

# Chapter 1

## DEFINING THE ROLE OF A SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKER

Being a school social worker is exciting, ever changing, and deeply rewarding. It can also be exhausting, overwhelming, and stressful as you continually respond to issues, problems, and crises. At its most fundamental level, being a school social worker means that you are *supporting students to be able to get the most out of their education*. This can be accomplished in a multitude of ways. In this chapter, we discuss the importance of connecting the students with other people and systems, the types of students on a school social worker's caseload, time management, how to make referrals, and how to communicate your role as a school social worker with the systems and people you interface.

Throughout the United States, each state has its own definition of the scope of the role of the school social worker. Your state's department of education has the final word on what constitutes that role in your state. Therefore, it is crucial that you spend some time familiarizing yourself with your state's department of education website and the necessary requirements for practice as a school social worker. These differences can include the classes you need to take in your MSW program (or after your program), the tests you need to take to become accredited as a school social worker, the forms you need to fill out, the background checks you need to complete, and the supervised clinical hours that you need to accrue. There is a national conversation about making school social work accreditations reciprocal among states, but thus far, that has not occurred. So, if you are moving between states, make sure you understand what is needed to be accredited in your new state. That said, you will find more similarities than differences in the role of the school social worker among states. This book approaches school social work from the perspective of these commonalities and generalities of practice.

### BEING A BRIDGE

*To support students to get the most out of their education* means that one of the most important characteristics of your role as a school social worker is to be a *bridge* to the many different systems in which the student is situated. The reality is that these systems may not know or be aware of each other, understand each other, or communicate with each other regularly—or at all. As a school social worker, you have the opportunity to create or improve the dialogue between these systems to enhance the functioning for the student and to understand the student better in these different venues. If these different systems are actively supporting, functioning for, and understanding the student, the student will be more successful in school.

Let's begin with an exercise: Think about a student you know. How many different systems and people do they interact with in a week? Let's name the systems and the people who may make up those systems:

**Family:** parents, stepparents, siblings, grandparents, extended family, foster care parents, other caregivers or guardians

**Teachers:** classroom teachers, special education (SPED) teachers, bilingual education teachers, gym teachers, art teachers, computer teachers, music teachers

**School staff:** school nurses, school secretaries, school janitors, lunch staff, playground staff, bus drivers

**Administrators:** principals and assistant principals

**Community members:** outside clinicians, doctors, dentists, after-school activities leaders and members, after-school sports coaches and players, community agencies, religious training leaders and members, neighbors

**Other students:** in their class, at recess, in the lunchroom, on the bus, in their neighborhood, and in the other places they may be after school

With your specific student in mind, think about how the interactions with some or all of these individuals and systems can either enhance or undermine your student's week.

After taking that inventory, we need to ask ourselves:

- Do all of these people who come into contact with your student understand your student in the same way?
- Do some of these people know your student better than others?

- Do some of these people have insights into how the student functions best?
- What may activate your student and why?

By taking this approach as a school social worker, we have the opportunity to gain a holistic view of our students. We can support them in strengthening bridges to the individuals and systems in their lives that are most supportive of them.

## STUDENTS HAVE OTHER FOCI THAN JUST LEARNING AT SCHOOL

One of the universal truths of education is that students *never* come to school with only learning in mind. They come with thoughts about what happened this morning before school, last night, last weekend, and last month as well as all the major and minor events they have experienced in their lives. For some of these events, they feel excitement and pleasure at the thought of returning to those venues where the happy events took place; these students cannot wait to leave school again at the end of the school day. Some students come to school to spend time with friends; in clubs; in sports; in band; and with favorite teachers, staff, or administrators. Education is not the primary goal; socializing is. Other students ponder events that have made them feel sad, lonely, abandoned, embarrassed, scared, or hurt outside of school and worry about returning to those venues or people; others worry about their loved ones who are still in those venues or with those people. Others still worry about being in school itself. Recess, bathrooms, lunchroom, school buses, or bus stops may not feel like a safe place either due to violence or bullying (which we discuss in greater detail in chapters 6 and 7). The reality is our students are frequently spending more time thinking about what happened or may happen outside the classroom than listening to what the teacher is saying.

*To support students to get the most out of their education*, we need to be able to help our students articulate their issues, problems, and concerns to a trusted adult (us) and to help them learn to understand and separate themselves from the difficult, sad, or toxic issues that they have experienced or witnessed outside or inside the school. As a school social worker, we help our students give voice to their issues so that their issues do not dominate their thinking and so that they can actually have the capacity to learn at school.

## WHAT TYPE OF STUDENTS ARE ON YOUR CASELOAD?

Your role as a school social worker is often delineated by the type of students who make up your caseload. Some school social workers only have a caseload of students who are in process of SPED assessment or have a SPED designation. Chapter 3 discusses in detail the process of assessing students for SPED and the individualized education plan (IEP) in which educators, school social workers, and school psychologists collaboratively work together to create a specific program for students who qualify for SPED services. Some students who are already on an IEP will have school social work contact minutes written into their IEP documents. Remembering that the provision of SPED is a federal law, every school needs to minimally have a SPED school social worker to service SPED students. This may mean that the SPED school social worker is not housed in one school but works between two or more schools to see the SPED students on their caseload.

Other school social workers are mandated to have a caseload of general education (GED) students (that is, non-SPED students). Often, GED school social workers are funded by the school, district, or state who see the benefit from students having access to mental health providers within the school. Some GED school social workers will be required to transfer students—if those students become SPED students—to the SPED school social worker.

Some school social workers have a caseload of both GED and SPED students. These GED and SPED school social workers often are responsible for the mental health needs of the entire student population of the school.

Other school social workers do not have a specific caseload of students at all but function as social-emotional learning (SEL) specialists who help to enhance and transform the school environment. The SEL school social worker's role is often to run classroom groups and schoolwide programs to improve the general functioning of all students. Additionally, many SEL school social workers are tasked with observing, educating, and coaching teachers, staff, and administrators on how to best meet the emotional needs of students.

Regardless, in times of school problems or crises, the SPED school social worker, the GED school social worker, the SPED and GED school social worker, or the SEL school social worker will be asked to intervene. The role of the school social worker in school crises is discussed in chapter 8.

## TIME MANAGEMENT

No one has ever said that they have more than enough time to do their job as a school social worker! School social work is usually high energy and high activity. It is both being responsive to the emotional needs of the students on your caseload and being responsive to the emotional needs of the school. The demands of the profession can sometimes make it feel like everything is an emergency and everything must be done at that very moment, which, frankly, is impossible to do. For that reason and others, time management is one of the most important things you can do when you begin as a school social worker.

### Make a Schedule

We recommend that you create a schedule that can be tracked on your phone, tablet, computer, or planner.

- Place weekly counseling sessions with the students on your caseload.
- Include small group sessions (see chapters 5 and 6).
- Include schoolwide program meetings and trainings (see chapter 7).
- Make time for collateral contacts—other professionals and community folk you need to talk to regarding your students (see chapters 3 and 8). Make sure you have signed written consent from the parent or guardian to have these discussions.
- Create planning time for the groups or programs.
- Note meetings: school staff meetings; district school social work meetings; scheduled IEPs; meetings with parents to discuss their students; meetings with teachers, staff, and administrators; school committee meetings; districtwide meetings; trainings you are attending; and professional development you are creating for teachers, staff, and administrators.
- Allow time for paperwork. Unlike the teachers in your building, school social workers do not have planning periods, scheduled lunch, or times when their students go to “specials” (gym, art, music, etc.) that give them free time for grading, planning, and renewing. This needs to be added to your schedule. Writing notes and completing evaluations and assessments and any billing requirements that you may have should be considered in how much time you allocate each week for paperwork.

## 6 The School Social Work Toolkit

- Take time for lunch every day. Close your door and eat nutritious food.
- Allow for crises and unforeseen circumstances. Do not pack your schedule so tightly that responding to a crisis will cause the entire day to implode. Granted, it is impossible to plan for unforeseen circumstances, but if you have some extra time built into the schedule, there is time that can be allocated to the issue at hand and time in the week to move other appointments in your schedule. We have found that extra time on Fridays (because students are entering the weekend) and Wednesday afternoons (because students may have visitation with noncustodial parents) are particularly good times to reduce the scheduled meetings.

### CAREFUL CONSIDERATION

Bringing home paperwork is a slippery slope and should be avoided. Most school social workers are not paid overtime, nor do they have flextime; thus, doing paperwork in the evenings or on the weekends will never be compensated. There are times during the school year, such as in the fall when IEP recertifications need to be done and in the spring when the deadline to finish IEPs for the school year nears, when SPED school social workers will experience more paperwork. However, if you cannot consistently get the paperwork done during the school week, some responsibilities need to be delegated to other members of the school community.

## Communicate Your Schedule

Sharing your schedule with your school administrators and teachers has several benefits. The first is that they all realize you are busy and that you have responsibilities to others (and are not just at their beck and call). This will help them to consider whether this is really an emergency that needs your immediate attention or if they can wait until you are available. Additionally, if they need to bring you into meetings with parents or community members, it lets them know when you are free and avoids scheduling conflicts.

In addition to your colleagues, share your schedule with your students so they can plan to see you at the same time every week. Sharing your schedule with students can alleviate their anxiety and reduce questions about your availability. You may also want to create some guidelines for counseling services—for example, students are not

allowed to go to the school social worker's office without a pass and students should not be allowed to just "drop in" to counseling; instead, they should be required to be picked up from class by the school social worker. This prevents specific students from monopolizing all of your time.

Of course, there will be days when the schedule has to be adjusted due to a crisis, but in general, you should try to uphold the schedule you created for yourself. Not creating and sticking to a schedule can lead to feeling continually pulled in a million different directions, overwhelmed, and burned out, which is discussed in chapter 11.

## REFERRALS

Because referrals are the basis for much of what a school social worker does, it is imperative that the systems and people you work with understand the referral process and who is an appropriate referral and who is not. The right referral system will save you and your colleagues time and precious resources. The wrong referral system in which you receive many referrals that are not appropriate will bog you down in work that is not necessary and keep you from doing your job.

Sometimes teachers will want to refer to you a student with whom they have personality issues due to lack of mutual respect, or parents will want you to see their student to assuage themselves of guilt that they have over their own parenting issues, or administrators will want you to act as a disciplinarian for their unruly students. None of these is a good referral and often is a "time sink." You should make it clear that students who are mandated to receive SPED school social work services on their IEP do not require a referral. The referral process outlined here is for the GED school social worker.

### Conditions for Referring Students

One could argue that all students would benefit from spending time with a school social worker. But you are only in the school for the school day for five days a week, so some criteria must be established. The following list provides conditions that necessitate a referral to the GED school social worker. This list will need to be tweaked for specific characteristics of students in your school:

- severe behavior problem (define *severe* for teachers, administrators, and staff—their definition may differ from yours)

## 8 The School Social Work Toolkit

- suicidal ideation
- anger management issues that keep the student from focusing on schoolwork
- failing grades and a SPED referral has already been ruled out
- student experiencing a crisis, such as abandonment, loss, trauma, or grief
- bullying
- other life issues impeding academic success

### Create a Referral Form

After you have defined the conditions for referral of a student to the school social worker, you need to create a referral form. A referral form is a good way of tracking the number of referrals that you receive and lets your supervisor know how busy you are. A referral form also holds the referring party responsible. For example, if a teacher is referring a student for severe behavior problems in class, the teacher should be able to report the strategies and interventions they have already tried with the student. Referral to the school social worker should be a last resort, not the first.

In addition to the part of the form that the teacher, staff, administrator, parent, or student fills out, there should be a part that you fill out. This is where you will determine if the referral is appropriate for a GED school social worker or if another intervention is needed, such as referral for SPED testing, more teacher interventions, or a behavior intervention plan. This part of the form will also help with documentation and tracking of all referrals and who is responsible for those referrals.

If you feel the referral is appropriate for GED school social work, you will need to fill out the intervention section on the form, asking, What services will the student benefit from? Would individual or group counseling be appropriate? A copy of the part of the form that you fill out will be given back to the person who made the referral so that they know what the next steps will be.

After creating the form, you will need to have a place for referrals to be dropped off. This should be a secure place near your office, such as a locked box with a slit in the top so that confidentiality can be preserved. If the forms are going to be emailed to you, make sure your school email can securely receive protected information.

### Who Makes the Referral?

Three main groups make school social work referrals: (1) school personnel, including teachers, staff, and administrators; (2) parents/guardians; and (3) students who



make self-referrals. Occasionally, students who see you may refer friends they know who are experiencing difficulties. A sample GED school social work referral form is provided here.

## SAMPLE GED SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK REFERRAL FORM

After filling out this form, please put it in the drop box located outside the GED school social work office or send it to the school social worker's email.

Person filling out referral form: \_\_\_\_\_

Cell phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Email address: \_\_\_\_\_

Are you a parent/guardian? Yes No

Are you a school employee? Yes No

Are you self-referring? Yes No

Are you a friend? Yes No

Date/time: \_\_\_\_\_

Student being referred: \_\_\_\_\_ Student grade: \_\_\_\_\_

Classroom teacher of student being referred: \_\_\_\_\_

### Reason for Referral:

(Please check the appropriate box and add specifics in the comments section)

- ☐ Severe behavior problem
- ☐ Suicidal ideation
- ☐ Anger management issues that keep the student from focusing on schoolwork
- ☐ Failing grades, and a special education referral has already been ruled out
- ☐ Student experiencing a crisis: issues of abandonment, loss, trauma, grief
- ☐ Bullying

## 10 The School Social Work Toolkit

☐ Other life issues impeding academic success. Please explain: \_\_\_\_\_

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Additional comments: \_\_\_\_\_

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### **Teacher/Staff/Administrative Intervention:**

(Please check the box of any/all that you have done)

- ☐ Met with student one-on-one to correct behavior
- ☐ Met with student's teacher about situation
- ☐ Met with student's parent/guardian. Date of meeting: \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ Referred student to administrator
- ☐ Tried different teaching methods to offer support for student's situation/  
behavior

Please elaborate: \_\_\_\_\_

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Additional comments: \_\_\_\_\_

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### **Referral Source**

PLEASE DO NOT WRITE BELOW: SOCIAL WORKER MUST FILL OUT

### **School Social Worker Intervention:**

- ☐ Met with teacher/adviser/administrator/staff
- ☐ Met with parent/guardian
- ☐ Met with student to conduct initial evaluation

Student eligible for school social work services?      Yes      No

**Assigned Intervention (if eligible for school social work services):**

- ☐ Individual counseling
- ☐ Group counseling. Focus of group: \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ Behavior/academic intervention plan

School social worker signature: \_\_\_\_\_

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**Communicate the Referral Process**

Now that you have defined the referral process for yourself, you need to introduce it to the school. Always meet with your administrator or supervisor before introducing the process to the rest of the school administrators, staff, and teachers. This guarantees that they are completely behind your referral process and can help field any questions if needed. A staff meeting or professional development training would be a good place to introduce the referral process. You want all school staff, teachers, and administrators to be together at the same time, so they all hear what you have to say.

Be clear and concise when describing the referral process. Bring enough forms for everyone, so they can follow along as you explain the form. Go over the process thoroughly by explaining the conditions for referral, the referral form itself, and the place where forms should be dropped off. Ask if anyone has any questions or needs further clarification about the referral form or the process.

**COMMUNICATING YOUR ROLE TO THE SYSTEMS YOU SERVE**

Being a school social worker means that you are *supporting students in their pursuit of getting the most out of their education*. You can do this by letting the systems you work with know what you do as a school social worker: In addition to being a bridge to your students and their systems, you also need to be a bridge to the systems you work with on their behalf. In particular, you must be a bridge to school administrators, students, teachers and staff, parents, and the community.

## School Administrators

Consider the following bridging activities you may participate in that involve administrators:

- Assist administrators in the development and implementation of new programs that support greater social and emotional health for students, staff, teachers, and administrators.
- Assist administrators in improvements in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the school community (see chapter 2).
- Assist administrators in creating a trauma-informed school to create greater emotional and physical safety at school (see chapter 2).
- Assist in student interventions.
- Serve as a member of various teams that support academic success through social and emotional growth of students.
- Offer clinical expertise regarding disciplinary interventions.
- Offer psychoeducation especially around issues of trauma, abandonment, loss, and grief.

## Students

Consider the following bridging activities you may participate in that involves students:

- Counsel students, individually and in groups (such as small groups, classroom groups, schoolwide programs), regarding prosocial behavior, social and emotional development, anger management, conflict resolution, peer mediation, restorative justice (RJ) practices, bullying, suicide prevention and intervention, grief and loss, understanding trauma, healthy masculinity, gay–straight allyship, and healthy relationships (see chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7).
- Make appropriate referrals to outside agencies as needed.
- Provide crisis interventions (see chapter 8).
- Maintain student files, including progress notes, treatment plans, assessments, and behavior contracts.

## Teachers and Staff

Consider the following bridging activities you may participate in that involve teachers and staff:

- Collaborate for improved behavior management strategies for students (see chapter 10).
- Work closely with the SPED department to ensure the coordination of services for students with special needs.
- Create professional development for the school community to better understand emotional and social development, understand trauma behavior, and increase resilience in all students.

## Parents/Guardians

Consider the following bridging activities you may participate in that involve parents:

- Maintain regular and open communication (see chapter 9).
- Support parents to be advocates for their students.
- Help parents negotiate the process of SPED.
- Make home visits as needed.
- Create regular psychoeducation for parents to explore issues and practices that support their student's success.

## Community

Consider the following bridging activities you may participate in that involve the community:

- Follow state guidelines for reporting incidents of child abuse and mandatory reporting (see chapter 8).
- Abide by all school regulations and state requirements regarding confidentiality and education laws (see chapters 4 and 8).
- Interface with community stakeholders who are working with or supporting children and youth.

## 14 The School Social Work Toolkit

School social workers are perfectly positioned to work in the schools to both be a bridge and to help bridge the many systems to each other. Being a school social worker is a multifaceted role that helps students succeed to their greatest capabilities.

### NEXT CHAPTER

In the next chapter, we discuss the influence the school social worker can have on the school environment. The school environment can become healthier and more inclusive through the work of the school social worker. In particular, we discuss how life during the COVID-19 pandemic, and now post-pandemic, has created many changes in schools and education. Additionally, we discuss school safety and the continual barrage of school violence. We round out the chapter with a discussion of two recent developments in school: DEI and trauma-informed schools.