

# Maximize the Potential of Your School Social Worker

Your school social worker is poised to help you navigate federal mandates, facilitate schoolwide initiatives, and support students' growth and success.

**Annette Johnson and Libby K. Nealis**

*I didn't have a support system at home and avoided getting involved with school activities and was being anti-social with classmates at the beginning of my freshman year. I had this wall up that Ms. Stacey was able to break down. She instilled me with coping mechanisms and a positive outlook on life. She is still the person that I turn to for guidance; five years later, we are still in contact. She didn't only make a difference but she is also a huge part of the young woman I've become today.*

*Taking social workers out of an educational environment is like taking nurses out of a hospital. I strongly believe that school social workers and other supportive adults are needed to balance out the chaos that we experience in our adolescent years. Ms. Stacey made my high school years the best years. I was involved in sports; I attended prom; and most importantly, I graduated with my class!*

—Stephanie

Created in collaboration with the School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA) to facilitate partnerships between principals and school social workers and to remove barriers to learning. Additional resources are available at [www.sswaa.org](http://www.sswaa.org).

## The Need for Services

The profession of school social work emerged out of the settlement house movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, beginning in Boston, MA; Hartford, CT; and New York, NY, in the early 1900s. Chicago Public Schools employed their first school social workers in 1919 (Morrison, 2006). School social work grew out of the policies that focused on compulsory school attendance, and school social workers were initially known as “visiting teachers” who addressed the attendance problem through home visits and other interventions. Although the world is a very different place than it was a century ago, policies that support the needs of disadvantaged children and their families in the educational setting have played a major role in the evolution of school social work.

The primary focus of school social work is to provide links between home, school, and community. School social workers use their skills to understand the social ills of the community and serve as advocates for students and families, ensuring that students receive the maximum benefit from public education and any other available public support services. This work builds on the historical context of school social work and identifies

strategies and best practices, such as response to intervention (RTI) and social and emotional learning (SEL), that can be utilized under current federal policies to address growing student needs.

## Federal Policies

The major federal education policies that have defined the role and promoted the growth of school social workers in education are Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the Rehabilitation Act (Section 504), and IDEA. Those policies, including funding to states and schools under ESEA and IDEA, encourage principals to employ school social workers in an expanded role to address myriad challenges.

Title I of ESEA created the means for schools to address the various needs of disadvantaged students, most specifically under Part D, Prevention and Intervention Programs for Children and Youth Who Are Neglected, Delinquent, or At-Risk. Those provisions address the needs of students who are in transition from alternative education settings, foster care and homeless students, or those otherwise at risk for academic failure or dropping out.

Although Title I contains certain



mandates, there is flexibility in how school districts use the balance of their Title I dollars. They can use Title I—and supplement those dollars with funding from other sources—to coordinate and provide an array of educational and social services. Unfortunately, there are more students eligible for Title I than there are funds to serve their needs adequately. The most recent funding levels for FY 2014 showed a much-needed increase of \$625 million, up to \$14.4 billion for Title I funding.

Expanded uses of the Title I dollars have been promoted in recent legislation, including “school-based mental health partnerships” and community schools programs. Those are precisely the types of coordinated service efforts in which school social workers are ideally trained to facilitate and maximize positive outcomes for students.

### **Services for All Students**

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act provides legal protections from discrimination for anyone with a disability. Students with disabilities may receive accommodations and modifications to help them in school, including the provision of school social work

services at some point during their education. Designing accommodations for a student’s 504 plan and following his or her progress can ensure that the accommodations are effective and produce the desired outcomes.

The creation of IDEA marked the first time that school social work was defined in federal legislation. The law currently delineates some of the services that school social workers provide under IEPs. Provisions under IDEA now allow for funds to be used for “early intervening services” for students who are not yet identified for special education services, including “providing educational and behavioral evaluations, services, and supports” (US Department of Education, n.d., p. 1). They also call for the use of RTI and other multitiered systems of support to assist in determining the presence of a disability. Those services are intended to address academic and behavioral challenges within the general education classroom.

### **RTI and SEL**

RTI is a system-wide approach used in general education to prevent or resolve issues about the lack of student success. It allows for early

**School social workers use their skills to understand the social ills of the community and serve as advocates for students and families, ensuring that students receive the maximum benefit from public education and any other available public support services.**

## What's Next?

Involve the school social worker and other specialized instructional support personnel (SISP) in the school leadership team to:

- Design the RTI process at your local school and provide training and assistance to teachers in classroom interventions
- Help develop the universal (tier 1) implementation plan for the academic and behavioral areas
- Assess current schoolwide or group-based supports and identify areas for growth
- Provide targeted (tier 2) services for at-risk students using evidence-based individual, small group, and classroom-based push-in services
- Provide intensive (tier 3) services for students who require more individualized, intensive support
- Plan and implement schoolwide SEL
- Infuse SEL in the classroom in a number of ways, including classroom meetings, classroom-based topical discussions, and classroom activities that align with concepts that are being taught in the curriculum content areas
- Consult with administrators and classroom teachers to encourage the infusion of SEL throughout the curriculum
- Integrate SEL skill development with clinical work for students in individual and group counseling in constructive ways.

identification and prevention activities for all students. RTI arose to address universal academic and behavioral issues in the regular education classroom and to ensure the development of more intensive interventions—including special education, when appropriate—that would improve student outcomes. Concerns were also expressed as RTI was emerging about the growing number of students who receive special education services—in particular, the over-representation of Black and Latino boys in restrictive special education settings.

RTI includes rigorous implementation of high-quality, culturally and linguistically responsive instruction, assessment, and evidence-based interventions to address the needs of all students (National Center on Response to Intervention, n.d.). Comprehensive RTI implementation contributes to more meaningful identification of learning and behavioral problems, improves instructional quality, provides all students with the best opportunities to succeed in school, and assists with the identification of learning and other disabilities.

SEL is a process for helping children (and even adults) develop the fundamental social and emotional competencies needed for success in life. SEL teaches the skills that all people need to handle themselves, their relationships, and their work effectively and ethically. Those skills include recognizing and managing emotions, developing caring and concern for others, establishing positive relationships, making responsible decisions, and handling challenging situations. SEL skills for children focus on teaching them how to calm themselves when angry, making friends, resolving conflicts respectfully, and making ethical and safe choices (Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004). SEL is also a framework for school improvement

and the promotion of a positive school climate. School social work practices align well with SEL.

School social workers can use long-standing and current education policies to intervene in the educational process at multiple levels, using the systems perspective and offering prevention and intervention services to affect academic achievement. Those services go beyond making home visits and providing individual, group counseling, and crisis intervention services. Focusing on systems, strengths, and resilience, school social workers incorporate evidence-based practices and use of data to support students and boost program outcomes.

School social workers have excellent leadership skills in facilitation and coordination and are aptly trained to lead or colead the RTI or SEL change process. They will engage the entire school community and develop a team of people who can help lead the charge: school administrators, grade-level teachers, parents, specialized instructional support personnel (SISP), and other support staff members (e.g., the lunchroom staff members, the custodian, and the bus driver).

### Service Learning

Another essential component of school social work is working with students from a strengths perspective. One such model is critical service learning. Critical service learning engages students in meaningful service activities in their schools and communities to support the development of civic responsibility, caring and concern for others, and self-worth. Critical service learning is integrated into the academic curriculum so that students are empowered to brainstorm, plan, and implement activities that will have a direct impact on the school, the community, and their own personal development (McKay & Johnson, 2010).

At Everett Middle School in San Francisco, CA, Bridget Early's role is to help defuse tension throughout the campus and support students who are living in poverty and challenging circumstances. She helps teachers focus on academics by running interference when a crisis occurs.

"My job is helping kids who are not having their basic needs met," said Early. "They are expected to sit in class and focus on schoolwork and testing, when maybe the night before there was crazy domestic violence or a shooting outside their window. Maybe they're with a parent who is a stranger. It's hard for them to come here and set all that aside."

There's no such thing as a typical day, but here's what one recent day looked like.

**8:40:** A boy suspended for slamming a door on a teacher's hand is processed for reentry to the school. Sullen and angry, he explains he intended to slam the door and call the teacher a name, but not hurt her. Early asks how the incident affected his classmates. He admits that they were scared and unable to learn. The teacher is brought in, and the boy apologizes. Early asks the students about what warning signs he displays before he erupts into rage. He promises that the next time he feels angry he will visit Early at the wellness center to calm down.

**8:50:** A boy strolls into the wellness center, emanating anger. The student, who who has an emotional disability, tells Early that he needs a break from his class. After a time-out and a few kind words, he's ready to return.

**9:30:** Early gets a call that a boy has caused a disruption. In the hallway, he explains that he found a dead bug, picked it up, and put it on a girl's desk. His teacher made him call his father. "I didn't do it on purpose. Well, maybe kind of on purpose," he says, looking remorseful. "I know I was trying to be funny, but it affected my teacher, and I disappointed her." He promises not to do it again.

**10:00:** Early rounds up at-risk students who call themselves the "Sixth-Grade Mob" and asks them to attend a meeting she has planned with the help of probation officers to deter them from gangs. One boy says he doesn't want to go. "Just trust me," says Early. "Give it a try." His reluctance soon turns to enthusiasm; he brings other students to Early, saying they will also benefit from the meeting.

**10:30:** A boy comes to the wellness center, upset about "harassment." He declines her offer of mediation, but seems calmer after a talk. He has suffered abuse by his father and is struggling with his mother, who won't accept that he's gay, says Early. She schedules him for a counseling session with a marriage and family therapist interning at the school. Early spends a lot of time educating students about homophobia and sponsors the Gay-Straight Alliance and the school's gay pride week. Students come out to her but are afraid to be open at this age.

**11:00:** The Sixth-Grade Mob meets with "Red," an ex-gang member, for a "scared straight" type of conversation. Most of them are "gang wannabes," says Early, who hopes this talk might put them on a better path. Red describes being shot and stabbed numerous times and having his "friends" abandon him during recuperation and incarceration. He tells the students, "A lot of people glorify the gang thing and think it's cool, but it's really not. Small things lead to big things."

**11:30:** Early contemplates how the presentation went: "I think it will affect some of them not at all, and some who want to look cool in front of their friends will go home tonight and really think about it. We can't force them to make right decisions, but we can provide information to make right decisions."

**11:45:** A boy has been sent to Early for wearing blue shoes. Blue and red are banned as gang colors. Early uses masking tape to cover up the blue. "Obviously tape doesn't solve the gang problem," she says, winding tape around his shoes. "But it won't trigger gang behavior in other kids."

**Noon:** Early has pizza waiting for a new group of peer mediators. She trains them to handle disputes, welcome new students, and give tours. She reminds them conflict resolution is confidential and not to be discussed publicly.

**1:15:** Two boys having a playground dispute are brought in by a security officer. One repeatedly kicked a ball at the other. Swearwords and threats were exchanged. The boy hit by the ball agrees to make peace, but the one who kicked it laughs, rolls his head, and mumbles more threats. Early asks if he is able to "move on," and he repeatedly replies, "I don't care." She suspects he is under the influence of something and asks the guard to remove him and investigate. Off he goes.

**1:45:** Early returns phone calls to parents, grandparents, social service agencies, and others.

**After school:** Early attends a professional learning community meeting with staff members and provides a sympathetic ear to stressed-out teachers. "Both my parents are public school teachers, so it's important for me to support teachers," she says. "I seriously think that teaching is the most admirable job and that they need a space where they can talk about things. They need an outlet." She also offers "wellness" sessions with teachers once a week during lunchtime.

**4:00:** Early prepares to go home. "A lot of the problems I deal with are on a societal level," she muses. "It trickles down to the school, and we try and fix it. Sometimes they come back years later and tell me I made a difference. For me, that's the best part of the job."

---

Adapted from Posnick-Goodwin, S. (2013–2014). A day in the life of a school social worker. *California Educator*, 18(4), 42–44.



Critical service learning is different from community service and service projects in that it goes beyond mere altruism shown to the less fortunate. The mission of critical service learning is to support critical thinking, reflection, and action to bolster societal change (McKay, 2010).

Although research is ongoing, service learning, partly through its effects on students' sense of community and positive school climate, may help increase the engagement and motivation of all students, particularly at-risk or disadvantaged students. Service learning emphasizes youth empowerment so that students begin to see themselves as partners with others to bring about change in their environments (McKay, 2010). Service learning builds on students' developmental assets and is a protective factor for youth.

### **Conclusion**

All school social work services should clearly correlate with support for the

academic achievement of students. Because of their training in systems theory, leadership, facilitation, advocacy, and coordination and their strong clinical skills, school social workers have the expertise to align existing services and clinical practices with emerging expectations to support RTI and SEL in schools. Those expectations and challenges should be met, developed, and expanded by school social workers in partnership with other education team leaders. Together, they can capitalize on their schools' delivery of educational services to maximize positive behavioral, developmental, and academic outcomes. **PL**

### **REFERENCES**

- McKay, C. (2010). Critical service learning: A school social work intervention. *Children and Schools*, 32(1), 5–13.
- McKay, C., & Johnson, A. (2010). Service learning: An example of multilevel school social work practice. *School Social Work Journal*, 35(1), 21–36.
- Morrison, V. (2006). History of school social work: The Illinois perspective, one hundred years of school social work: Past, present, and future 1906–2006. *School Social Work Journal*, 30(3), 1–23.
- National Center for Response to Intervention. (n.d.). *What is RTI?* Retrieved from [www.rti4success.org](http://www.rti4success.org)
- US Department of Education. (n.d.). *IDEA—Reauthorized statute: Early intervening services*. Retrieved from [www2.ed.gov/policy/speced/guid/idea/tb-early-intervent.pdf](http://www2.ed.gov/policy/speced/guid/idea/tb-early-intervent.pdf)
- Zins, J., Weissberg, R., Wang, M., & Walberg, H. J. (2004). *Building academic success on social and emotional learning: What does the research say?* New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

**Annette Johnson** is a clinical assistant professor at Jane Addams College of Social Work at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

**Libby K. Nealis** is the director of policy and advocacy for the School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA).