



International Network for School Social Work

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School Social Work is a Vital Resource in the United States

Anne McInerney, President of the School Social Work Association of America

School social work in the United States started with "visiting teachers" in East Coast cities around 1906. Most of the existing states passed compulsory education laws by the early part of the century, so the schools had to address the needs of a wider range of pupils. School staff had to be sensitized to the children's needs and the home/school connection needed to be strengthened. The "visiting teacher" had a role in all of this and helped to provide the services the children needed to keep them attending school. One hundred years later, school social work has continued in much the same way and has spread to all states.

School social workers are now the vital link between the schools, family and communities. We work with the students in their environment, which means we examine how the child interacts at school, at home, and in the community. As valued members of the school team, much of our work is focused on bullying prevention, supporting children in crisis, violence prevention, and social skill development. Some school social workers have specialized roles, for example for children with disabilities and homeless students, while the majority provide the full range of services to the whole school population both individually and in groups. The approach is holistic, covering all aspects of the students' lives, the school climate and connections to the community. The goal is to help overcome the barriers, such as homelessness, violence, poverty and trauma, that students face before they enter our school doors so that they are ready to learn.

School social work has evolved since it started 120 years ago to meet the wider needs of schools and children. As the schools have increasingly become the center of many communities, school social workers have developed an important role in the school community. It is now estimated that there are at least 30,000 school social workers practicing across the country.

Although the states differ on minimum requirements for school social workers, most states require a Master's Degree in Social Work (MSW) and a license from the State Department of Education. We must provide evidence of continuing education to both the Department of Education and our state social work boards. Many school social workers have a clinical license as well, which gives them the training and background in mental health.

How the School Social Work Association supports school social workers

During the 1990's school social workers across the United States had discussions about how to strengthen their role in schools. These discussions could only take place where professional organizations existed and could bring them together to discuss their needs. Mostly this was in the Midwestern States. In order to have a more comprehensive view of the perceived need, school social workers and their professional organizations around the country were contacted and gradually brought into the discussion. Finally in 1994, 64 participants from 20 states came together to make a decision about forming an organization exclusively representing School Social Workers. A decision was reached during a 3-day meeting and a name chosen, the School Social Work Association of America, with task forces assigned to develop a structure with Constitution and Bylaws.

The SSWAA defined its Vision for school social work and the Association's Mission.

Our Vision is that school social work is a valued, integral part of the education of all children, connecting schools, families and communities.

The School Social Work Association of America empowers school social workers and promotes the profession of school social work to enhance the social and emotional growth and academic outcomes of all students.

Strategic planning was continued in 1995 with increased representation from the States and elections were held soon after. Randy Fisher was elected as the first President. A Government Relations Director was hired the same year to advocate for school social workers in Washington, DC. One year after this a Memorandum of Understanding was signed by the SSWAA and School Social Work Section of the National Association of Social Workers, acknowledging the role each organization played in promoting the profession of school social work and outlining the collaboration between the two.

SSWAA has held summer meetings in Washington, DC since 1996 to help develop leadership, to provide training in advocacy and to give SSWAA members the opportunity to lobby their representatives in Congress. SSWAA's first national conference was held jointly with the Kentucky Association and the Midwest Council the same year and was attended by 593 members from 34 states. Since 1998 SSWAA has held its own well-attended annual conferences.

The SSWAA has been a staunch advocate for school social work, working with other professional groups for student support. The members have found it crucial to have the SSWAA Government Relations Director, Myrna Mandlawitz, keeping the members informed about all federal legislation that affects student services.

In addition to activity at the national level, SSWAA has worked with State associations, adopting a format of affiliate state associations and a Delegate Assembly to help make decisions for the organization. SSWAA partners with our affiliate states to provide support in the development of their state organizations, as well as to keep them informed about changes in education policy and mental health advances which affect school social workers. The SSWAA web site www.sswaa.org is a rich resource (visited often by overseas school social workers as well as those in the US) for information about new practices in the field, licensure/certification changes and links to related organizations.