



UNDERSTANDING THE SCOPE OF PRACTICE OF MINNESOTA SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS

School social workers have the unique training, knowledge and expertise to address the mental health needs of children within the school environment, and they are the vital link between the school, home and community. School social workers are educated to understand the interplay of systems and the impact those systems have on academic achievement. School social work is grounded in the foundation of evidence-based research and practice, which ensures that interventions implemented by school social workers assist students in being physically and emotionally ready to learn. While the roles and responsibilities of school social workers may vary significantly based on the needs of the students, school social workers operate under a scope of practice dependent upon their education, training, and level of licensure obtained by the Board of Social Work. All school social workers possess core competencies and skills that can be expected regardless of the level of licensure obtained. This paper outlines the education, professional standards and licensure requirements necessary to practice school social work in the state of Minnesota.

According to the School Social Work Association of America National Practice Model for School Social Work, there are three features that all school social workers should strive to incorporate into their practice. School social workers should 1) provide scientifically supported education, behavior, and mental health services, 2) promote school climate and culture conducive to learning, and 3) maximize school-based and community resources (SSWAA, 2013). “School social workers are expected to possess advanced knowledge and technical skills to guide their practice in these three areas” (SSWAA, 2013).

All school social workers, regardless of level of licensure, provide evidence-based interventions to help students address barriers to learning by utilizing an ecological perspective. This perspective views the students within the context of their classroom, family, community and culture. School social workers are equipped to understand and assess the educational, social, emotional and behavioral functioning of individual students within the context of multiple environments. School social workers utilize evidence-based assessment tools to measure students’ level of functioning to determine a baseline. School social workers then develop and implement evidence-based interventions with the goal of improving students’ level of functioning, which leads to enhanced academic outcomes. School social workers provide services for all students regardless of the student’s level of functioning in the school, family or community. These services are divided into two levels of practice in the educational setting: (1) direct services that incorporate a wide range of education, behavior, and mental health services provided through personal contact with students, and (2) indirect services such as administration, research, policy development, advocacy and education for school staff, parents/guardians, and community members to enhance school success for students (Barker, 2003).



School social workers strive to establish and sustain a positive school climate free from discrimination and harassment. A positive school climate is one that promotes healthy relationships, school connectedness and dropout prevention. School climate and culture have a profound impact on student achievement and behavior. To the extent that students feel safe, cared for, appropriately supported and “pushed” to learn, academic achievement increases (National School Climate Council, 2007). School social workers promote positive school climate by implementing school-wide programs such as Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), bullying prevention programs, character education programs, alcohol and drug prevention programs, restorative justice programs or crisis prevention programs.

School social workers maximize school-based and community mental health resources by participating in multidisciplinary school and community teams. School social workers support children’s mental health through capacity building of family members, school staff and community agencies to increase student outcomes (NASW, 2012). As mental health practitioners and professionals, school social workers have a specialized skill set to provide a wealth of knowledge and a breadth of services as members of multidisciplinary teams. By promoting a continuum of mental health services, school social workers mobilize resources, promote assets and provide innovative leadership, interdisciplinary collaboration, systems coordination and professional consultation (SSWAA, 2013). For example, school social workers coordinate and make referrals to available resources within the school or by reaching out to community partners or agencies to support students and families. School social workers are familiar with the scope of services available in the community, such as healthcare, family services, juvenile justice, child welfare and children’s mental health, and are adept at navigating these systems in order to address challenging barriers to school success.

School social workers are mental health practitioners and mental health professionals, as defined by Minnesota Statute 245.462 Subdivision 17 and 18, who meet Minnesota requirements to practice social work in the school setting. Subdivision 17 classifies a “Mental Health Practitioner” as a person providing services to individuals with mental illness who is qualified in at least one of the following ways:

- (1) holds a bachelor’s degree in one of the behavioral sciences or related fields from an accredited college or university and:(i) has at least 2,000 hours of supervised experience in the delivery of services to persons with mental illness; or(ii) is fluent in the non-English language of the ethnic group to which at least 50 percent of the practitioner’s clients belong, completes 40 hours of training in the delivery of services to persons with mental illness, and receives clinical supervision from a mental health professional at least once a week until the requirement of 2,000 hours of supervised experience is met;
- (2) has at least 6,000 hours of supervised experience in the delivery of services to persons with mental illness;
- (3) is a graduate student in one of the behavioral sciences or related fields and is formally assigned by an accredited college or university to an agency or facility for clinical training; or
- (4) holds a master’s or other graduate degree in one of the behavioral sciences or related fields from an accredited college or university and has less than 4,000 hours post-master’s experience in the treatment of mental illness.



Subdivision 18 defines a “Mental Health Professional” as a person providing clinical services in the treatment of mental illness who is qualified in at least one of the following ways:

- (1) in psychiatric nursing: a registered nurse who is licensed under sections 148.171 to 148.285; and (i) who is certified as a clinical specialist or as a nurse practitioner in adult or family psychiatric and mental health nursing by a national nurse certification organization; or (ii) who has a master’s degree in nursing or one of the behavioral sciences or related fields from an accredited college or university or its equivalent, with at least 4,000 hours of post-master’s supervised experience in the delivery of clinical services in the treatment of mental illness;
- (2) in clinical social work: a person licensed as an independent clinical social worker under chapter 148D, or a person with a master’s degree in social work from an accredited college or university, with at least 4,000 hours of post-master’s supervised experience in the delivery of clinical services in the treatment of mental illness;
- (3) in psychology: an individual licensed by the Board of Psychology under sections 148.88 to 148.98 who has stated to the Board of Psychology competencies in the diagnosis and treatment of mental illness;
- (4) in psychiatry: a physician licensed under chapter 147 and certified by the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology or eligible for board certification in psychiatry;
- (5) in marriage and family therapy: the mental health professional must be a marriage and family therapist licensed under sections 148B.29 to 148B.39 with at least two years of post-master’s supervised experience in the delivery of clinical services in the treatment of mental illness;
- (6) in licensed professional clinical counseling, the mental health professional shall be a licensed professional clinical counselor under section 148B.5301 with at least 4,000 hours of post-master’s supervised experience in the delivery of clinical services in the treatment of mental illness; or
- (7) in allied fields: a person with a master’s degree from an accredited college or university in one of the behavioral sciences or related fields, with at least 4,000 hours of post-master’s supervised experience in the delivery of clinical services in the treatment of mental illness.

A candidate for licensure as a school social worker in Minnesota must: 1) Hold a baccalaureate or master’s degree in social work from a program accredited by the Council on Social Work Education. 2) Pass one of the exams offered by the Association of Social Work Boards. 3) Hold a current license in Minnesota to practice as a social worker under the Board of Social Work and 4) hold a current license to practice School Social Work by the Minnesota Department of Education Board of Teaching. School social workers are licensed to provide social work services to children in pre-kindergarten through grade 12 in a school setting. Some school districts in Minnesota require that school social workers have a Masters of Social Work (MSW) degree. Social workers with an MSW degree have additional education and proficiencies to deliver social work services.



The Minnesota Board of Social Work offers four levels of licensure.

- Licensed Social Worker (LSW) - May engage in generalist social work practice: must be supervised by another social worker for the equivalent of two years of full-time practice.
- Licensed Graduate Social Worker (LGSW) - May engage in generalist social work practice under supervision; must be supervised by either a LISW or LICSW for the equivalent of two years of full-time practice. In addition an LGSW may, under supervision of an LICSW, engage in clinical social work practice while working towards licensure as an independent clinical social worker.
- Licensed Independent Social Worker (LISW) - May engage in generalist social work practice, and may, under supervision of an LICSW, engage in clinical social work practice while working towards licensure as an independent clinical social worker.
- Licensed Independent Clinical Social Worker (LICSW) - May engage in generalist social work practice, including clinical Social Work practice.

The various levels of licensure permit a school social worker to provide services under a scope of practice relevant to the specific license level and educational level.

Education for a generalist social worker practicing at a Licensed Social Worker level focuses on providing service to people in the context of their social environments. This means that the social worker does not simply focus on a student who is struggling, but also considers the environmental causes (home situation, peer interactions, neighborhood conditions, classroom climate, etc.) of student behavior. This holistic approach also considers what effect the student has on others (like other students, teachers, and parents). Though not an exhaustive list, the activities listed below provide examples of what a generalist social worker might do in a school:

- Conduct assessments and screenings to determine level of service or referral needed for students.
- Help families find resources to meet basic needs such as food or clothing.
- Advocate for student rights by helping families understand educational mandates and opportunities.
- Examine student performance, referrals to special education, and data specific to the achievement gap for students of color to identify the impact of racism and culture on academic outcomes and work to implement culturally responsive practices.
- Help parents create a discipline program to develop a bedtime routine so as to improve a student's ability to concentrate in school.
- Refer a family to a counseling center to deal with personal issues.
- Locate services for a homeless family and assist families to access those services.



- Provide short-term individual or group counseling services to help a student increase organizational skills, manage anger, or get along with others.
- Help a group of students with difficulties in peer interactions,
- Help a teacher re-structure a class to better meet a student's need
- Implement a school-wide bullying prevention curriculum or a project to improve respect among students.
- Help the students and the school deal with crisis situations such as the death of student or a community disaster through location of appropriate resources and community support persons.
- Provide in-service trainings on reporting child abuse, cultural competence, or the effects of trauma on a child's learning.
- Consult with teachers, administrators, and staff, including classroom observations, teacher consultations, case conferences, and meeting with administration regarding program needs.
- Collaborate with a local low-income housing project to coordinate safe study areas or after-school care.
- Work with local law enforcement on drug or gang-prevention strategies in the neighborhood.

In addition to the generalist social work skills and knowledge described above, social workers with an MSW degree have additional education, often with a specific emphasis on social welfare policy, research, group work, community practice, and/or clinical practice. The first two full-time years after receiving a MSW degree, social workers are licensed at the LGSW level. During this time they are required to receive supervision from a social worker with more experience and who meets certain qualifications determined by the Board of Social Work. After the equivalent of two full-time years of supervision, Licensed Graduate Social Workers (LGSW) may become licensed as Independent Social Workers (LISW and LICSW) and are no longer required to have supervision; they are, however, encouraged to consult with colleagues, and many develop collaboration groups to provide support with the complicated clients they serve. If they have the required training in supervision, LISWs and LICSWs may supervise LGSWs and LSWs. It should be noted that the supervision of a district employed school social worker conducted by a school principal or special education director does not meet the state requirement of social work supervision.

Many MSWs have education in clinical social work. In addition to providing the generalist practice described above, those who are licensed at the Independent Level (LICSW) have the ability to diagnose and treat mental illness, psychosocial disorders, disabilities, addictions, emotional impairments and behavior disorders. For example a school social worker with clinical licensure has the expertise and skill to:

- Assess students' emotional or behavioral needs.
- Collaborate with others to define appropriate school-based interventions for students with emotional or behavioral needs.
- Provide school-based interventions that include the treatment of mental and emotional disorders and counseling.
- Develop prevention programs or crisis management policies



- Conduct program assessments which includes; planning, development, implementation and evaluation of programs.
- Bill for mental health services provided in districts that bill insurance for services provided.

Some LGSWs and LISWs are working toward becoming Licensed Independent Clinical Social Workers. If they are under supervision of a LICSW, they may provide the clinical services described above. Social workers who choose to become licensed as clinical social workers (LICSW) must meet additional requirements during 4000 hours of supervised practice. Specifically at least 1800 hours must be “direct clinical client contact” (for example, working directly with students and/or their families).

In addition to the requirements for supervision, all social workers must have 40 hours of continuing education every two years. These continuing-education hours must be related to social work topics. Education based in-services may not always meet the requirement defined by the Board of Social Work. School social workers that have a clinical license (LICSW) must have 24 of those 40 continuing-education hours in the areas of differential diagnosis and assessment, clinical treatment planning with measurable goals, clinical intervention methods informed by research, social work ethics, and culturally specific clinical assessment and intervention.

Another critical component that is embedded in the scope of practice of all school social workers is an adherence to a professional code of ethics. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics is the primary ethical guidance for social workers, including school social workers (NASW Code of Ethics, 2008, p.3). The School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA) has developed supplemental ethical guidance that addresses issues related to school social work practice in host settings, group work, and the privacy of minor students. “These supplemental ethical standards address issues critical to school social work practice but not addressed in the NASW Code of Ethics. They are in addition to and do not supplant the NASW Code of Ethics. Issues addressed include responsibilities to clients and stakeholders, parent rights and participation, collaborative decision-making, sharing and protecting confidential information, differential treatment of minor student-clients, consent for services, advocacy, knowledge of laws and school district policies, assessment for school-based services, mentoring, and ethical decision making” (Dibble, 2012, p.1).

The NASW Standards of School Social Work Services advises 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). The Minnesota School Social Workers Association believes that utilizing a local education agency’s student needs assessment will provide a well-rounded picture of the myriad of needs specific to the population served. Also, the needs assessment can be used to identify how using school social workers, as members of a multi-disciplinary team, can best target services and interventions to increase academic achievement. It should be noted that when nationally recommended ratios for individual Specialized Instructional Support Personnel Professionals, such as school social workers, are implemented without considering specific population needs (severity of disabilities, intensity and type of services needed, etc.), it can result in the oversimplification of the system’s needs and hinder the ability of students to access appropriate services.



In conclusion, school social workers are highly qualified to offer comprehensive approaches that not only address the social and emotional needs of students but also benefit the entire school community. School social workers assist administrators and school personnel by sharing their knowledge and training and by emphasizing the importance of providing support to the whole child, which includes tending to the child's academic, social, emotional, and behavioral functioning. School social workers are the mental health professionals and practitioners on the educational team. Research on school social work has confirmed that school social work interventions improve students' emotional and behavioral problems (Allen-Meares et al., 2013; Franklin et al., 2013) and have a positive effect on academic outcomes (Alvarez et al., 2009; Franklin et al., 2013).

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