

The Roles of Social Workers at School

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School social workers practice in the most vulnerable parts of the educational process, and so their roles can be as complex as the worlds they deal with. Practice rests on a wide range of skills that are defined and take shape through interactive teamwork. School social workers may work one-on-one with teachers, families, and children to address individual situations and needs. They become part of joint efforts to make schools safe for everyone. In preserving the dignity and respect due any one person, the school needs to become a community of belonging and respect.

When the school decides to implement a zero-tolerance policy, social workers are available to consult with teachers on implementation and to work with victims and perpetrators of harassment. They may help develop a crisis plan for the school with the principal, teachers, representatives, and the school nurse. They may work with that crisis team through a disturbing and violent incident, working in different ways with individual pupils and teachers experiencing crisis and with the broader school population. They may develop violence prevention programs in high schools experiencing confrontations between students.

The basic focus of the school social worker is the constellation of teacher, parent, and child. The social worker must be able to relate to and work with all aspects of the child's situation, but the basic skill underlying all of this is assessment, a systematic way of understanding and communicating what is happening and what is possible. Building on assessment, the social worker develops a plan to assist the total constellation—teacher and students in the classroom, parents, and others—to work together to support the child in successfully completing the developmental steps that lie ahead.

The school social worker's role is multifaceted. There is assessment and consultation within the school team. There is direct work with children and parents individually and in groups. There is program and policy development. In 1989 a group of nineteen nationally recognized experts in school social work was asked to develop a list of the tasks that entry-level school social workers perform in their day-to-day professional roles. The result was a list of 104 tasks, evidence of the complexity of school social work. These tasks fell along five job dimensions:

1. Relationships with and services to children and families
2. Relationships with and services to teachers and school staff
3. Services to other school personnel
4. Community services
5. Administrative and professional tasks (Nelson, 1990)

Further research on these roles, tasks, and skills found four areas of school social work to be both very important and frequently addressed:

1. Consultation with others in the school system and the teamwork relationships that make consultation possible
2. Assessment applied to a variety of different roles in direct service, in consultation, and in program development
3. Direct work with children and parents in individual, group, and family modalities
4. Assistance with program development in schools (Constable & et al., 1999).

A key skill, the foundation of all other areas, is assessment. Assessment is a systematic way of understanding what is taking place in relationships in the classroom, within the family, and between the family and the school. The social worker looks for units of attention—places where intervention will be most effective. Needs assessment, a broader process, provides a basis for program development and policy formation in a school. It is often a more formal process that utilizes many of the tools of research and is geared toward the development of programs and policies that meet the needs of children in school.

References

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