

Chapter 12

An Educational Catch–22: Why Schools With the Greatest Need Are Least Likely to Have School Social Workers

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses injustices surrounding school social workers (SSW), specifically in schools with high rates of poverty, majority-minority populations, in rural settings, and/or concentrations of high-risk students. The education system is a substantial source of socialization for children, influencing opinions, worldviews, behaviors, and coping skills. Schools with an accumulation of poverty-based social problems commonly struggle with hiring SSWs due to budget deficits and suffer in comparison to richer school districts. Additionally, schools are providing more social services to students and families as a means of increasing educational outcomes; however, schools with the greatest demonstrated needs are less likely to have access to SSWs at the prescribed student ratio to provide services at an optimal level. This chapter discusses the benefits SSWs bring to the educational community, ongoing inequalities due to tax revenue-based budgets, and innovative ideas that can increase SSWs in schools with limited resources.

INTRODUCTION

The job description and roles of SSWs have changed considerably since their inception at the turn of the 20th century. Formally known as “visiting teachers,” the first official SSWs started to appear in 1905 in New York City, Boston, Hartford, and Chicago (Segal et al., 2018). By 1920, an incentive program known as the Commonwealth Fund set aside monies for 30 programs to develop social work programs in schools. As part of this movement, schools agreed to pay a third of the SSWs’ salary for three years, and if the school felt the program was beneficial to the student body, they would then take over the full financial responsibility of the positions. After three years, 70% of programs moved their SSWs into

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permanent positions due to the effectiveness of advancing challenging students educationally (Shaffer, 2006). When SSWs first began to provide services to schools, their greatest barriers for success were lack of funding, poorly developed job descriptions, child labor practices, behavior issues resulting from unreported child maltreatment, and the stigma of poverty (Fisher, 2020). Today, most of these barriers are still in place. As the discipline of school social work has evolved, so have the recognized challenges and injustices that should be addressed by SSWs.

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss social injustices surrounding the lack of school social workers (SSW) in schools, especially those with demonstrated need. The chapter will begin with a discussion concerning what SSWs are and the services they can provide for schools, especially those with challenging student populations. The chapter will also discuss inequalities surrounding the hiring of SSWs, as those schools with the greatest need for inhouse social services are the least likely to have access to SSWs (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019). The chapter will address the educational challenges that customarily accompany poverty, childhood trauma, and mental health issues, as well as the commonality of these issues occurring in higher concentrations in schools found in majority-minority schools (Bronn, 2020; Crutchfield et al., 2020; Gaias et al., 2021).

The chapter will address today's schools as small-scale social service agencies for students and families, creating additional burdens for administrators and educators. More schools are working to be trauma-informed, creating additional disciplinary responses, changing classroom philosophies, and mandating more emotional work from administrators and educators (Avery et al., 2021; Baez et al., 2019; Iachini et al., 2016). SSWs are uniquely trained to provide the individual, group, family, classroom, and community services to support the school's mission (Naik, 2019). Unfortunately, SSWs are commonly considered auxiliary staff, and their positions are dependent on a surplus in the school's operating budget (Branson, 2019; Teasley, 2018). Schools with the highest need for SSWs are often those with the fewest resources to hire and sustain SSW positions due to funding injustices (Miller & Williams-Isom, 2021).

Lastly, the chapter will discuss possible innovative methods for addressing the barriers of obtaining SSWs. Specifically, methods of hiring and sustaining more SSWs in school districts, new and creative funding opportunities, using *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez* as evidence of inequality, and advocating for Assembly, House, and Senate bills that could provide legislation and funding needed to create SSW positions, especially in schools with the greatest need. Additionally, the chapter will discuss the timeliness of trauma-informed schools and services in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the blanket of trauma that students, educators, and families have experienced since the beginning of 2020.

LITERATURE

Through research and innovative programs across educational institutions, administrators and educators have learned that a students' private life is instrumental in their ability to learn. Students struggling with hunger, mental health issues, unresolved trauma, family dysfunction, lack of acceptance, and/or other significant life issues are not open conduits for receiving and retaining knowledge (Fletcher & Frisvold, 2017, Longhi et al., 2019, Naik, 2019). Over time, schools have created programs to address these issues as a means of increasing students' scholastic achievements. As a result, today's schools take on more duties outside of simply educating students, the need for SSWs has increased (Smith, 2016; Kelly, 2020; Skoric & Kupresanin, 2018). Schools have become social service agencies within an educational system,

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