

School Social Worker

Making
A

DIFFERENCE in the **lives** of **students** with **special needs**

Kevin was having trouble in his American history class. He wasn't focused in class, never turned in homework, and was in danger of failing and having to repeat the eighth grade. Repeated calls to Kevin's parents from both his teacher and his school counselor brought no responses. The school administration, then called in the school social worker who visited Kevin's home and talked to his parents.

The family was going through a crisis brought on when Kevin's father lost his job. After several months of job searching, he remained unemployed and had begun drinking alcohol to excess on an almost daily basis. This led to marital problems and a generally unhealthy home atmosphere. The school social worker was able to direct Kevin's parents to appropriate community agencies that could help the family deal with the stressful situation. She also set up a testing and counseling session for Kevin. Several months later, the family was in group counseling and Kevin was in a special after-school tutoring program. Kevin's father still had not found a job; but the family was on a more even keel, and it looked like Kevin was going to pass American history.



C A R E E R S

in Special
Education
and Related **S**ervices



Increasingly, schools employ social workers to lessen the educational and developmental problems facing children. School social workers operate as a link among the school, the students, their families, and the community's social services. They work with students both in their homes and in their schools, while focusing on family and community factors that influence their performance in school. School social workers make a broad impact: They often reduce the number of school dropouts, or they may coordinate agency services for students and their families, and increasingly they develop strategies to prevent school violence.

Nature of Work

The National Association of Social Workers identifies four major areas of **school social work practice**:

1. Early intervention to reduce or eliminate stress within or between individuals or groups
2. Problem-solving services to students, parents, school personnel, or community agencies
3. Early identification of students at risk
4. Work with various groups in school to develop coping, social, and decision-making skills

School social workers play an important role in gathering information about a student's social, emotional, and behavioral adjustments to both school and the community. They conduct interviews with the student, the family, school personnel, other significant persons in the student's life, as well as make classroom observations of the student. They use this information to prepare social and developmental histories that identify the student's strengths and problem areas.

Using **direct counseling and referral techniques**, school social workers identify and consider solutions to problems. They also develop and obtain resources and information to help the student and, when necessary, the family. Their aim is to improve the overall quality of life for the student so he or she is free to learn. They may work with a multi-disciplinary team to accomplish this goal; but, like other social workers, school social workers must value the dignity and worth of each student in order to build a basis for trust and understanding. Confidentiality is a prime concern with students and their families. All information that is shared with school social workers is held in the strictest confidence.

Direct counseling may be on an individual basis or with groups. School social workers may hold group sessions with teenagers whose behavior or academic progress indicate the need for counseling. They may be called in to evaluate an excessively aggressive four-year-old or to help a seven-year-old who has a fire-setting problem. Sometimes, a change in the school setting, tutoring, or special classes may be recommended. If a community agency referral is appropriate, the school social worker will arrange for that service. In short, school social workers use a case-by-case method similar to other social workers, but always with the basic goal of maximizing the child's potential to benefit fully from his or her education.

School social workers may develop expertise in issues or problems that are specific to the student population or the community. They may include such issues as child abuse and neglect, teenage pregnancy, date rape, or poverty. They may also include student specific issues related to aggressive antisocial behavior, learning problems, emotional disabilities, or substance abuse. They may develop specialized services, provide group counseling on particular topics, and conduct training for school personnel.

School social workers work in preschool, elementary, middle and high school settings. They may work in special schools for students with physical, mental, or emotional disabilities.

Education Required

Some states require licensing by a social work licensing board, and more than 30 states require school social work licensure by the state's educational agency. There is also a social work component of the National Teachers Examination (NTE) that was developed by the Educational Testing Service and the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and is used to demonstrate a social worker's knowledge and aptitude.

Most school social workers have master's degrees in social work (MSW) from a university accredited by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), while a fewer number of school social workers have completed CSWE-accredited baccalaureate social work programs. Graduate students specializing in school social work usually complete at least one year of supervised experience in a school setting, typically under the direct supervision of an experienced school social worker.

The NASW has also created a School Social Work Specialist (SSWS) credential that requires a master's degree and at least two years of post-master's supervised school social work experience, as well as a passing score on the Social Work Component of the NTE.

Course work required for a degree in school social work may include applying social work in noneducational settings, and will include general knowledge to the field of social work. Social workers are employed in a variety of settings, and it is possible to train for the general field of social work with a concentration in school social work.

PRACTITIONER'S PROFILE



Katie Hart, LCSW, BCD, SSWS
School Social Worker
Jonesboro, Georgia

Katie Hart is a full-time social worker for the Clayton County Public Schools, a suburban community near Atlanta, Georgia. She is assigned to seven schools—five elementary, one middle, and one high school. She likes the broad age span in her caseload and believes her college studies prepared her well to work with children, teenagers, as well as adults. Katie earned a bachelor's degree in psychology from California's Pitzer College and a master's degree in social work from Atlanta (GA) University, now named Clark-Atlanta University.

At age 9, a tragic family circumstance acquainted Katie with disabilities. A favorite young cousin was diagnosed with a brain tumor and became blind. Before his death, the cousin and Katie continued playing, although the kinds of games they played had to change. Katie was astonished that her cousin could teach her how to make a potholder using cotton loops and a picture frame. "His disability really made me a more sensitive person and made me realize we can all make contributions," said Katie.

Katie's day-to-day schedule is driven largely by referrals. The school social workers at one of her schools and the school's management and information system personnel recently developed the school's first software program of computer-generated referrals and data collection. When any teacher wants the assistance of a social worker on the staff, the teacher contacts a counselor. The counselor or secretary enters the information onto a template (an electronic 'fill in the blanks' form) that has basic identifying information. The request is then sent to Katie via e-mail.

"There's no average number of referrals on any given day," explained Katie. Two dozen names might appear on a screen in a single day. Katie is obligated to take some action on each referral. Follow-up action could be as simple as a

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phone call or as complex as a series of visits with the student and family over a period of weeks or months.

Daily Schedule: Katie says no two days are ever alike for a school social worker, but problems are often alike. A request for prescription eyeglasses for a student is a simple case. Katie is alerted whenever eyeglasses are needed by a student who cannot afford them. After speaking with the family, Katie prepares the paperwork for the student to have a professional eye exam. The school receives the bill for the exam, lenses, and frames and then submits it to a local community organization, such as the Kiwanis that has offered to pay for the glasses.

"Teachers aren't the only ones who send us referrals," Katie noted. "I hear from community agencies on a regular basis." In one case, Katie was alerted about an elementary-age child who had been diagnosed with a behavior disorder and was either absent or arrived very late to class most days. In working with the child's family, Katie learned that the young mother was unemployed and appeared to be depressed and overwhelmed with the care of three young children. When the child missed the school bus, no other adult in the household could transport the child to class.

In cases like this, Katie is required to explain to the child's parents or guardians that if they prevent the child from attending school, the school is required to file a petition in juvenile court. Katie's intervention is usually very limited once a petition is filed, but sometimes she monitors a child's attendance and provides that information to the officer of the court.

Challenges: "Juggling priorities is my biggest challenge. I want to spend more time on some cases, and I'd like to provide more support to the teaching staff. Social workers deal with the pressing issues of the day, such as teenage pregnancy. We see more girls who are pregnant and who intend to stay in school. My job is to help them deal with the difficulties of being a student and teenage parent."

Satisfaction: "School is really the secondary institution to the family—when a child is not doing well in school, the family is unhappy. I loved school as a child and now get to be here every day. I like to provide support to kids. Social work is a career where you can solve problems, and the profession respects the dignity and self-worth of people. I like that."

Personal Qualities

Because a school social worker must often coordinate a team of teachers, parents, and social service providers, it is important to have the ability and willingness to work well with other professionals and inspire cooperation. The school social worker must be sensitive and responsive to the needs of both family and child. School social workers must be resourceful and flexible to successfully create individualized programs to help each child. Often school social workers must be willing to advocate for new resources when needed services are not available in the community.

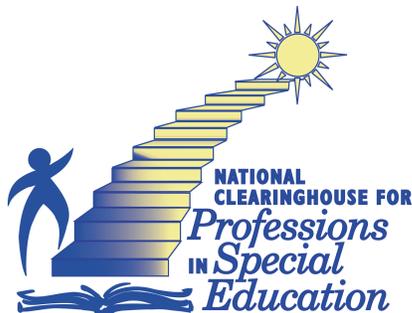
It is also important that school social workers express themselves clearly and enjoy the challenges and rewards of working with children. School social workers must have the perseverance and dedication to help students and their families realize specific, individual goals. A desire to continue to learn helps social workers discover new methods and research that will help them improve their practice.

Job Outlook and Advancement

There are so many social and personal difficulties facing today's youth that the role of the school social worker is always expanding. Educational success by students in at-risk communities is greatly enhanced through the employment of school social workers. The work for these professionals never diminishes, but there may be inevitable funding problems. Funding can be provided through local school districts' general education funds or through state and federal grants and foundations. The Improving America's Schools Act of 1994 provides some money that can be used to hire school social workers. School social workers who work with special education students can also be hired using funding from the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

How to Prepare for a Career

Students interested in becoming a school social worker can start getting experience by volunteering in a social service or community support program, or by becoming a peer counselor. Students can visit their own school social worker, if one is available, and ask about his or her experiences. Because advanced education is usually necessary, course work aimed at college and eventually graduate school is the most useful preparation.



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CAREERS

in special education and related services

RESOURCES

Council on Social Work Education

1600 Duke St., Suite 300
Alexandria, VA 22314
(Publishes the Directory of Accredited BSW and MSW Programs)
703-683-8080
703-683-8099 Fax
E-mail: accred@cswe.org
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National Association of Social Workers

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Washington, DC 20002-4241
800-638-8799
202-408-8600
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The National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education

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