

TENNESSEE SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS



Making a Difference in the Lives of
Children and Youth

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Source: Metro-Nashville Public Schools Social Work Services

Who are School Social Workers?

For over a hundred years, school social workers have provided a critical link between school, home, and community. School social workers are equipped with knowledge of the structural, social, and emotional barriers to learning, especially for vulnerable students. They consistently focus on coordinating the efforts of schools, families, and communities toward helping students improve their academic achievement by preparing students to be mentally, physically, and emotionally present in the classroom, ensuring equitable education opportunities, and promoting the respect and dignity of all students.¹ The State of Tennessee Department of Education licenses school social workers after completion of a program in school social work approved by the State Board of Education and after receipt of a Bachelor or Master Degree in Social Work from a school accredited by the Council on Social Work Education with completion of an internship in a school setting.²

How do School Social Workers improve outcomes for children and youth?

A 2013 study examined the influence school social workers have on educational outcomes, number of students completing high school, graduation rates, and dropout rates by doing a cursory review of the existing literature on school social work outcome research to date. They present the results of a study on school social work services in the 100 largest school districts in the United States, which includes Metro-Nashville, Knox County, Memphis, and Shelby County School Districts. They were able to control for poverty and school district size while assessing the relationship between the number of school social workers and the number of high school completers during the 2008-09 academic school year. The study showed that the number of school social workers in a school district positively influences the number of high school completers. In the 100 largest school districts in the United States, districts that employ school social workers had more students completing high school.³

Data was also compared for high school and middle school students receiving social work case management services in two rural school districts in the United States during the 2016-17 school year. Data was collected before and six weeks after the start of interventions to determine the impact of social work services on student attendance, behavior, and crisis situations. Regardless of the intervention, students receiving social work services in both districts had an average of 24% fewer absences in the six weeks following the start of services. That amounts to 1.78 more days in the classroom per six week period. They had an average of 40% less behavior referrals after beginning services, with an average of 0.67 less referrals during a six week period. Students also had an average increase of 13% on their progress improvement ratings after beginning services, with an average progress improvement rating increase of 0.5 points during a six week period. This rating demonstrates student progress on short-term goals, indications of change, and desired outcomes specific to each crisis situation. Though only licensed clinical social workers (LCSWs) can provide clinical therapy and intervention to students, these findings imply that even basic social work services and referrals for students with mental health issues are effective in producing improvements.⁴

In 2008, researchers examined the impact of school social work services on reducing risk factors related to truancy and student absenteeism among students in urban secondary schools. A total of 115 students participated in this study, 74 students receiving school social work services were compared to 71 students not receiving services. The study found that youths receiving school social work services displayed significant increases in their satisfaction with school, their self-esteem, and their perceptions of both their academic performance and the supportiveness of their home environments.⁵

Another study, a cross-national systematic review of eighteen studies, examined Tier 1 and Tier 2 school-based interventions that involve social workers and their effectiveness with youth. Participants receiving Tier 1 interventions where social workers provided behavioral and mental health assessments, psychiatric referrals, and crisis intervention reported significant increases in both physical and psychosocial health-related quality of life scores. Tier 2 interventions with students who were consider at-risk found that participants had significantly improved self-esteem, self-control, classroom behavior, improved emotional awareness, emotional coping skills, academic performance, and homework completion.⁶

In the Every Student Succeeds Act State Plan, the Tennessee Department of Education demonstrates the importance of supporting and coordinating initiatives that serve all students and ensuring that every student learns in a safe and supportive environment through the “All Means All” state education priority.⁷ Across the state, there is a push to provide individualized support and opportunities for all students, with a focus on those groups who are often left behind. Although there has been great progress, too many Tennessee students—especially those of color, from low-income backgrounds, who have disabilities, or are English learners—are not on track to graduate from high school prepared for postsecondary education and the workforce.⁸ We cannot improve outcomes overall without improving outcomes for our underserved populations. With expertise in family systems theory, child development, and cultural diversity, school social workers are equipped with knowledge of the structural, social, and emotional barriers to learning and can provide the needed strategies to interrupt trajectories that can lead to poor academic performance, chronic absenteeism, and delinquency. School social workers can drive continued success in Tennessee by preparing more students for postsecondary

and career success and ensuring more equitable opportunities for all students.

Research indicates that students from families who are engaged in their education earn better grades and test scores; enroll in higher-level courses and programs; are more likely to be promoted, pass their classes, and earn credits; have better school attendance; show improved behavior and have better social skills; and graduate and go on to postsecondary education. We also know, however, that children from economically disadvantaged families face additional challenges. Students living in lower-income neighborhoods often attend schools that lack the resources needed to foster student success. They tend to have much lower rates of parent involvement in their education than their middle-class peers. Schools must take deliberate action to forge strong partnerships with parents and help them feel welcome. Economically disadvantaged students need a network of support to counteract the negative effects of poverty.⁹ Tennessee school social workers are an active link to improving the lives of students and increasing their capacity for academic achievement by helping students overcome these obstacles and barriers to academic success. They build positive relationships between the school and families by working together with community resources and school administrators to ensure students and families can access basic necessities of daily living and the support necessary for parent engagement and better student outcomes.

Efforts to better prepare students for success beyond high school depend on students being in class to receive instruction and experience all opportunities available at their schools. Data on chronic absenteeism and discipline, however, show too many students miss too much time in school.¹⁰ Students who are absent 10 percent of school days (18 days) or more often struggle to stay on pace in their learning. Chronic absenteeism in high school grades can also pull students off track

toward graduation and postsecondary success. In addition, some of Tennessee’s chronic absenteeism rates may be tied to exclusionary disciplinary practices that remove students from class through suspensions and expulsions.¹¹ Often attendance workers do not have enough time or resources to address root causes of truancy. School social workers help monitor student attendance and reduce dropout rates by getting out in the community, speaking with families, and connecting them with resources to get them back into school. For disciplinary hearings, school social workers can be present to offer alternative strategies and prevent kids from going to juvenile court and missing valuable classroom time.

“We were sending out hundreds of letters from our attendance office weekly notifying parents of 5 day and 10 day absences. With the hiring of four social workers, who are speaking to and connecting families to resources, those attendance letters were decreased to only 12 letters.”

Source: Kim Guinn, Anderson County Schools
AWARE Director

Research and practice have consistently demonstrated an association between positive school climate and improved student learning, teacher retention, and school performance.¹² Exposure to violence in schools can impact brain development and a child’s ability to form relationships, impair memory integration and the ability to concentrate in class. It can also cause an increase in absenteeism, PTSD symptoms and poor mental health. Effects of school violence hinder learning and diminish student achievement and success. Thus, addressing school climate issues is necessary to support decisions for and evaluating the effectiveness of various policies and practices. Policy makers should consider

preventative measures and have more resources available to students that promote a healthy learning environment and successful outcomes for students.¹³

The Shelby County Schools Mental Health Center (SCSMHC) demonstrates the vital role school social workers and the threat assessment approach play in keeping students and schools safe. Previously known as the Memphis City Schools Mental Health Center, the center became the Shelby County School Mental Health Center after Memphis City and Shelby County Schools merged to form a new unified school district in 2013. SCSMHC is licensed by the Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services to provide school-based treatment and support for students who are struggling with behavioral and emotional challenges.¹⁴

During the 2004-05 school year, the mental health team in Memphis City Schools decided to adopt a threat assessment approach to evaluate students who appeared to pose a risk of violence. Threat assessment is a process of evaluating a threat, and the circumstances surrounding the threat to uncover any facts or evidence that indicate the threat is likely to be carried out. 209 student threats were referred for assessment during the 2004-05 school year. There were no reports of any students carrying out any of the violent threats. School social workers were and continue to be a vital part of the centralized Threat Assessment Team (TAT), which screens student threats and conducts mental health assessments in cases where there is concern about a continued threat to others. It is in large part due to the implementation of the student threat assessment guidelines and the Threat Assessment Team that there has not been a school shooting in Memphis.¹⁵

Strategies that promote student relationships and improve staff—student communication could be the most effective method for reducing school

violence. Social workers have a vast knowledge of evidence-based practices that aim to improve student success from a behavioral and mental health perspective. School social workers can provide training and education opportunities to students, teachers, administrators, and the community on various topics, including suicide prevention, bullying, child abuse prevention and detection. They can also be involved and work alongside school administrators and teachers to develop and support decisions on school policies and practices regarding school safety and promotion of a healthy school climate. School social workers can help identify safety and security needs and assist school personnel in balancing the implementation of school safety practices with promoting student connectedness and a positive education environment conducive to student learning.¹⁶

Current Status of School Social Work and Recommendations

There are a variety of recommended student to school social worker ratios. The Tennessee BEP funding formula ratio is 1 social worker to every 2,000 students.¹⁷ Only 29.5 percent of Tennessee school districts meet this ratio.^{17 18} The National Association of Social Workers and the School Social Work Association of America recommended ratio is 1:250.^{19 20} The Tennessee Coordinated School Health surveys schools by ratio of 1:1,500.¹⁸

During the 2016-17 school year, there were a total of 1,781 schools and 140 school districts in the state of Tennessee.²¹ Currently, a total of 440 school social workers are employed in Tennessee with a majority serving schools in urban areas. Almost half, forty-three (43) percent, of school districts in Tennessee do not have school social worker coverage.¹⁸ Responses from the 2016-17 Student Health Survey found that 84% of Tennessee school districts indicated an interest in receiving more support to help them address youth mental health needs in their schools.²²

Over the past decade, we have established a positive trajectory and celebrated a period of groundbreaking change in Tennessee's education system. During this period, Tennessee has seen striking successes in student achievement that also called attention to the continued need to ensure long-term success for all students. However, we know our work is not finished. We must continue to build on our progress and success by strengthening the strong foundation in each of our schools and districts.

Student Support Collaborative

Legislation passed by the Tennessee General Assembly in 2018 (SB2196/HB2272) requires the establishment a student support collaborative in the Tennessee Department of Education. The collaborative will review and refine the roles and responsibilities for school social workers, school counselors, school psychologists, and school nurses. The collaborative will also identify available resources and areas that school social workers, school counselors, school psychologists, and school nurses can collaborate on to provide high quality support to students. Representatives from the following organizations will be part of the collaborative:

- Tennessee Department of Education
- Local education agencies
- NASW, Tennessee Chapter
- TN Association of School Social Workers
- Tennessee Association of School Counselors
- Tennessee Association of School Nurses
- Tennessee Association of School Psychologists
- Tennessee Commission on Children and Youth

This legislation also stipulates that the BEP review committee will analyze the addition of a component for school social workers to the BEP funding formula and will include this analysis in their 2018 annual report.

Overview of Key Federal and State Policies

Every Student Succeeds Act

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) replaced the No Child Left Behind Act in 2015. This gives states and school districts more flexibility to shape policies within schools. Tennessee fully transitioned to ESSA during the 2017-18 school year. The passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act is a real opportunity for Tennessee to build on our current successes and to support our larger state goals by tailoring programs in schools to meet the specific needs of the state, school districts, and communities within Tennessee. With the implementation of ESSA in motion, Tennessee will begin to seek assistance in increasing student attendance as each school will now receive a grade measuring chronic absenteeism. The ESSA acknowledges the important and direct link between mental and behavioral wellness with the overall positive student achievement, school climate, high school graduation rates, and the prevention of risky behaviors and delinquent incidents.⁷

Basic Education Program

The Basic Education Program (BEP) is the funding formula through which state education dollars are generated and distributed to Tennessee schools. The funds generated by the BEP are what the state has defined as sufficient to provide a basic level of education for Tennessee students. The BEP has three major categories (instruction, classroom, and non-classroom), each made up of separate components related to the basic needs of students, teachers, and administrators within a school system.¹⁷

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Changing Needs of Tennessee Children and Youth

School Violence

- From 2014-16, a total of 26,828 offenses that included 19,145 victims were reported by Tennessee Law Enforcement agencies at a school location²³
- As of February 28th, there have already been 19 gun-related incidents on the grounds of a U.S. elementary, middle, or high school in 2018²⁴
- Witnessing violence can lead to toxic stress, trauma, and a negative impact on brain development in youth²⁵

Adverse Childhood Experiences

- More than 1 in 6 Tennesseans report a score of four or more ACEs
- The future economic development and prosperity of the state depends on what we do now to prevent these and wrap services around children and families²⁵

Chronic Absenteeism

- 16% of Tennessee ninth-graders were chronically absent in 2015-16
- Chronically absent students are less likely to read on grade level at the end of third grade
- More than 63,000 students in Tennessee missed school time in 2015 for disciplinary infractions⁸

Mental Health

- Approximately 1 in 6 school-aged youth experience impairments due to mental illness²⁶
- The number of ADHD/ADD diagnoses in Tennessee have increased by 167 percent from 2004-05 to 2015-16²⁷

Poverty

- In Tennessee, 1 in 4 students under the age of 18 are living in poverty²⁸
- Economically disadvantaged students are 3x more likely to be chronically absent in elementary schools than their non-economically disadvantaged peers¹⁰

Addiction Epidemic

- Tennessee ranks 2nd in the U.S. for the rate of opioids sold
- In 2012, Tennessee 10th and 12th graders stated the average age at which they first abused prescription opioids was 14²⁹
- In 2013, an estimated 26,000 children ages 12-17 were dependent on or abusing illicit drugs or alcohol in Tennessee³⁰

Suicide

- Suicide is the 2nd leading cause of death in young people (ages 10-19) in Tennessee³¹
- With educators trained to recognize youth who exhibit signs of contemplating suicide, we have a good chance to identify and help youth at risk for suicide³²

Bullying

- In 2014-15 school year, there were 9,678 total number of bullying cases in Tennessee
- The percentage of cyberbullying cases rose from 6.5% in 2013-14 to 7.8% in 2014-15³²

Homelessness

- There was a 15% increase in the number of homeless children and youth from the 2014-15 school year to the 2015-16 school year
- Unaccompanied homeless youth have increased from 617 to 759 in those years³³
- With increasing population, links to housing and community resources are essential

Teen Pregnancy

- In 2016 there were more than 32 teen pregnancies per 1,000 females aged 15-19 in Tennessee³⁴
- Racial and ethnic disparities in teen pregnancy persist
- Long-lasting effects for teen parents and their children- e.g. growing up in poverty, having parents with low level education, low performance in school²⁵

Gaps in Academic Achievement

- In 2015, 88 percent of African-Americans and 81 percent of Latinos were below proficient level in eighth grade
- The rates for African-American students who did not graduate from high school are more than twice as high as non-Hispanic white students³⁵
- Approximately 50,000 English Learners are enrolled in Tennessee schools¹¹

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