

The National Association of Social Workers

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The School Social Worker in Crisis Situations: The Right Skills, The Right Professional

Introduction

Communities view schools as perfunctory resources that not only educate students, but also keep them safe. Many parents assume that when they send their children to school, their children will have their primary emotional needs, such as a sense of security met. However, when a crisis occurs, schools are often unable to respond adequately to the pressing needs of the students and personnel. The primary goal of schools is educating students, but instruction and learning cannot effectively occur when the entire community, including students and their families, as well as the school administration and teaching personnel, are profoundly affected by crisis.

Unfortunately, these crises are happening often. According to the National Center for Education Statistics:

- From July 1, 2009, through June 30, 2010, there were 33 school-associated violent deaths in elementary and secondary schools in the United States.
- During the 2009–10 school year, 85 percent of public schools recorded that one or more incidents of violence, theft, or other crimes had taken place, amounting to an estimated 1.9 million crimes.
- In 2009, about 28 percent of students ages 12–18 reported being bullied at

school during the school year. Students' reports of being bullied at school varied by student and school characteristics.

However, despite the gravity of these circumstances, schools have valuable resources to help them respond. School social workers, with their crisis management expertise, clinical proficiency and leadership skills, are uniquely positioned to assist all members of the educational community when a crisis occurs. Typically parents, family members, teachers and professionals are strained by their own emotions about the occurrence, leaving them apprehensive and unsure of how to address the needs of the students. Since school social workers are the liaison between the school, the parents and the students, they can assume a leadership role in guiding the school community in healthy and effective responses.

The Growing Need for School Social Workers

School social workers have consistently focused on coordinating efforts of schools, families, and communities toward helping students improve their academic achievement and social, emotional, and behavioral competence by using its unique perspective of viewing the person in his or her environment (NASW, 2012). The underlying premise of school social work services is grounded in students' academic

progress being strengthened when students' basic physical and emotional needs are adequately met. School social workers not only provide direct services to children who require basic needs or exhibit challenging behavior, but also lead prevention efforts that support children through building the capacity of family members, other school staff, and community agencies to improve student outcomes (NASW, 2012).

However due to extensive financial deficits and constraints, local education agencies are often unable to provide adequate school social work services. School social workers often have high referrals and caseloads, limiting their time. In addition, many school social workers work at multiple school locations, with limited funding for resources and maintain complex schedules (Issurdatt, 2010). These factors regularly limit school social workers' availability, compounding the lack of resources when a crisis occurs.

The National Association of Social Workers has advocated innovative ratios in its latest revision of the *NASW Standards for School Social Work Services*; advising local education agencies to provide school social work services at a level that is sufficient to address the nature and extent of student needs (NASW, 2012).

School social work services should be provided at a ratio of one school social worker to each school building serving up to 250 general education students, or a ratio of 1:250 students. When a social worker is providing services to students with intensive needs, a lower ratio, such as 1:50, is suggested (NASW, 2012).

The School Social Worker's Role in Crisis Situations

HELPING ADMINISTRATORS AND TEACHERS

School social workers are extensively trained to manage and deal with crisis—providing an advantage in assisting school administrators and teaching personnel. School social workers can lead the development of strategic plans that prepare other school personnel to respond adequately during the times of chaos and crisis. Having a plan in place and communicating the details ensures the school community's participation in the recovery. A well-developed plan also helps ease the anxiety of the professionals, giving them specific roles to fulfill during a crisis.

School personnel may not feel comfortable discussing the crisis with students and their families due to uncertainty of exactly what to say or how to answer specific questions. However, school social workers are trained and experienced in delivering difficult and sensitive information and can assist in developing messages that are age-appropriate and culturally sensitive. School social workers can also work collaboratively with school administrators and teaching personnel around discussing the crisis or aftermath with the students and families. School social workers can provide teachers with tools and techniques that safeguard confidentiality.

COORDINATING SERVICES

School social workers are extensively trained in collaboration, networking and case management skills. They are trained to triage to determine priorities during emergencies. These valuable skills allow school social workers to meet the multitude of needs during crisis situations.

School social workers are also knowledgeable in classroom management and behavior intervention and can assist teachers and school personnel in identifying difficult times during the day and developing a supportive plan to address issues. School social workers possess skills in developing behavior plans for individuals and groups who may need additional support through the crisis period and/or after.

School social workers are well-informed regarding relevant resources in the community. They can provide linkages to resources and referrals for students and families as well as teachers and administrators who may need more assistance during crisis

TRAINING TEACHERS, ADMINISTRATION AND OTHER SCHOOL STAFF ON HOW TO IDENTIFY AT RISK STUDENTS

Needs persist not only during a crisis and may be prevalent long after the traumatic event. School social workers can work closely with school administration and teachers to determine which children or families require ongoing support. School social workers can help identify which students and families have access to additional resources through means outside of the school and which students and families rely on resources primarily through the school. School social workers can provide information on signs and symptoms of students at risk of requiring more support and

how to monitor students through time. School social workers can also collaborate regarding prevention of long term issues after a crisis.

PROVIDING DIRECT SERVICES TO STUDENTS AND THEIR FAMILIES

School social workers hold expertise in providing direct services to students and their families during difficult situations. Depending on the practice outlined through their job description and qualifications, school social workers may provide clinical services, as well. Regardless, all school social workers are trained to provide emotional support and resources directly to students and their families.

RECOGNIZING SIGNS OF CRISIS

A student may experience crisis in his or her life due to peer conflict or a personal family issue such as parental divorce. This type of crisis response typically requires the help of the professionals working closest with the student to identify the situation and refer the student for support. An individualized approach works well in this situation, where a school social worker can assess the needs of those involved and provide treatment and resources as necessary.

A broader approach can also be used in addressing other forms of crisis. The death of a teacher, school personnel or student is an example of a crisis where the students in need can be addressed as a group primarily. Then, as the students are assessed further, those with additional needs would be referred for supplementary support. In addition to direct services, the school social worker can provide substantial material and guidance for the school administration, teachers, etc. to use in discussing the occurrence directly with the students in a supportive and age appropriate manner and how to clearly address and answer questions from students and families.

During more extensive crisis situations, such as natural disasters, national tragedies such as terrorist attacks, mass killings and school shootings, school social workers can offer valuable services to assess and address the immediate needs of the school and community population. Whether the crisis is outside of the school or if the crisis directly affects the school community, support, guidance and expertise is needed to manage the crisis and lead the recovery. Multi-tier approaches to service delivery can be employed to adequately meet the enormous needs of the population.

Conclusion

School social workers are leaders in meeting the needs of the entire school community. Whereas other professions can assist in the psychological needs of students, school social workers are specifically trained to offer comprehensive approaches that benefit not only students, but the entire school population. School social workers assist the school administration and teaching personnel by adding to their knowledge, training and relationships with the students, as well as provide direct services to the students themselves and their families. Social workers are knowledgeable regarding community resources and collaborative efforts to assist in service provision.

Resources

NASW Standards for School Social Work Services

This document outlines standards for professional practice, professional preparation and development, and administrative structure and support.

www.socialworkers.org/practice/standards/NASWSchoolSocialWorkStandards.pdf

NASW School Social Work Specialty Practice Section

This customized option with NASW membership provides resources and training directly relevant to school social work practice through opportunities for professional development via live practice specific teleconferences, free CE's, chats, E-Alerts, and more.

www.socialworkers.org/sections/default.asp

The Certified School Social Work Specialist Credential (C-SSWS)

This credential is exclusively offered by NASW and attests to expertise, skill and knowledge in the field of school social work; certifies two academic years of post-MSW supervised school social work experience and attests agreement to abide by the *NASW Code of Ethics*, and the *NASW Standards for School Social Work Services* and the *NASW Standards for Continuing Education*. www.socialworkers.org/credentials/specialty/c-ssws.asp

References

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