	Rank	Score												
Advocacy for students and families	1	3.69	1	3.68	1	3.66	1	3.47	2	3.67	2	3.51	2	3.36
Alternative school/program	27	1.77	21	1.86	20	2.12	16	2.02	19	1.87	23	1.72	20	1.38
Assessment of students	13	2.59	11	2.77	8	3.09	8	2.97	6	3.26	6	3.23	6	3.05
Before/after/summer school program	34	1.14	34	1.27	35	1.36	28	1.29	28	1.47	29	1.39	28	1.02
Building consultation team	11	2.75	13	2.69	9	3.04	9	2.76	9	3.01	11	2.80	11	2.75
Case management	6	3.01	5	3.08	5	3.29	5	3.25	5	3.33	5	3.24	7	3.05
Classroom instruction	29	1.61	26	1.65	25	1.82	21	1.73	22	1.78	28	1.52	25	1.23
Comprehensive school counseling program	33	1.19	33	1.28	31	1.52	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Consultation	3	3.35	3	3.38	3	3.56	2	3.41	1	3.69	1	3.51	1	3.51
Crisis intervention/coordination	9	2.85	7	2.97	7	3.14	7	3.00	7	3.17	8	3.04	9	2.80
Data-based decision making	10	2.84	12	2.72	16	2.52	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Employee assistance program	38	0.54	40	0.56	41	0.66	35	0.60	35	0.73	35	0.69	32	0.68
Employee wellness program	36	0.77	41	0.55	40	0.69	34	0.68	34	0.83	34	0.71	34	0.51
Evaluation of professional practice	22	1.95	24	1.67	28	1.67	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Grant-writing/management	37	0.76	39	0.80	39	0.98	32	0.82	32	0.97	33	0.93	31	0.71
Group work and counseling	7	2.93	10	2.84	11	2.91	15	2.03	15	2.29	15	2.40	15	1.76
Individual student counseling	2	3.45	2	3.43	2	3.58	3	3.34	4	3.42	3	3.45	4	3.18
Intradistrict collaboration	19	2.17	19	2.07	19	2.24	17	1.97	17	2.02	26	1.58	18	1.49
Mentoring program (for students)	24	1.89	29	1.53	27	1.71	23	1.58	26	1.54	21	1.79	24	1.25
Observations (of students)	18	2.31	18	2.15	17	2.50	13	2.46	13	2.47	14	2.42	14	1.98
Parent conferences	16	2.49	15	2.54	13	2.83	11	2.62	11	2.86	9	2.95	8	3.01
Parent groups/classes/presentations	30	1.50	35	1.22	36	1.34	27	1.47	27	1.53	22	1.77	22	1.30
Peer programs	NA	NA	30	1.52	30	1.64	25	1.54	20	1.83	17	2.03	17	1.53
Policy development	32	1.29	36	1.15	34	1.38	29	1.18	29	1.40	30	1.33	29	0.92
PBIS	8	2.89	9	2.85	14	2.62	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Program coordination	21	2.01	25	1.67	21	2.08	18	1.93	16	2.11	16	2.19	NA	NA
Program development	25	1.87	23	1.77	23	1.94	20	1.81	18	1.93	24	1.70	16	1.73
Program evaluation	28	1.73	27	1.65	26	1.77	22	1.70	23	1.77	25	1.66	26	1.19
Pupil services teaming	5	3.08	8	2.91	6	3.16	10	2.76	12	2.73	12	2.66	12	2.66
Referral and information	4	3.22	4	3.37	4	3.37	4	3.33	3	3.47	4	3.40	3	3.24
Research	31	1.49	32	1.31	32	1.41	31	1.09	31	1.10	31	1.11	33	0.58
Restorative justice	26	1.86	28	1.55	33	1.40	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Rtl	15	2.50	16	2.50	18	2.41	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
School-community collaborative partnerships	14	2.54	17	2.50	15	2.61	14	2.35	14	2.43	13	2.44	13	2.04
School-community liaison	17	2.44	14	2.67	12	2.84	12	2.54	10	2.87	10	2.91	10	2.78
School health services	28	1.63	31	1.42	29	1.65	26	1.52	25	1.71	19	1.95	23	1.30
School-home liaison, home visits	12	2.70	6	2.98	10	3.01	6	3.01	8	3.15	7	3.22	5	3.14
Screening students	23	1.92	22	1.79	22	2.02	19	1.85	24	1.73	18	1.95	19	1.42
Service learning, community service	34	1.17	37	1.10	37	1.22	30	1.11	30	1.26	27	1.52	30	0.80
Staff development, training, in-services	20	2.04	20	1.89	24	1.91	24	1.54	21	1.79	20	1.83	21	1.35
Supervision of school social workers	39	0.45	43	0.30	43	0.30	37	0.33	37	0.30	37	0.27	36	0.38
Supervision of school social work students	35	0.91	38	0.82	38	1.06	33	0.75	33	0.92	32	1.06	27	1.07