



## **International Network for School Social Work**

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#### **The Role of the School Social Worker with Very Special Needs Students in the New York City Department of Education, by Daniela Pozzaglia, LMSW**

School social workers have been employed in U.S. school systems since 1906 and have been heavily involved with children with special educational needs since the initial passing of Public Law 94-142 in 1975. The main focus of this Federal law was to establish the legal precedent that all children are entitled to a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment, regardless of their special needs. Many revisions have been made to this basic law and to its successor the IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Act) of 1990, which itself has been modified over the years.

I am a New York City Department of Education school social worker employed in the Citywide program in Queens, New York. I graduated with a Masters in Social Work from Hunter School of Social Worker in Manhattan in 1983. I have more than 25 years experience in various school settings. Currently, my Citywide school organization has nine separate sites (I am responsible for three) in which the students are severely impaired, requiring a 12-month school year. I have students with classifications of autism, mental retardation, emotional disturbance and multiple handicaps (physical and cognitive). The class sizes vary, as do the staff ratios. Some students are afforded 1 to 1 adult supervision throughout the day due to behavioral, educational and social issues.

The NYC school system's Citywide programs have approximately 1 million students enrolled from 5 to 21 years of age. Social workers, psychologists and guidance counselors are interchangeable in their roles as related service guidance providers. There are nearly 400 guidance providers for these Citywide children and there is one clinical supervisor. The supervisor sets up professional development workshops during the school year and is consulted on cases involving a crisis, emergency, abuse or neglect.

In my role as a social worker, I perform many liaison tasks between students and staff, staff and families, and families and social service agencies. I support students who need to bring issues appropriately (using words to express themselves) to the staff's attention. We all recognize that students bring whatever situations are going on in their home lives into the

classroom, often resulting in behavioral or emotional problems. My schools use PBIS (Positive Behavior Intervention Supports) to foster positive behaviors and reduce problem behaviors that interfere with the educational day. I invite parents to school to discuss relevant issues that impact the child's learning. I assist in making referrals to agencies for in-home services. I report to the New York State registry cases that need investigation due to neglect or abuse of students.

I assist in data collection together with the teachers to analyze maladaptive behaviors (biting, spitting, kicking, scratching, screaming, etc) in students who need Functional Behavior Assessments and then develop Behavior Intervention Plans to help the student be more available to the learning environment.

Much of my day is spent on individual or small group counseling required by the students' Individual Education Plans (legal documents by which these children are educated in a free and appropriate public school setting). These sessions are fairly eclectic in their approach, given the wide span of functioning levels of my students. Focusing on the 5 tenets of PBIS is often a part of the session. The 5 tenets are to use appropriate behaviors to "be safe", "be responsible", "be respectful", "be kind" and "be a learner". Different behaviors embody these concepts depending on the school environment, including the classroom, the cafeteria, the bus and the playground.

For children who are non-verbal, my program uses Mayer-Johnson symbols to help communication. Some students don't understand the concept that a symbol, picture or word represents something else and need photos to understand that signs can represent things, people, etc. We also provide augmentative communication devices (usually run by batteries) that can "speak" the word or sentence the student wishes to express. For those who are able to spell, there are portable boards (like computer keyboards) that "speak" the word/sentence typed out. Other students may be able to learn American Sign Language. My population uses the common, simple Activities of Daily Living words ("bathroom", "more", "yes", "no", "sorry" etc) frequently. Some other students who are hard of hearing or deaf learn the American Sign Language alphabet and more complex concepts.



For higher functioning students, I teach lessons, together with a teacher, highlighting character traits that are adaptive and appropriate. I start with a book that has a protagonist who serves as an example of a positive trait or perhaps a story in which the main character develops a moral trait. The stories are chosen according to the children's intellectual level, age and interest. Brightly colored pictures help to keep their attention. With the teacher, I develop the theme in the book and we arrange for a follow-up arts project, a short play or a writing piece that can become part of each child's portfolio of work. With higher functioning students, I will hold group sessions (with the teacher) discussing anger management, interpersonal relationships (among boys and girls), self-advocacy skills, etc. My days are rarely dull!

The opportunities to share with other school social workers at the New Zealand International School Social Workers conference in the spring of '09 have broadened my horizons tremendously. I am eager to correspond with others in the field. My email addresses are DaniPozzag@aol.com or DPozzag@schools.nyc.gov.