

THE VALUE OF SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK

21 Ways to Promote our Worth in Education

Compiled and Written by: Mary Pat Gilliam, LCSW

Social Workers can aptly be described as the oil which supports the school engine. When there is success and achievement, credit is given to the entire machine for operating effectively. Highlighted below are ways social workers specifically contribute toward and enhance the goal of educating children.

1. **ALIGN YOURSELF** with your School District's Priorities.

If bullying is a hot topic at the administrative level, make sure you're addressing it as well. If your district is targeting issues around student homelessness, make it a priority for you. In other words, our job is to advance the agenda of the school district for which we work.

Keep in mind that attendance is a priority for each school district. Assisting this endeavor will always be regarded well.

2. **SERVE ON COMMITTEES** that are useful to the School District.

Volunteer for committees at the district level. Social workers bring a perspective which can complement the educational viewpoint. Seek out opportunities to offer input in your district.

3. **KEEP ABREAST OF INFORMATION** which is helpful to Staff.

Psychotropic medication is often changing and updating. Community Resources can be difficult to understand and access. Family Court and Children's Services are confusing if one is unfamiliar with the system. Keep track of changes and updates. You'll be seen as a valuable resource.

4. **USE DATA** to focus others on the Usefulness of our Profession.

Data is part of the language of education. Know the number of students that are homeless in your district during the year. (Homeless Coordinator) Learn the percentage of students on free/reduced lunch. (DESE Website) In conversation, you can tie these issues to social work's ability to intervene effectively,

5. SUPPORT DATA DRIVEN STUDENT OUTCOMES

‘Data Driven Decision Making’ has become a motto in education and it’s not going away soon. Social workers sound ineffectual when stating we cannot find ways to gather data on the work we do. Instead, look for ways to collect information demonstrating progress on the students we serve. Continue to reiterate we are part of a team which helps improve student outcomes.

6. COLLECT MEANINGFUL DATA

Decision makers are not interesting in how many phone calls we have made, they need to know the bottom line. “Did we enhance student performance?” “Did we help students access their education?” Consider tracking how many families have been helped. Find other data that leads back to your district’s priorities.

7. MAKE CONTRIBUTIONS as an entire Social Work group.

Organizing a coat drive allows others to contribute and reminds staff there is a social work department. Coordinating backpack distribution of food supplies supports tenets of the profession. Find ways make your social work department vibrant and visible.

8. CELEBRATE SOCIAL WORK MONTH

What better way to remind staff of the contributions of our profession. Notify administrators. Ask SSWAM to remind your superintendent to celebrate this month.

9. STAY INFORMED OF NATIONAL TRENDS in Education

The implication of test scores on teacher performance is a hot topic. It’s a trend that’s shifting the climate in the classroom. Keep abreast of trends. This helps all of us continually adapt to the field of education.

10. RELATIONSHIP, RELATIONSHIP, RELATIONSHIP

Restaurateurs note that a satisfied consumer tells one person and a dissatisfied customer affects the opinion of ten others. This is so true in our field. Foster those relationships with principals, counselors, teachers and the clients we serve.

11. **SUPPORT THE NATIONAL EFFORT** of the Social Work Profession

It's no accident that school social work was identified in the reauthorization of IDEA, thereby creating jobs for school social workers. We know our value. Efforts at the national level allow our profession to demonstrate our contributions to schools.

12. **TELL STUDENT NARRATIVES** related to Social Work

Keep track of individual success stories. Be able to relate the narrative on formal and informal occasions. Look for the possibility to collect the data within the story, knowing, of course, it's the soft data which spells out the success.

13. **HELP KEY PEOPLE SEE YOUR VALUE**

Stay in communication with key people who make decisions about social work positions. Find ways to relay information. Know that decisions are not made by the superintendent in isolation, they are influenced by input of key administrators.

14. **RECOGNIZE THE COLLECTIVE GOOD** of the School District

In this time of severe budget deficits, we look foolish if we argue that a teacher should be eliminated so that social work has a position. Administrators are being called to make difficult decisions. Instead, acknowledge and reiterate the contribution which our profession makes in multifaceted areas.

15. **WRITE USEFUL DOCUMENTS AND ARTICLES** for Educators

When a natural disaster hits, write a quick checklist for teachers of ways they can help children in the classroom. Offer to write a blurb for the website on issues that affect parents and the community. In other words, establish yourself as a source for thoughtful and informative communication.

16. **AVOID DILUTING THE POSITION** of Social Work

Social workers want to be viewed as supportive professionals. It's in our DNA. But it's easy to crossover the line into loading busses, handing out worksheets or countless other tasks. Avoid a task where someone could ask 'Couldn't we hire someone far cheaper to do this work?' Strike a balance between being

a team player (dismissal may require 'all hands on deck') and allowing your workday to be consumed by endless tidbits.

The same is true for projects we envision. Organizing a job fair is a noble endeavor, but doesn't advance the mission of a school district and it makes us look dispensable. (Granted, one could argue that employed residents pay taxes.) On the other hand, collaborating with community representatives on a project fosters relationships, which the district finds valuable.

17. **BE AN ADVOCATE** for Students and Families

There are times this will annoy both teachers who are on the front line and administrators who are responsible for the entire student body. However, the savvy administrator will respect you for this position if done with knowledge and integrity. You are performing your role as a bridge between the family and school.

18. **IDENTIFY THE NEED** within the System

Nothing says *VALUE* like finding a need and mobilizing the resources to solve the problem, especially when using existing staff and materials. For example, a Crisis Team helps all staff know there will be a competent response should an event occur. A Resource Manual reduces duplication of work and allows a more informed response. Look for the unmet need.

19. **OBTAIN DATA** from your Constituency

If ten of your students graduate, find out how many families thought social work involvement played a key role. Ask students you serve if your intervention was useful. (Scott Miller research) In other words, have our clients help define our success.

20. **INTERPRET MENTAL HEALTH** for Educators

Continue to be proficient in understanding and explaining mental health issues to others. Interpret for educators that one is often 'riding the roller coaster' with these students, trying to keep them from dropping too steeply and, perhaps, not as frequently. We can build up their tool box for coping, but make no mistake, the issues are ongoing. This needs to be continually interpreted for educators. This disability will affect their entire school career.

21. ENJOY THE RIDE

People notice others who enjoy and are engaged in their work.
No one dragged us kicking and screaming into this profession.
Let others know we thrive on having a chance to make a difference
in the lives of those we serve.