

School Social Work

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Introductory Guide to School Social Work

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School social workers support students who are struggling with mental, emotional, social, behavioral, and/or familial issues that are negatively impacting their academic performance and overall well-being. School social workers support students through individual and group counseling, conflict mediation, interventions to address crises, resource navigation services, and the development and implementation of school programs. School social workers can work in a number of different settings, including public schools, private schools, and academic programs that serve vulnerable populations.

School social workers can encounter numerous challenges on the job, such as lack of adequate resources to serve students, overwork, and managing the vicarious trauma and emotional burdens that their students carry. Nevertheless, school social workers may find helping children and adolescents empower themselves, tackle challenges, mature, and improve their lives to be incredibly rewarding and sustaining.

The majority of school social workers are employees of schools and school districts, and must obtain a specific credential

from their state government to practice. They can typically apply for this credential through their state's education department, board of education, or teacher credentialing commission. While school social worker licenses/certifications vary from state to state, the process to earn a school social worker credential generally involves a combination of undergraduate and graduate training, taking and passing a state administered examination, and fulfilling certain professional and/or internship experiences.

What School Social Workers Do

The mission of school social work is to support students' well-being and academic engagement. To accomplish this mission, school social workers collaborate with school staff to provide a wide variety of services to students and their families, including but not limited to the following:

Academic Support Programs

School social workers work as part of a team of teachers, counselors, and school administrators to develop and implement programs and plans for students who are struggling academically. While specific program titles can vary from school to school, common programs and plans that school social workers engage in include (but are not limited to):

Individual Education Programs (IEPs):

IEPs are free, individualized services delivered to students who have learning disabilities or other mental or physical barriers to academic performance. To create and implement an IEP for a particular student, school social workers, teachers, school counselors, and other school staff meet with parents to discuss the student's needs and how to address them. Services can include accommodations in the classroom, mentorship/guidance outside of classes, and psychological counseling. IEPs are offered nationwide as part of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

Student Assistance Program (SAP):

SAPs are state-administered programs that offer prevention, support, and early intervention services for students from kindergarten through 12th grade who are experiencing behavioral, familial, social, and psychological barriers to learning. The Student Assistant Program began primarily as a substance abuse prevention and intervention service in school settings, but then branched out into other areas of student support. "Each social worker [working in elementary schools in San Francisco] facilitates and coordinates the Student Assistance Program (SAP), which case manages students on an individual level, and also trouble shoots classroom and school wide climate, behavior, and discipline issues," explained Maggie Brown, LCSW, PPSC, who

works for San Francisco Unified School District, in an interview with OnlineMSWPrograms.com.

Response to Intervention (RTI):

RTI is a methodical approach to early identification of students in need of academic and/or behavioral support. The RTI approach combines parent involvement, regular student assessments, and different tiers of interventions to detect, prevent, and address students' academic challenges. "The RTI process combines universal screening of all children in the general education classroom with high-quality instruction to try and improve learning outcomes and overall student support in the school setting," Ms. Brown told OnlineMSWPrograms.com.

Restorative Justice Programs:

Some schools have restorative justice programs in order to promote constructive and empathy-building disciplinary measures, as opposed to punitive or isolating measures. "Restorative Justice is considered to be an alternative to the more traditional system of punishment that focuses on blame and removal from the community when a problem behavior arises," Andy Duffy, PPSC, a school social worker at Aspire Monarch Academy in Oakland, CA, explained in an interview with OnlineMSWPrograms.com. "The main emphasis of restorative justice is to strengthen relationships (school-wide, within a class, in a friend group, in a family, etc.) so that repairing a relationship

becomes the main focus when harm has taken place.” Examples of restorative justice practices include replacing suspension and expulsion with community service participation or peer-mediated group discussions that promote communal support and acceptance.

Individual and Group Counseling

School social workers provide counseling for students encountering mental, emotional, social, behavioral, and/or familial barriers to academic performance, either as part of a student support program such as those listed above, or on an individual, as-needed basis. “I meet with my students once to twice weekly either in group or individually as mandated via their IEPs,” noted Nityda Bhakti, LMSW, who works as a school social worker for The New Life School, an alternative day school located in the Bronx, NY that serves disadvantaged students struggling with mental, emotional, and social barriers to learning. “I help the students identify their strengths and well as areas for growth, teach them effective problem solving skills which we practice in session, help them explore distress tolerance and emotion regulation techniques, have them identify and practice coping skills, and participate in goal formulation exercises regularly.”

Leandra Peloquin, PPSC, described in an interview with OnlineMSWPrograms.com how much of her role as a school

counselor at Notre Dame High School located in San Jose, CA involves regular check-ins with students. “We meet with each of our students at least once a semester. We have an open door policy and are able to meet with students more if wanted and/or necessary,” she explained, “By having counseling services as a normal part of the culture of the school, it operates as a protective factor for the students.”

In addition to preventative counseling sessions, school social workers counsel individual students on an as-needed basis. “I work with students in a wide variety of ways. Different styles of interventions are used to address academic, social and emotional issues,” Mr. Duffy explained to OnlineMSWPrograms.com. “I work with students individually to process trauma, discuss difficulties with following behavior expectations in class, family and friend difficulties, etc.”

School social workers typically involve parents in the counseling process. “I am in active communication with my students’ parents/guardians via phone and in-person meetings at the school,” Ms. Bhakti noted, “It is important that the parents be highly aware of their child’s progress, behaviors, and areas for work academically and social/emotionally.”

School social workers can also run therapeutic groups to help several students struggling with the same issue. “The groups that I run typically address developing improved social skills,

increasing self-regulation at school, and addressing emotional issues (typically anxiety). I will also do class-wide discussions, particularly around issues of bullying and large-scale social difficulties in the class,” Mr. Duffy told OnlineMSWPrograms.com.

Student, Parent, and Community Education

In addition to engaging in academic support plans and individual and group counseling, school social workers can also develop programs and presentations that educate students and parents about serious issues occurring on school campuses, such as cyberbullying, campus-based violence, racism, depression and other emotional disorders, and substance abuse. “We plan and facilitate presentations for faculty, staff and parents related to adolescent mental health and development [...and] coordinate health awareness programs for students to learn about many different issues that impact adolescents and our society as a whole,” Ms. Peloquin explained to OnlineMSWPrograms.com. “For instance, this year we are arranging for the YWCA Rape Crisis Center to speak to all classes about sexual violence and dating violence in April during Sexual Assault Awareness Month. We are fortunate to have the support of school administration to bring light to these very important issues for our student body, faculty and staff.”

Crisis Interventions

In the event of a school crisis, such as campus violence or severe cases of bullying, school social workers are typically some of the first personnel to minimize harm to students, address the psychological ramifications of traumatic events, and support other school staff members in dealing with the crisis. For example, in serious cases of bullying or cyberbullying, school social workers will typically counsel the victims, providing them with emotional validation and empowering tools to help them manage the negative effects of the bullying. They may also hold counseling sessions with the children who bully their peers, in order to help them address the underlying causes of their problematic behavior.

Connections to Community Resources

For students facing social, financial, familial, and/or behavioral barriers to their academic performance, and who could benefit from connections to community resources, school social workers can provide resource connection and navigation services. Community resources that school social workers may connect students to include off-campus academic support programs, scholarships, family support programs, and low-cost counseling and mental health services outside of school.

Challenges that School Social Workers Face

Some of the primary challenges that school social workers face include being unable to fully resolve the problems they encounter,

working within a system that often lacks adequate resources, and shouldering the emotional burdens of students and their families.

“One of the most challenging aspects of being a school social worker is knowing that there are students who are experiencing tremendous difficulty that I may never reach for one reason or another,” noted Ms. Peloquin, “There are times where there is a lot to accomplish in the way of academic planning for students, while concurrently, there are students that need to be seen because they are in crisis or experiencing personal difficulty. [...] I have just over 200 students, which is below the ideal student to counselor ratio of 1/250. In that way, we are so fortunate to have a caseload that is manageable, where many school social workers have far higher numbers.”

Ms. Bhakti explained how the challenges of adequately serving large student populations has even motivated some school districts to work with external social service agencies to ease the burden that their school-based school social workers and counselors face. “The Department of Education (DOE) generally hires only one School Social Worker per school- and many times, a School Social Worker’s hours/time will be split between two different schools” she explained, “Such a large population of young people are served by the DOE and so many mental health and social issues present themselves within this population, that many Social Service agencies receive grants and/or get approval

to be DOE vendors in order to host social workers at schools to provide counseling and additional supports to the School Based Support Team (SBST).”

Even as a school social worker at a smaller, specialized school, Ms. Bhakti noted the continual need to prioritize and move at a fast pace while not sacrificing quality of counseling or care. “[The] school I work at currently is very fast paced, and crisis-driven,” she said, “[G]iven the high levels of need of the majority of the students, it is a position that can easily lead to burn out if self-care is not adamantly practiced regularly and effectively.”

In academic environments with high student need and low staff numbers, it may be easy for school social workers to feel overwhelmed. In her interview with OnlineMSWPrograms.com, Ms. Peloquin advised school social workers to stay present and attentive to make the most of the time they do have with each of the students they counsel. “In having a large number of students with a limited amount of time to build strong relationships, I focus on being very present with the time we do have. I place value on learning what their lives are like both in and out of school. I let them know that I can hear anything and focus on what is important to them,” she noted.

Working with vulnerable, underserved, and at times even abused children and adolescents can also prove emotionally

challenging. “It’s difficult to find out that a child has been abused or neglected. It always feels profoundly unfair and unfortunate, even when I know that the parents have the best of intentions,” Mr. Duffy told OnlineMSWPrograms.com, “I find some comfort in reminding myself of the importance and value of reporting abuse, but it’s just always very sad.”

Why People Become School Social Workers

The reasons why school social work can be demanding and difficult—that is, investment in children’s well-being and the pain of seeing some of their needs unaddressed due to inadequate time, staffing, and other resources—also directly connect to why school social work can be an incredibly rewarding field. The relationships that school social workers forge with their students and the lasting impact they can have on the lives of their clients during their formative years can be deeply gratifying and energizing.

Witnessing the concrete and incredibly important impact of one’s work is a notable reward of school social work. “I have also found safety planning to be a rewarding experience. Giving students a plan to keep themselves safe when things get dangerous at home is unnerving for me, but the students seem to experience genuine relief once the plan is in place,” Mr. Duffy explained to OnlineMSWPrograms.com. “It’s also just super

rewarding to be surrounded by awesome children all day!” he added, “A short conversation with a student can fill your cup for the rest of the day.”

Depending on the specific setting in which they work, school social workers may have the opportunity to be deeply influential in the lives of their students. In her interview with OnlineMSWPrograms.com, Ms. Bhakti described how working at a small, specialized school serving underprivileged youth allowed her to witness and actively participate in their progress towards their academic and personal goals. “After working in an outpatient mental health clinic with adolescents, which did have its benefits and I did enjoy, I wanted to really get to know the children whom I was trying to help,” she told OnlineMSWPrograms.com, “I realized that seeing a child five days a week for hours within each day, and within one of their most natural social environments, is much more telling of their strengths and targeted areas for growth, as opposed to what can be observed once a week, within 45 minutes in an office setting.”

Working with youth who display resilience, determination, and investment in their development despite their struggles can also be deeply fulfilling. “Adolescence can be amazing and exciting, as well as confusing, difficult and painful. I feel very fortunate to be able to support students during this time in their lives,” Ms. Peloquin said, “The most rewarding experiences that I

have had working at Notre Dame have been the relationships that I have been able to build with students.”

“I do feel like I am making a difference in the lives of young people who are at a developmental time filled with inner chaos and conflict- but also a time when their true spirits and identities are beginning to shine,” said Ms. Bhakti, “[T]hey are beginning to search for meaning in their lives and come into themselves. It is great work!”

How to Become a School Social Worker

The requirements to become a school social worker vary by state. To become a school social worker, candidates must obtain authorization to practice from their state’s board of education, teacher credentialing commission, or education department by earning a state-specific school social work credential. Prospective school social workers should research the specific educational, internship, and examination requirements their state has for individuals seeking authorization to practice school social work.

In general, individuals who are interested in becoming school social workers must complete a CSWE-accredited MSW program in a field that is relevant to school social work. School social work typically has a strong clinical component, as school social workers often counsel students and their families; thus an MSW program with a concentration in clinical social work or an

advanced generalist program with strong clinical classes may be ideal. Some schools of social work offer concentrations or sub concentrations in school social work, and thus prospective students should research accredited MSW programs carefully to ensure that the program they choose will help them meet their goal of becoming a school social worker.

Social work students should note that many states require school social workers to complete certain key classes in order to earn their credential to practice in schools. Mr. Duffy outlined for OnlineMSWPrograms.com the specific courses that he took in order to earn his Pupil Personnel Services Credential (California's credential for school social workers) (*Note: Academic requirements for school social worker certification can change at any time.*)

“I’m writing below the list of courses that I was required to take to earn the PPSC (Pupil Personnel Services Credential), which is an essential credential for becoming a school social worker [in California].

1. Social Work Practice in School Settings
2. Social Work and Education Policy
3. Introductory Practicum
4. Field Seminar
5. Field Placement (2nd year in a school setting)

In addition to the classes required to get the PPSC, I chose to take Family Therapy, Social Work with Latinos, and Infant Development to supplement my knowledge going into work with younger kids,” he explained.

[Disclaimer: Certification requirements can change at any time and vary by state; therefore, the course recommendations in this section should be used for example purposes only. Students should check with their state’s board of education or teacher credentialing commission for the most up-to-date requirements.]

Ms. Bhakti suggested a number of other course topics that would be helpful for prospective school social workers. “I would recommend that Social Work students interested in school social work take courses in child and adolescent development, child abuse, substance abuse, school social work, and clinical seminars,” she said.

Individuals who wish to practice school social work should also actively seek field practicum experiences in school settings. “My recommendation for students who are interested in school social work is to gain direct experience working in a school through an internship (field placement) or employment,” Ms. Peloquin advised. She also recommended that students not wait until they complete their graduate program to earn the necessary credential to practice in schools. “In order to work as a school worker in a public school, one must have a Pupil Personnel

Services Credential (PPSC),” she said, “Although there are post-masters PPSC programs, from what I understand, it is more convenient to achieve this credential while going through your masters program.”

Ms. Bhakti advises social work students to actively seek as much information as they can about school social work as a field. “If students are unable to get a field placement within a school, I suggest they research Behavioral Intervention Plans, Functional Behavioral Assessments, and Individualized Education Plans. If students know teachers or other school personnel I would suggest they reach out to those professionals,” she told OnlineMSWPrograms.com, “I also recommend that students join a School Social Work Association as a student member and see if they can interview or speak with a school social worker at a local school.”

As with any demanding yet rewarding profession, becoming a school social worker requires thorough planning, an honest evaluation of one’s professional strengths and motivations, and a significant investment of time. However, for some individuals, the opportunity to support, guide, and empower youth during some of the most challenging and impactful years of their life can make the effort and constant demands of the profession worthwhile.

Note: For more information on how to become a school social worker, please see our [How to Become a School Social Worker](#) article.

About the Author: Kaitlin Louie is a content writer and editor who writes articles for OnlineMSWPrograms.com. She received her bachelor's and master's degrees in English from Stanford University, and aspires to be an author of fiction and creative non-fiction.

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