

School and University Partnerships in Education and Social Work: A Working Model to Enhance the Social and Emotional Learning of All Children.

Program development and partnerships between parents, schools, and social workers are essential for a child's emotional and social development. The demands of federal legislation like No Child Left Behind and the Disabilities Improvement Act, as well as state requirements for certification, are making it necessary to demonstrate outcomes, such as student achievement, behavioral interventions, and attendance. Schools that under perform are held accountable: They must provide their students with extended learning or tutoring, credit recovery opportunities, remedial courses, assignment to adult mentors for additional support and counseling sessions to assist in personal growth and skills development. The use of research-based instructional methods, timely information, and options for parental involvement are most important for a child to be successful in school. Almost all teachers and social workers welcome parental involvement by giving them information and choices about their children's education and behavior in the classroom. Teachers are highly trained in developmentally appropriate classroom management and instruction. Social workers are trained in program development as to strengthen school, home and community partnerships while enhancing social and emotional development of students. Therefore, both professions are well equipped to work in partnership to develop a working model that will enhance the social and emotional learning of all students. What do parents, teachers, and social workers have in common? Parents, teachers, and social workers have the same goal: to guide children in their social and emotional development.

Research shows that school readiness, conceptualized as emotional self-regulation, social competence, and family and school involvement without conduct problems, plays a key role in the development of youth interpersonal adjustment and academic success. A survey conducted

by the National Center for Early Development and Learning indicated that 46% of kindergarten teachers reported that more than half of the children in their classes lacked the self-regulatory skills and emotional and social competence to function productively, and were not ready for school. Socioeconomic disadvantage does not necessarily lead to social and emotional problems, however 25% of children living in poverty experience negative social and emotional outcomes (Webster-Stratton, Reid, & Stoolmiller, 2008). There is also evidence that shows it is crucial to consider children's attitudes toward social standards and conventions that characterize acceptable behavior at home and those that characterize acceptable behavior in school. In addition, there is evidence that shows it is important to be culturally sensitive to a child's ethnic background and socioeconomic status (Butler, Leschied, & Fearon, 2007).

Social workers are well trained to assist a diverse student population in different school settings. There is a heavy emphasize in the social work curriculum to not only improve the awareness of a cultural and ethnic different population, but also to integrate the knowledge of gender, family type, spiritual and/or religious identity and how to work w with the family structure. For example, it is all too often, that the stress of military families affects student learning, study habits, and positive test results in schools. School social workers are great advocates for children, as well as for parents, and grandparents. They are trained to work with different cultures and ethnic groups; therefore, they can best assist the child, family, and the teacher. School social workers often do home visits, and provide families with community resources. The Families and Schools Together program was developed in 1988 by a social worker with the purpose to decrease stress in families, increase family functioning and student success (Bye & Alvarez, 2007). Young people who feel better about their racial-ethnic background have better behavioral and academic outcomes. Children evidenced more trust in teachers when they

observed and perceived that teachers exhibited trust in them. Social workers are very familiar with the ecological model of racial-ethnic attitude formation that influences human interaction at home, at school, and in the neighborhood. Social workers who partner with teachers are not only mentoring *students* in regard to racial stereotyping, but are influencing parents as well.

Community context has been shown to be a potent influence upon children's racial-ethnic attitudes, which can affect their learning outcomes (Smith, Atkins, & Connell, 2003).

Parental involvement in social-emotional skills instruction is one of the most important factors. When social workers work together with parents in schools and in children's homes, there is an added layer of support to the family that a classroom teacher and school based counselor cannot facilitate within the confines of the school building. In schools where social workers are not available, the burden to infuse social-emotional skills into the children rests solely on the teacher and one counselor. Elksnin and Elksnin (2006) have pointed out that it is crucial that children learn social-emotional skills if they are to succeed in school and in life. Children who lack these skills are often outsiders in school, are often rejected by others, and are at risk for developing mental health problems that can persist throughout adulthood. Social workers, in partnership with parents and teachers, can instruct skills that are grounded in social learning and cognitive-behavioral methods or theories. Parents and teachers frequently address concerns about students to social workers when children display anxiety and depressive disorders. The tasks of screening, referrals, and treatment are done in collaboration with the parent and a school official. The Report of the Surgeon General's Conference on Children's Mental Health (U.S. Public Health Service, 2000) estimated that 1 in 10 children and adolescents suffer from a mental illness severe enough to cause impairment that results in behavior and learning problems (Weldon & Cook, 2006).

School social workers are often asked to assess children's emotional problems and to make referrals for psychological or psychiatric testing. They may also assess families by using a genogram and ecomap, and other family systems assessment tools. The Family and Schools Together program was developed in 1988 by a social worker. The program is widely recognized in the field of social work through documented studies as the most effective program in improving the academic and behavioral performance of children. The program achieves its effectiveness by increasing parental involvement in school, and by reducing family conflict (Miller, Martin, & Schames, 2003).

Of utmost concern stemming from all the aforementioned items, is that of attendance. Research consistently reports that students with poor attendance are at a greater risk of dropping out. Middle- and high-school students could greatly benefit by partnering with education and social-work departments at universities through mentoring, academic tutoring, workshops, and service learning. Perhaps the challenge is can the pre-service social worker or university faculty partner best collaborate, network, and build trust as a valued partner within the school while working with the counselors and student support services to address the needs of the school, student, families, and community.

The Florida Association of School Social Workers highlights the challenge of school social workers in the 21st century. "These days there is a greater emphasis on evidence based practices and intervention methods that will focus on successful outcomes, known as Response to Intervention (RtI)" (Spohn, 2010). Working within a system of highly documented accountability requires some knowledge and acculturation in order to best serve the school's needs within the existing organizational structure and climate. The 2010 Florida's School Counseling Framework prepared by the Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services, details thoroughly the standards based counseling model or the "Student Development

Curriculum” for prevention and early intervention strategies (FLDOE, 2010). While the school counselor works closely with the student, teachers, and support staff on the school campus, the school social worker is the key element and should be the greatest asset and wealth of information for the services and support available to students and families off campus. This often leads to most of the social workers tasks to be done in the field with limited visits to the school site each week. However, schools that develop strong working relationships with their r social worker and know how their services to a student can overlap are better suited to improve student attendance, academic performance, and social/emotional development. Identifying the needs, and matching those with the services the university partnership can offer, requires taking time to get to know the community The School Social worker and/or university faculty may be viewed as an outside stakeholder as they are not on the school grounds each day. Establishing trust within these settings is of utmost importance. Warren & Peel (2005) identified critical components to public school/university partnerships. They indicate that understanding the organization, standing committee, the school improvement plan, and action plans aid in one’s ability to l listen and provide valuable feedback in meetings. Attending committee meetings and knowing what support efforts and structures exist within the school afford meaningful contributions at meetings.

Knowing what support services to offer requires m multicultural awareness and understanding of the school and local community. Through School Counselors and administrators, the school social worker can obtain the schools demographics and valuable data. Additionally, the social workers should become familiar with the School Improvement Plan and the specific goals of the school for that academic year. Typically the students the SSW will serve will fall within the lower achievement categories and struggle with attendance. Achievement gaps in the school data and school climate surveys guide the development of a school’s annual goals to meet all students’ needs. Schools are being called to document intervention strategies and measure outcomes of their

plans. Additionally, School Counselors are being called to evaluate and measure their goals and indicate if the services they provide students show gains (FLDOE, 2010, p. 40). The ability to articulate one's efforts in working with one student and their family within the scope of the school goals and school climate is a valuable tool in becoming a respected outside partner. University partners sending students for placement within the schools should become familiar with the district goals, and school based interventions and committees and require pre -service SSW placements to participate at the school base site attendance and intervention committee meetings as to better understand the school support system.

Resources

International Network for School Social Work

<http://internationalnetwork-schoolsocialwork.htmlplanet.com/>

National Association of Social Workers

<http://www.naswdc.org/>

National Dropout Prevention Center/Network

<http://www.dropoutprevention.org/home>

School Social Work Association of America

<http://www.sswaa.org/>

Student Support Services

<http://sss.usf.edu/>

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