

The Role and Function of the School Social Worker

Schools provide a formative experience for children. Schools can be a haven or a horrible and dreaded place, depending on the child's experiences. The images of crayons, brightly painted halls, and bulletin boards can create joy or fear for a child. Peer interactions with other students can be a source of pleasure or alienation. Many children cannot respond effectively to the school environment because of the stress in their home and family lives. The school environment has traditionally required students to conform, and those who could not meet a school's expectations usually dropped out. However, federal and state laws now require school districts to conform to the needs of students and provide a setting in which all children can be educated.

This book focuses on the multifaceted role of the school social worker and the ways school social workers can utilize their knowledge, skills, and values to improve the lives of students. The book attempts to help the reader understand how to incorporate social work skills into the public school system on an individual, group, and community level. It focuses on the basics of being a school social worker, including building relationships, assessment, working with multidisciplinary teams, and helping children and adolescents address the difficulties that keep them from performing well in school. The book addresses issues at each developmental level of a child's public school life from preschool through transitioning out of high school.

Many of the topics in the book are illustrated by case examples,

although names and identifying information have been changed to maintain confidentiality. The case examples illustrate actual situations that school social workers address. Some of the examples explain how the social worker was able to help the child. Others reflect the social worker's inability to intervene successfully.

School districts employ social workers to address the needs of at-risk and special needs students. The precise social work role in connection with these students varies from school to school and from school district to school district. Some school districts employ school social workers to serve multiple schools or to work with a single broad population. Other districts assign the social worker to a single school or a narrow population. Many school districts expect social workers to function as members of crisis teams. The school social worker spends most of his or her time helping children with emotional and behavioral disorders. Accordingly, many school districts employ social workers in the special education department, where they are limited to working with special education students. This diversity in the social worker's roles creates a wide variety of functions and responsibilities for school social workers.

BASIC TASKS

In spite of the social worker's many roles and responsibilities, four basic tasks have been identified as common to all school social workers. These are:

- *Consultation* with others in the school system as a member of a team.
- *Assessment* applied to a variety of different roles in direct service, consultation, and program development.
- *Direct intervention* with children and parents in individual, group, and family modalities.
- Assistance with *program development* (Constable, Kuzmickaite, Harrison, & Volkmann, 1999).

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) has identified important guidelines for the delivery of social work services in schools, including standards for practice, professional preparation and development, and administrative structure and support. These guidelines are set forth in the NASW Standards for School Social Work Services, which were adopted in 1978 and revised in 1992 and again in 2002 (NASW, 2002). School social workers should be aware

that they may be held accountable under these standards whether they are members of NASW or not. For example, legal actions may use these standards as a basic measure of competence. School social workers should review and apply these standards, which are set forth in Appendix 1.1.

INTERDISCIPLINARY TEAMS

Social workers often serve as members of interdisciplinary teams to assist in placement, review, and dismissal of students with special needs. As set forth in Standard 9 of the NASW Standards for School Social Work Services, “school social workers shall work collaboratively to mobilize the resources of local education agencies and communities to meet the needs of students and families” (NASW, 2002). Team members may include teachers, counselors, school psychologists, and diagnosticians. School social workers must understand how to work effectively as a member of the interdisciplinary team and how to add to the work of the team. “The unique contribution of the school social worker to the interdisciplinary team is to bring home, school, and community perspectives to the interdisciplinary process” (NASW, 2002, Standard 9). Membership in interdisciplinary teams requires (1) interdependence, (2) the ability to perform newly created professional activities and take on new tasks as necessary, (3) flexibility, (4) collective ownership of goals, and (5) reflection on processes (Bronstein, 2003).

School districts employ an array of professionals who strive to welcome and educate children. The professionals who spend time with children at school are teachers, administrators, counselors, nurses, school social workers, psychologists, diagnosticians, vocational counselors or transition specialists, teachers’ aides, speech therapists, and physical therapists.

Teachers have the primary responsibility for educating children. Sometimes students will be placed in special education classes with teachers who have training to assist with both behavioral and educational modifications. Most special education teachers are assisted by a teacher’s aide. Teachers must have at least a bachelor’s degree and certification from the state in which they teach.

Administrators manage the day-to-day activities in schools and provide leadership by setting goals, establishing policies and procedures, budgeting, determining curriculum, training teachers and other staff, and interacting with the public. They are responsible for the quality of the school district’s educational systems. They are ultimately responsible for curriculum and discipline. They hire and fire the teachers and

other staff. Most school administrators are former teachers. However, a teacher must obtain additional education and certification to become an administrator. The administrator in an individual school is usually a principal. In some schools, the principal is assisted by one or more assistant principals.

School counselors provide counseling and guidance for students. They assist students with academic and personal problems to help them succeed in school. Many middle and high school counselors also help students plan their schedule of classes. Counselors for students in the higher grades help students plan for careers and higher education.

School nurses provide health care in the school to further children's success in the classroom. The nurse serves as a bridge between health care in the community and the school. Nurses are involved in developing individualized health plans (IHPs) and individualized education plans (IEPs). The variety of nursing tasks in a school ranges from dispensing prescription medications to teaching about the physical changes that take place during puberty. School nurses check children who are ill and injured and determine when a child needs to be sent home because of an illness or injury. Nurses also help report child abuse and neglect. Most school nurses are registered nurses.

School psychologists and diagnosticians help screen children to determine if they have learning or psychological problems. Their reports assure that children are provided with the programs and adjustments that will ensure success at school. These programs range from gifted and talented programs to special education programs. School psychologists must have a master's degree in psychology. School diagnosticians are an emerging profession. Certification for this position usually requires teaching experience and a master's degree.

Speech therapists diagnose and treat speech, voice, and language disorders. Most states require a master's degree in speech-language pathology for licensing.

Physical therapists help children with severe physical problems remain comfortable at school.

Vocational or transition specialists help students plan for effective careers. They frequently provide follow-up services for those students with special needs after they leave the public schools.

School social workers assist children so they can be successful in school. The goal of school social work should be to give all children the opportunity and resources to help them succeed academically and socially in a safe and healthy school environment. Social work in a public school setting plays a vital role in developing students and linking them to the resources and support necessary to maximize their potential in the educational process (O'Donnell, 2000). Most states require a

master's degree in social work in order to practice as a school social worker. School social work is one of the most rewarding and interesting areas of social work practice. School social workers can have a life-changing impact on their young clients in a way that those who work with adults rarely experience.

The school social worker and the other professionals described above form an interdisciplinary team that works together on behalf of children and adolescents. This book addresses the experiences of children as they meet with either success and encouragement or failure and discouragement in school.

MULTIFACETED ROLES OF A SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKER

The main goal of school social work is to enable students to function and learn in the school environment. School social workers practice in a secondary setting—the primary purpose of schools is to educate students, not to provide social services. The school social work practitioner will often be the only social worker in a school and sometimes in an entire school district. Therefore, autonomous school social work practice requires skills for all levels of practice—micro, mezzo, and macro. School social workers work primarily with individual students. However, they also develop and facilitate groups for students and parents. Effective school social work practice consists of collaborating, consulting, developing behavior plans, and training others to work with difficult children in the context of a child's daily school experience (Frey & George-Nichols, 2003). School social workers are involved in training and resource-building activities such as staff development, community education, and grant writing.

School social workers assist interdisciplinary teams by providing information from a thorough assessment of students that usually includes information from collateral sources. A treatment team that utilizes experts in testing, diagnosis, and referral is the most comprehensive way to assist needy children and their families. School social workers also provide direct treatment to students, so the social worker reports to team members about the progress students make during counseling.

Some school districts employ social workers as part of crisis intervention teams to assist with severe mental health issues. These school social workers work across all age groups from prekindergarten through 12th grade. Their training and experience in serving a whole system utilizing the ecological systems perspective allows them to add a

unique perspective to an intervention team. School social workers are in a position to orchestrate and support a unified and comprehensive intervention plan for children (Frey & George-Nichols, 2003). Members of school crisis teams often include a psychologist, social worker, school nurse, and, sometimes, a school police officer. The goal of these crisis intervention teams is to intervene when there are serious problems such as suicide threats, violence, abuse, severe behavior problems, deaths of students or teachers, and other school crisis situations. Assistance from social workers is often required during a crisis and afterward to provide grief counseling and debriefing or to assist affected families by referral to an outside agency.

SKILLS NECESSARY TO PRACTICE AS A SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKER

School social workers perform on many levels, including work with individual students and their parents, groups of students, teachers, and community agencies. The following provides a brief overview of the many types of skills a school social worker must possess.

Assessment

The ability properly to assess and treat a student is at the core of providing adequate direct services. School social workers must “possess skills in systematic assessment and investigation” (NASW, 2002, Standard 21) and “conduct assessments of student needs that are individualized and provide information that is directly useful for designing interventions that address behaviors of concern” (NASW, 2002, Standard 12). One of the school social worker’s most valuable roles is to educate members of the school district and community about the value of early assessment, intervention, and treatment by qualified mental health professionals (Maynard-Moody, 1994).

School social workers contribute an essential dimension to the assessment of students through the use of the ecological perspective, which necessitates consideration of the child’s family and neighborhood (Radin, 1992; NASW, 2002, Standard 12). Accordingly, they must “incorporate assessments in developing and implementing intervention and evaluation plans that enhance students’ abilities to benefit from educational experiences” (NASW, 2002, Standard 13). The other aspect of assessment that is unique to the social work profession is the use of the strengths perspective (NASW, 2002, Standard 5). As Saleebey (1997) has indicated, practicing from the strengths perspec-

tive means that “*Everything* you do as a social worker will be predicated, in some way, on helping to discover and embellish, explore and exploit clients’ strengths and resources in the service of assisting them to achieve their goals, realize their dreams, and shed the irons of their own inhibitions and misgivings” (p. 3).

Direct Practice

School social workers should have practice skills for working with individuals, groups, and communities.

Counseling Individuals

Mental health problems are present at all grade levels in the public school system. School social workers can help students with emotional and behavioral problems adjust to the school environment and learn to manage their own behaviors. They also “promote collaboration among community health and mental health services providers and facilitate student access to these services” (NASW, 2002, Standard 26). In addition, school social workers assist parents and teachers in learning to cope with and manage a child’s emotional and behavioral problems.

Case Example

Jim, a 10-year-old fourth grader, acted out constantly at school. He tore up books and his assignments. He refused to do schoolwork and would often yell at his teacher. When the school first began to deal with his misbehavior, the teacher or assistant principal would call home and report it. On one occasion, the mother’s live-in boyfriend came to the school to pick Jim up in response to such a report. Upon arriving at school, the boyfriend threw Jim against a wall in front of the teacher, social worker, and counselor. It became obvious that calling the home was not a solution. After Jim spent time with the school social worker, it was determined that Jim was being hit, threatened, and locked in his room for several hours at a time by his mother’s boyfriend. Jim was frightened and depressed, but these emotions were expressed as anger, which is often the way children deal with depression and frustration. Jim had no control over his environment at home. The school began to assist in solving Jim’s problems through the use of behavior management plans and a level system, which helped Jim regulate his misbehavior and rewarded his positive behaviors. With counseling provided by the school social worker, Jim was able to

express his anger and learn some healthy outlets for his frustration. The school social worker referred the family to child protective services (CPS), which also worked with the mother and her boyfriend.

Home Visits

School social workers visit the homes of students for various reasons. Some home visits are made to assess the reasons for student misbehavior or absences. When students have prolonged absences, it is the school social worker who visits the home to assess the situation and give information back to the school district. Sometimes the school social worker makes an initial home visit in order to discuss a child's school difficulties when school officials have been unable to contact parents by phone. Social workers also visit student homes to involve the parents in activities that can reinforce programs and behavior management plans that the school has put into place.

Some districts ask school social workers to provide outside intervention in the home, such as teaching parents how to make accommodations for attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism, and special needs. School social workers help implement in-home training for special education students and provide parents with information that will assist them in parenting children with special needs. Program evaluation studies and theoretical and empirical research have indicated that positive intervention outcomes are related to factors other than child-centered activities. Family-centered services are intended to help the family maintain the child in the home and prevent out-of-home placement (Sabatino, 2001). In-home activities and parental involvement can help students succeed in school.

Case Example

Bob, age 15, was in ninth grade at a public high school. His mother would try to bring him to school, usually unsuccessfully. The mother felt desperate because, on many occasions, she could not get him out of bed. On the days that he got ready and went to school, his mother would drop him off at the front door of the building, whereupon he would enter the building, go out the back door, and leave the school grounds as quickly as possible. The school social worker determined that his behavior resulted from a school phobia. To get Bob to school, the school social worker and the assistant principal went to his home one morning, woke him up, and waited for him to get ready. They then took him to school.

The social worker and Bob determined that he could handle school if he didn't have to face people when he first came in the building. He was told that while he was in the building, he was allowed to go to the social worker's office and relax whenever he felt uncomfortable. It was unnecessary for the social worker and assistant principal to bring Bob to school after the initial visit. The school social worker provided counseling and support whenever Bob came to her office. The counseling involved cognitive-behavioral therapy and stress relief, which included teaching him deep breathing and visual imagery with which he could relax when he felt tense, and giving him an escape to the social worker's office. Over time, this intervention was successful, and Bob attended school on a regular basis.

Group Work

Many students receive counseling at school through their membership in groups. Such groups meet the needs of diverse populations and are effective tools in reaching many students at once. Group work in schools includes the three major models of group work: remedial, reciprocal, and social-goals. The remedial model provides group therapy geared toward changing dysfunctional behavior. The reciprocal model focuses on achieving mutual aid or support through group work such as that practiced by Alcoholics Anonymous [Alateen]. The social-goals model addresses social consciousness or responsibility through groups such as social skills and anger management groups (Whitaker, 1980).

Some of the main types of groups with which social workers assist focus on social skills, support for new students, anger management, and grief and/or support related to parental separation. In addition, recreational groups provide field trips and teach new skills. Social workers also train students in group work and counseling skills so they can help their peers.

School social workers assist parents through group work as well. Teaching parenting skills and educating parents on how to accommodate students with specific disabilities are common tasks for school social workers. They also work with transition specialists to help students and their parents prepare to leave public school when the students turn 18 or have completed an equivalency exam for special education students leaving high school. Social workers teach parents about the various community programs and resources and, when necessary, make referrals. Group work in the schools will be discussed more thoroughly in Chapter 9.

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Community Mental Health

Social workers can be the link between community programs and the schools. They should promote student health and mental health and facilitate student access to community health and mental health services (NASW, 2002, Standard 26). “Wraparound programs” involve agencies outside the school system in assisting with delivery of services to needy children and their families. Research indicates that these services should be developed and approved by a community-based interdisciplinary services team that will not deny services to any youngster regardless of the severity of his or her disability. The school social worker must be the link between the school and any outside source of support.

Court Referrals

Most states have mandatory school attendance laws. Many school districts require the school social worker to refer students who have excessive absences to a truancy court. When a student has extended or excessive absences, the school social worker should meet with the student and his or her parents to determine the cause of the absences. Where the circumstances dictate, the social worker must refer the matter to the appropriate court. Once the court referral is made, the social worker usually has the responsibility of attending court hearings and providing the student’s attendance and school records to the judge. After a student has been referred to court, the school social worker monitors student attendance through daily teacher sign-in sheets. These sign-in sheets are given to the court to verify that the student attended each class period every day.

Advocacy

An important role for the school social worker is that of advocate. As Standard 8 of the NASW Standards for School Social Work Services recognizes, “School social workers shall advocate for students and their families in a variety of situations” (NASW, 2002, Standard 8). Social workers act as advocates for the parents when they help them understand their rights. Often, social workers must seek out parents who are unwilling to become involved with the school system and help them understand that someone in the school supports them. There is a significant group of parents for whom involvement necessitates outreach and recruitment. Many parents are intimidated by the school system.

The school social worker can reach out to them and assure the successful outcome of their interactions with the school (Banchy, 1977).

Mediation

Mediation is a role in which school social workers can serve both their school districts and clients. Standard 15 of the NASW Standards provides that “School social workers shall be trained in and use mediation and conflict-resolution strategies to promote students’ resolution of their nonproductive encounters in the school and community and to promote productive relationships” (NASW, 2002, Standard 15). Mediation involves structured attempts to resolve pupil, parent, and school conflicts without using the formal appeal process, which is very costly (Weiner, 1980). School social workers can be effective neutral mediators to bring about needed change or to find mutually agreeable ways to settle conflicts between parents and schools.

INTERVENTION WITH SPECIAL-NEEDS STUDENTS

School social workers often are required to assist in the implementation and delivery of services to students with special needs. These services may include assessment, early identification, or actual provision of direct services. School social workers in rural communities struggle with the implementation of special programs. Limited resources and cost are two of the major obstacles to the provision of services. Rural school systems face a host of barriers to quality service delivery that urban schools do not. Rural schools usually have less tolerance for diversity, more homogeneous populations, more traditional moral values, and an expectation that the community can take care of its own members (Caudill, 1993). Where areas of need are not being addressed by the local community or education agency, school social workers should work to create services that address these needs. (NASW, 2002, Standard 14).

RESOURCE AND PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

School social workers interact with outside agencies and provide links to community resources for children and families in need. As set forth in Standard 6 of the NASW Standards, “School social workers shall help empower students and their families to gain access to and effectively use formal and informal community resources” (NASW, 2002, Standard 6).

School social workers refer students and families for outside intervention and testing. When students are on probation, the school social worker is the link between the school and the probation officer, and social workers provide information to juvenile court in truancy cases, as noted earlier. Likewise, outside agencies often contact the school social worker for information. For example, ad litem attorneys may turn to the social worker for information about student progress. Social workers in schools also work cooperatively with the school nurse and teachers to assist in referrals for child abuse and neglect.

Case Example

Ralph, age 12, was in seventh grade in a special education classroom. He was referred to the social worker because he was refusing to do his work at school. Ralph told the social worker he hated school.

Ralph's mother was widowed when Ralph's father was killed in an accident. Ralph was only 6 years old at the time. The mother worked two jobs to support the family. Ralph had an older sister whose friends came over after school and ate a lot of the family food supply. The mother would not ask the sister to stop her friends from eating the family's food because she wanted her children to have friends over to her house rather than going out.

Ralph was upset about the lack of food and his sister's activities, but he also did not want to tattle on her. He became suicidal because he felt the situations at home and school were hopeless. The school social worker contacted the mother to see if she would like assistance, such as food stamps or counseling for Ralph, but she was very independent and refused outside help. Ralph continued to regress, began sleeping all day at school, and was unwilling to do his schoolwork.

The social worker again contacted Ralph's mother, whereupon she received the mother's consent for community mental health intervention. The social worker then arranged for a psychologist from the local community mental health center to perform an intake screening on Ralph at school. After the initial screening, the psychologist arranged for a psychiatrist to evaluate Ralph for medications, and Ralph was placed on antidepressants that lifted his mood. Ralph's teacher assisted by giving him special projects that allowed him to make up the work he had missed. The social worker met with Ralph weekly and helped him focus on his strengths and the areas of his life over which he had control, such as his schoolwork and friends. Ralph's schoolwork improved, he ceased being suicidal, and he remained in school.

HELPING SCHOOL PERSONNEL UNDERSTAND THE ROLE OF SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK

It is sometimes difficult for school social workers to gain visibility and to convince district personnel of the validity of their role and skills. To avoid this problem, the social worker should gain visibility and network with school personnel and parents whenever possible. As stated in Standard 3 of the NASW Standards for School Social Work Services, "School social workers shall provide consultation to local education agency personnel, school board members, and community representatives to promote understanding and effective utilization of school social work services" (NASW, 2002, Standard 3). School social workers should join PTA boards, attend school board meetings, offer classes for teachers, and provide macro work within the system to become visible so that people will gain an understanding of the variety of services offered by social workers.

A school social worker is fortunate if he or she is limited to one or two campuses. The social worker then has the opportunity to become familiar with the administration, counseling staff, and teachers. It is much easier to be successful on a campus when there is a relationship of trust established with the staff. Each school campus has a unique culture that is initially difficult to identify and understand. The social worker must show school administrators and teachers the benefits of having a school social worker on their campus.

TRAINING AND EDUCATION NECESSARY FOR SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK

School social workers must know how to build trust and positive relationships with children and how to practice independently.

The Essential Knowledge Base

The school social worker utilizes a generalist perspective. Generalist practice is the use of the problem-solving process to intervene with systems of various sizes, including individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. The problem-solving process is a step-by-step model that includes engaging with the client, assessing problem areas and identifying strengths, creating and carrying out an intervention plan, evaluating the success of that intervention, and terminating the client-practitioner relationship. The generalist operates within a system and person-in-environment framework and recognizes that many

problems require intervention with more than one system (Boyle, Hull, Mather, Smith, & Farley, 2006).

Direct practice skills include:

1. Knowing how to develop and maintain professional/helping relationships.
2. Collecting and assessing information about a problem or situation.
3. Recognizing the client's strengths and abilities.
4. Developing a plan to improve the problem or situation.
5. The use of legitimately recognized and researched interventions.
6. Working within the values and ethics of the profession (Boyle et al., 2006).

Autonomous practice skills are required of school social workers because they often work alone or as the only social worker on an interdisciplinary team. School social workers often have to educate other employees in the education system about their skills and capabilities. They also educate students and their parents about the role and function of school social work in order to receive permission from parents to work with their children. School social workers work independently from other social workers and in non-social service settings where each social worker must determine his or her own work routine and job description.

In order to work alone, a social worker should understand the generalist model to intervene on all levels and all situations with individuals, groups, the community, parents, and school teams. He or she must have a clear understanding of the values and ethics of the profession and have the ability to make decisions for clients that are congruent with social work values, without the opportunity to consult with other social workers. School social workers must also understand limits of practice (O'Donnell, 2000).

Getting Ready to Practice

School social workers do not practice in the traditional agencies that employ social workers, such as social service and child welfare agencies. Therefore, many of the employees in school districts are not familiar with the social worker's role and do not understand what a social worker does. For example, school administrators frequently do not understand how to utilize social workers—particularly when a social

worker may serve an entire district and visit several schools weekly. Accordingly, school social workers should interpret their tasks for local education agency personnel “so that the primary professional activities and competencies of school social workers are maintained” (NASW, 2002, Standard 3). Social workers should meet school administrators on each campus and discuss the role of social work and how their skills meet the job requirements.

Social workers should also coordinate with administrators to help determine where they can meet with students on their campus, since they are required to “maintain adequate safeguards for the privacy and confidentiality of information” (NASW, 2002, Standard 7). It usually is difficult to find private space to do counseling in school buildings. If the need for space is addressed in advance, most administrators will continue to assist the social worker in reserving a space to work that is private and that will allow for confidential information to be shared.

The school social worker should meet counselors, special education teachers, diagnosticians, psychologists, or personnel who work with special-needs students. Social workers should explain social work skills and the role differences between themselves and counselors. Establishing roles early will help fill in gaps in services, reduce future confusion over respective responsibilities, and eliminate any threats of competition that counselors may perceive from social workers.

Knowledge about Mental Illness and Learning Problems

School social workers benefit from having specific knowledge about learning disorders and mental disorders, as described in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV-TR). Many of the high-risk students whom social workers serve have a learning disability or behavior disorder. Some of the more common disorders seen in the schools are childhood depression, autism, bipolar disorder, conduct disorder, severe behavior problems, eating disorders, and substance abuse. Many children have a dual diagnosis of depression or substance abuse along with another disorder. These children come to school taking five or six different medications. The school day is predictable for children who are on a great deal of medication. They sleep, wake up feeling hostile, refuse to work, act exhausted, try to complete some schoolwork, and usually return to sleep.

Adolescents with learning disabilities are at increased risk to do poorly in school and become potential dropouts. Likewise, a learning disability puts students at risk because they have demonstrated educa-

tional achievement below that of their peers. They have twice as great a risk of suffering emotional distress than their peers, and, if female, they are twice as likely to attempt suicide and be involved with peer violence (Constable, McDonald, & Flynn, 2002).

Relationship-Building Skills

Skills in building positive relationships are essential for school social workers, whose ethical principles recognize the central importance of human relationships (NASW, 2002). Children need to build a connection before they will let the social worker help them. Social workers should build strong relationships with children through the use of empathy, genuineness, and positive regard, skills identified by humanistic psychologists as essential for a therapeutic relationship. Once the relationship of trust is developed, the social worker can become the vehicle for change. Social workers need to help children feel valued and accepted and need to be a positive motivator, encouraging children to keep trying in spite of adverse situations.

Knowledge about Child Development and Childhood Risk and Resilience

Social workers should be knowledgeable about developmental and biological factors that affect students' ability to function effectively in school (NASW, 2002, Standard 18). School social workers also need to be aware of childhood developmental risk and resilience factors (Davies, 2004). They should further be aware of the warning signs of suicide and signs of abuse and neglect, grief, and trauma. If these symptoms are not recognized by a knowledgeable practitioner, the child may be misdiagnosed and not treated appropriately.

Knowledge about Specific Needs in Individual School Districts

School social workers assess the needs in the school district and provide inservice training to teachers and school administrators that addresses the goals and mission of the educational institution (NASW, 2002, Standard 10). This training may include instruction on how to deal with mental health issues and students with special needs.

Case Example

A 16-year-old high school junior at a large high school (over 2,000 students) had made a suicide plan. She gave away prized possessions and told each of her seven teachers goodbye at the end of class. She knew her parents and sister would be gone on that particular evening, so when they all left, she wrote a note and went into the garage and hung herself. On Monday when school personnel discovered the suicide, they began to talk about the last time they had seen her. The teachers had been told goodbye but did not think about the significance and impact of that message until they realized that each teacher had been told the same thing. The young woman had given important personal items—a bracelet and a teddy bear—to a couple of her friends. The school social worker was called to help deal with the aftermath of the suicide and to check on other students to see if they had any suicide pacts. When the victim's behavior prior to the suicide was discovered, it surprised the social worker and counseling staff to learn that no one had recognized any of the classic warning signs of suicide. The school social worker and a school psychologist put together a class that described the classic warning signs of suicide and offered it to teachers as part of professional development on an ongoing basis for several years.

THE LEGAL MANDATE FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION AND OTHER LAWS AFFECTING SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS

Social Workers and the Laws Governing Services to Disabled Students

School social workers assist students who are receiving special education services. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, Public Law No. 101-476) is a federal law that has had a strong impact on the role of the school social worker and other educators as they provide special education services. IDEA ensures the rights of students with disabilities to a free public education that meets their unique needs. As with other current and proposed policies and laws, it is necessary for school social workers to understand this law in order to do their jobs effectively (NASW, 2002, Standard 22). The social worker must find ways to assist teachers and administrators to meet their obligations toward students with and without disabilities. The social worker must find ways to translate social work skills and

values and social work problem-solving approaches into educational terms (Haddad, 1980).

With an adequate knowledge of the requirements of the law, the school social worker has unlimited possibilities to expand the social work role by assisting other educators, students, and parents to understand their rights and responsibilities under the law. Following are a list of suggestions that can help school social workers who are assigned to work in special education expand and clarify their role.

1. Provide inservice training to educators (regular and special education teachers and administrators) to help them understand social work ideas about individual differences and the philosophy that each situation is unique.
2. Train special educators about how to utilize school social workers.
3. Help regular education teachers learn how to set goals that are matched with students' real abilities. This involves learning about different types of student problems and the goals that would be most beneficial to student growth.
4. Teach small-group skills to teachers.
5. Help teachers develop a peer consultation system.
6. Help acquire money and information for new materials (grant writing).
7. Seek positions on curriculum committees and stress the importance of a curriculum that allows for individual differences.
8. Become a strong advocate for students and parents. Help inform parents about their rights.
9. Teach parents about the IEP and its benefits.
10. Seek leadership positions in schools and unions.
11. Teach educators how to manage the stress that accompanies their jobs.
12. Help mediate differences between special and regular education and serve as a liaison between the two.
13. Provide public relations for the school by informing community agencies about the services that are being provided to students with disabilities.
14. Reinforce the idea of parent-teacher contacts in both regular and special education.
15. Train regular educators about the IEP and how to incorporate school social work services into the plan for problem students.
16. Work within the system to facilitate placement of students with disabilities. Make sure adequate testing is done.

17. Make sure that regular educators who have disabled students in their classrooms understand their conditions and how to deal with them.
18. Work with state vocational rehabilitation programs to be sure disabled students are adequately transitioned after completing public school (Haddad, 1980).

Due Process

The rights of due process guaranteed by federal laws for the disabled present several possibilities for school social workers. If the school social worker is the liaison between the school and home, he or she can assume responsibility for informing parents of their due process rights. Due process has brought changes that are entirely consistent with general social work principles: rejection of labels for children, promotion of self-determination for students and parents, an increase in educational alternatives, and fairer decision-making processes (Banchy, 1977).

Work with Families in Relation to Special Education Law

The school social worker can assist parents through the IEP process by helping them understand how to become effective members of school IEP teams. Often, the social worker can help best in the creation and implementation of the IEP by gathering information on the child in question. The social worker's assessment should have an ecological perspective and should focus on the student, as well as his or her interactions in the school environment, at home, and in the community (NASW, 2002, Standard 12). Much of this information can be obtained from parents, but parents will be much more cooperative when they understand the social worker's purpose for obtaining the information. The school social worker should obtain specific information about the factors that are interfering with the education and adjustment of the pupil. This information is obtained through observation of the pupil and through interviews with various individuals who know him or her. The social worker should always consult teachers regarding the pupil's behavior and academic progress, taking into consideration the classroom rules and the teacher's expectation of the pupil. When interviewing parents, the school social worker must give consideration to their opinions regarding the pupil's behavior in the home, classroom, and community, as well as their attitude toward academic achievement (Parham, 1979).

Social Work Roles in Special Education

Social workers serve many functions when they work in special education. They assist in placing students in special education programs; serve as members of IEP teams; make classroom behavior observations; and interview students, parents, and educators to complete assessments and social histories in order to provide information that will be used in placement of students. Once students are placed, the social worker may help implement any therapeutic or social skills goals prescribed in IEPs.

Meeting IEP goals requires knowledge about special education law and how to work with students with a specific diagnosis. Social workers must be familiar with methods of outcome measurement and evidence-based practice to illustrate how the social work intervention assists students in meeting prescribed goals. "Evidence-based practice is defined as the planned use of empirically supported assessment and intervention methods combined with the judicious use of monitoring and evaluation strategies for the purpose of improving the psychosocial well-being of clients" (O'Hare, 2005, p. 6). School social workers must be able to verify that the intervention they choose and implement meets the student's needs and helps promote positive change.

Federal mandates such as the 1997 amendments to the IDEA have brought special attention to the need to work with disabled students. Rural and poor school districts may not have programs in place but are still required to meet the objectives of these federal laws. The requirements of these laws are:

1. To provide assistance to states in developing early intervention services for infants and toddlers with disabilities and their families. This assures a free appropriate public education to all children and youth with disabilities.
2. To assure that the rights of children and youth with disabilities from birth to age 21, as well as their families, are protected.
3. To help states and localities provide for early intervention services and the education of all children with disabilities.
4. To assess and assure the effectiveness of efforts to provide early intervention services and educate children with disabilities (Atkins-Burnett, 2004).

The family-centered early-intervention practice ideas first introduced in 1986 remain part of the new amendments of IDEA. These require early assessment of both the strengths and needs of the children and their families and the specification of goals for both.

In addition to assessment and intervention with the child, a statement about the family resources, priorities, concerns, and expected outcomes is part of each individualized family service plan (IFSP) (Sabatino, 2001). School social workers often assist in assessments, treatment plans, and linkages to resources (NASW, 2002, Standards 12, 13, and 26). They may screen the child in the home, provide community referrals, and help set up a community network to identify and serve these special-needs children. They can also assist teachers and parents in early identification through inservice training and parent education.

LEGISLATION THAT AFFECTS THE ROLE OF SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS

The federal legislation commonly referred to as “No Child Left Behind” authorizes federal funds to be used for prekindergarten programs and additional paraprofessionals in the classroom. No Child Left Behind is based on (1) emphasis on proven teaching methods, (2) stronger accountability focused on results, (3) increased flexibility and local control, and (4) more options for parents. As a result of this law, school districts are adding new prekindergarten programs. School social workers should work with district administrators to be part of the assessment team that identifies at-risk youth for these prekindergarten programs.

All of the foregoing federal mandates require schools to identify and serve children with special needs at birth. States must ensure that all children with disabilities who are in need of special education and related services, regardless of severity of disability, be identified, located, and evaluated. Children who are eligible for services must be offered appropriate educational and related services (Atkins-Burnett, 2004).

ETHICAL DILEMMAS

The school social worker, who must rely on NASW’s *Code of Ethics* as a guide to ethical decision making (NASW, 2002, Standard 1), experiences ethical dilemmas in maintaining social work values in a non-social work setting. Sometimes the ethical dilemma may be caused by lack of funding—school social workers are told not to recommend outside services to parents because school districts may have to pay for them. It also is difficult for social workers in the school system to confine their work to helping students achieve in school; often circum-

stances away from the school environment create the problem, and yet the social worker is restricted to working with the child in the school environment. Ethical dilemmas may also arise when a social worker faces other non-social work professionals who do not understand confidentiality. In such situations, social workers should inform students, families, and other professionals of the confidentiality limitations and requirements when services are initiated.

Since supervision of school social work programs should be provided by credentialed and experienced social workers with masters' degrees in the field (NASW, 2002, Standard 35), some ethical dilemmas arise from supervision by non-social work professionals. School social workers often are supervised by educators, who focus on education and protecting the school district, while social workers focus on the client. The chapters that follow will deal with many of these issues in more detail.

CONCLUSION

The role and function of the school social worker vary among school districts. School social workers are generalist practitioners who must have skills to work with individuals, groups, families, and communities. Each school campus has a unique culture that makes it necessary for school social workers to understand diversity and how to work with unique situations. School social workers must have the ability to work with other professionals in the school district and to connect children and families to community resources. Social workers utilize their professional knowledge and skills to help children who are at risk, who are having difficulties, or who are disabled succeed in school.

DISCUSSION TOPICS

1. How does the role of the school social worker differ from the roles of any of the other school professionals?
2. Which school social work roles seem most interesting?
3. Can you think of ways to create visibility in schools so that communities and schools will understand the necessity of having a school social worker?
4. Discuss what learning disabilities and DSM-IV-TR disorders may be prevalent among students in schools.

5. Discuss developmental theories and what the school social worker may need to know about them.
6. What laws other than those discussed in the chapter might govern school social work?
7. Do you know of any other laws that have affected the schools?
8. Role play: You are a new school social worker. How would you introduce yourself and your abilities to your principal?

APPENDIX 1.1. NASW Standards for School Social Work Services*
Approved by the NASW Board of Directors, June 2002

Definitions

The following terms are defined for purposes of this document.

Case management—Organizing, coordinating, and sustaining activities and services designed to optimize the functioning of students and/or families.

Competence—The synthesis of professional behaviors that integrate knowledge, skills, and activities in the performance of the tasks of school social work. Competence in school social work includes all relevant educational and experiential requirements, demonstrated ability through meeting licensing and certification requirements, and the ability to carry out work assignments and achieve goals while adhering to the values and the code of ethics of the profession.

Certified school social work specialist—A social worker meeting the requirements for a School Social Work Specialist certification issued by the National Association of Social Workers.

Credentialed or licensed school social worker—A social worker meeting the requirements for a school social worker as established by the state board of education or other state entity that licenses or certifies educational personnel, or professional social workers.

Cultural competence—Congruent behaviors, attitudes, and skills enabling an individual to work effectively in cross-cultural situations.

Ecological perspective—The perspective of the interaction of the child and family and their environment. Important concepts include adaptation, transactions, goodness of fit between the students and their educational environments, reciprocity, and mutuality.

Family—The parent(s), guardian, custodian, or other person acting in loco parentis of a child.

Functional behavioral assessment—An approach to assessment that enhances understanding of the purpose and effect of the behavior(s) of concern and provides information that is useful in the development of effective interventions.

Human services—Programs and activities designed to enhance people's development and well-being. Basic human services include personal social services, health, education, housing, income, and justice and public safety.

Local education agency—The local public agency responsible for operating the educational program. In some states, responsibility for provision of special education

*The complete text of the *NASW Standards for School Social Work Services* is available on request from NASW or at www.socialworkers.org. From National Association of Social Workers (2002). Copyright 2002 by the National Association of Social Workers. Reprinted by permissions.

programs has been assigned to entities called intermediate units, area education agencies, educational service units, and so forth.

Mediation—A collaborative problem-solving process in which a neutral third party guides a discussion intended to help the parties in the dispute define the issues, obtain relevant information, and generate reasonable options for resolution.

Practice modalities—Specific treatment interventions used by the school social worker or other practitioner to help the student, family, or other identified client system reach a desired goal or outcome. Intervention strategies may include casework; group work; individual, group, or family counseling or therapy; community organization; crisis intervention; advocacy; staff training; policy development; and program coordination.

Prevention—Efforts undertaken by school social workers and others to minimize or eliminate the social, psychological, or other conditions known to cause or contribute to physical and emotional illness and some socioeconomic problems. Prevention efforts may include actions taken by school social workers and others that would prevent problems from occurring (primary prevention); limit the extent or severity of the problem (secondary prevention); or assist in recuperating from the effects of the problem and developing sufficient strengths and skills to preclude its return (tertiary prevention).

Professional practice—The ethical principles, provision of services, and responsibilities that school social workers are expected to maintain.

School social work—Social work services provided in the setting of an educational agency by credentialed school social workers. This specialty in social work is oriented toward helping students make satisfactory adjustments and coordinating and influencing the efforts of the school, the family, and the community to achieve this goal.

Student—Any person legally mandated by the state to be enrolled in an educational program or eligible to be enrolled.

Standards for Professional Practice

For the purposes of this document professional practice relates to the ethical principles, provision of services, and responsibilities that school social workers are expected to maintain. The term “local education agency” is used throughout this document to refer to any local or regional public education system and is consistent with the wording of federal legislation.

Standard 1. A school social worker shall demonstrate commitment to the values and ethics of the social work profession and shall use NASW’s Code of Ethics as a guide to ethical decision making.

Standard 2. School social workers shall organize their time, energies, and workloads to fulfill their responsibilities and complete assignments of their position, with due consideration of the priorities among their various responsibilities.

Standard 3. School social workers shall provide consultation to local education agency personnel, school board members, and community representatives to promote understanding and effective utilization of school social work services.

Standard 4. School social workers shall ensure that students and their families are provided services within the context of multicultural understanding and competence that enhance families' support of students' learning experiences.

Standard 5. School social work services shall be extended to students in ways that build students' individual strengths and offer students maximum opportunity to participate in the planning and direction of their own learning experience.

Standard 6. School social workers shall help empower students and their families to gain access to and effectively use formal and informal community resources.

Standard 7. School social workers shall maintain adequate safeguards for the privacy and confidentiality of information.

Standard 8. School social workers shall advocate for students and their families in a variety of situations.

Standard 9. As leaders and members of interdisciplinary teams and coalitions, school social workers shall work collaboratively to mobilize the resources of local education agencies and communities to meet the needs of students and families.

Standard 10. School social workers shall develop and provide training and educational programs that address the goals and mission of the educational institution.

Standard 11. School social workers shall maintain accurate data that are relevant to planning, management, and evaluation of school social work services.

Standard 12. School social workers shall conduct assessments of student needs that are individualized and provide information that is directly useful for designing interventions that address behaviors of concern.

Standard 13. School social workers shall incorporate assessments in developing and implementing intervention and evaluation plans that enhance students' abilities to benefit from educational experiences.

Standard 14. School social workers, as systems change agents, shall identify areas of need that are not being addressed by the local education agency and community and shall work to create services that address these needs.

Standard 15. School social workers shall be trained in and use mediation and conflict-resolution strategies to promote students' resolution of their nonproductive encounters in the school and community and to promote productive relationships.

Standards for Professional Preparation and Development

Professional preparation defines the level of training required for school social work practice. Professional development refers to the enhancement of basic knowledge and skills that requires ongoing effort by school social workers.

Standard 16. School social workers shall meet the provisions for practice set by NASW.

Standard 17. School social workers shall possess knowledge and understanding basic to the social work profession.

Standard 18. School social workers shall understand the backgrounds and broad range of experiences that shape students' approaches to learning.

Standard 19. School social workers shall possess knowledge and understanding of the organization and structure of the local education agency.

Standard 20. School social workers shall possess knowledge and understanding of the reciprocal influences of home, school, and community.

Standard 21. School social workers shall possess skills in systematic assessment and investigation.

Standard 22. School social workers shall understand the relationship between practice and policies affecting students.

Standard 23. School social workers shall be able to select and apply empirically validated or promising prevention and intervention methods to enhance students' educational experiences.

Standard 24. School social workers shall be able to evaluate their practice and disseminate the findings to consumers, the local education agency, the community, and the profession.

Standard 25. School social workers shall possess skills in developing coalitions at the local, state, and national levels that promote student success.

Standard 26. School social workers shall be able to promote collaboration among community health and mental health services providers and facilitate student access to these services.

Standard 27. School social workers shall assume responsibility for their own continued professional development in accordance with the NASW Standards for Continuing Professional Education* and state requirements.

Standard 28. School social workers shall contribute to the development of the profession by educating and supervising school social work interns.

Standards for Administrative Structure and Support

An effective school social work program must have adequate administrative structure and support. NASW recommends that the local education agency use the following standards, along with state and federal guidelines, to develop a school social work program.

Standard 29. State departments of education or other state entities that license or certify educational personnel shall regulate school social work practice.

Standard 30. State departments of education or other state entities that license or certify educational personnel shall employ a state school social work consultant who is a credentialed and experienced school social worker.

*The complete text of the *NSAW Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice* and the *NASW Standards for Continuing Professional Education* is available on request from NASW or at www.socialworkers.org.

Standard 31. School social work services shall be provided by credentialed school social workers employed by the local education agency.

Standard 32. Local education agencies shall employ school social workers with the highest level of qualifications for entry-level practitioners.

Standard 33. Social workers in schools shall be designated “school social workers.”

Standard 34. Salaries and job classifications of school social workers shall be commensurate with their education, experience, and responsibilities and be comparable to similarly qualified professional personnel employed by the local education agency.

Standard 35. The administrative structure established by the local education agency shall provide for appropriate school social work supervision.

Standard 36. The administrative structure of the local education agency shall delineate clear lines of support and accountability for the school social work program.

Standard 37. The local education agency shall provide a professional work setting that allows school social workers to practice effectively.

Standard 38. The local education agency shall provide opportunities for school social workers to engage in professional development activities that support school social work practice.

Standard 39. The goals, objectives, and tasks of a school social work program shall be clearly and directly related to the mission of the local education agency and the educational process.

Standard 40. The local education agency shall involve school social workers in developing and coordinating partnerships with community health, mental health, and social services providers linked with or based at school sites to ensure that these services promote student educational success.

Standard 41. All programs incorporating school social work services shall require ongoing evaluation to determine their contribution to the educational success of all students.

Standard 42. The local education agency shall establish and implement a school social work–student population ratio to ensure reasonable workload expectations.