

School Social Workers are the Vital Link to School Success

Although the profession of School Social Work has been around for over a century, many people still do not understand in what capacity a School Social Worker functions in the educational setting. Partially, this is due to the ever-changing role of the School Social Worker. This year marks the 106th anniversary of the profession of School Social Work as it originated in Chicago during the settlement house movement (Johnson, 2012). Initially, School Social Workers were known as Visiting Teachers and their work centered on visiting schools and homes in order to work closely with and foster harmony between schools and community groups to promote understanding and communication. During the early years of the profession, School Social Workers met with families in their homes to facilitate the children's education and to ensure children attended school after the passing of the compulsory attendance law. School Social Workers became the Vital Link between home, school and community because they understood the social needs of the underprivileged families and played an important role of advocating for children and families.

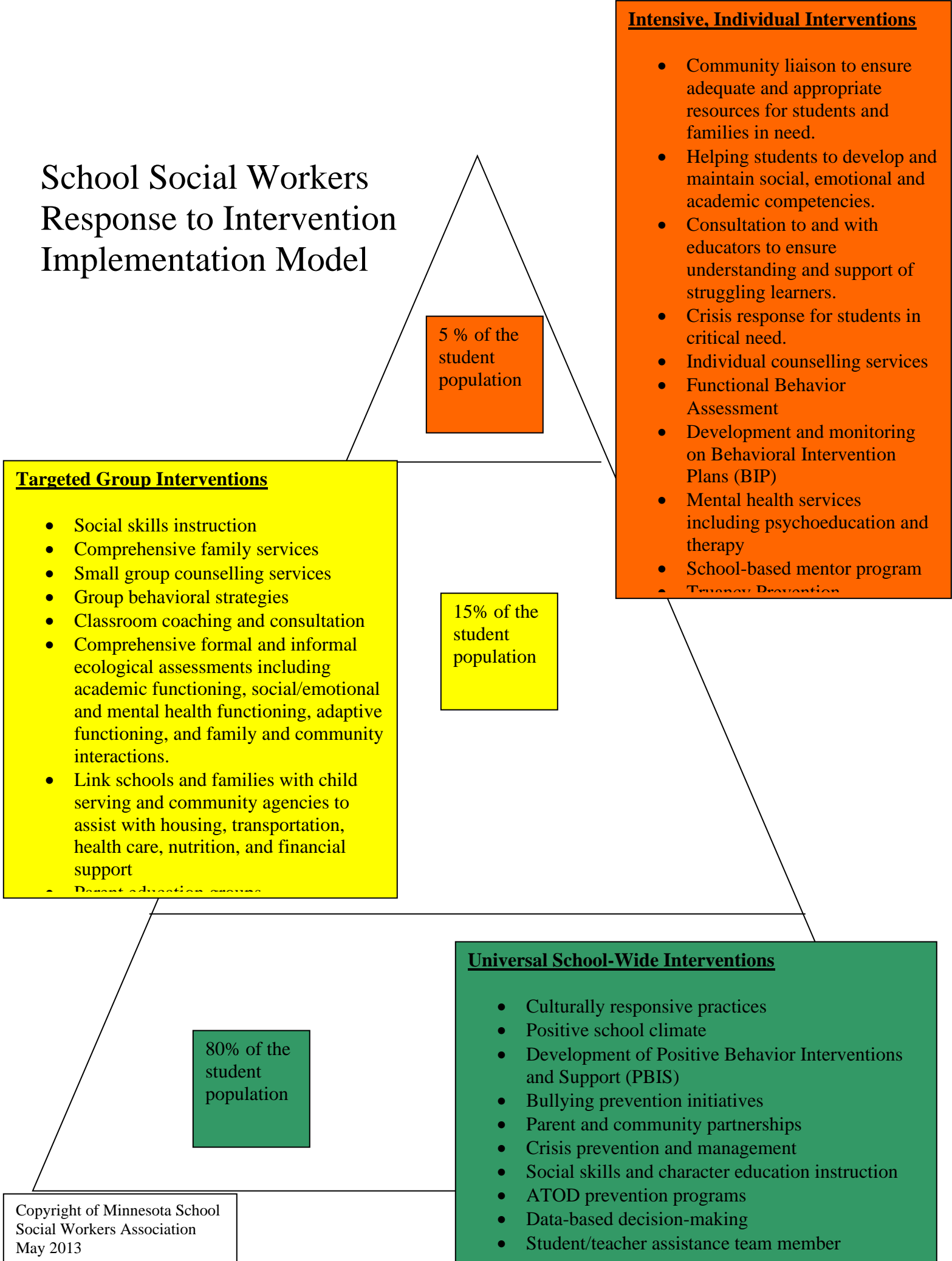
The passing of the Rehabilitation Act/Section 504 (1973) and Individuals with Disabilities Act (1975), created a new role for School Social Workers and delineated some of the services to be provided. Social work services in schools, as identified in section 300.34, (c), (14), included:

- Preparing a social or developmental history on a child with a disability
- Group and individual counseling with the child and family
- Working in partnership with parents and others on those problems in a child's living situation (home, school, and community) that affect the child's adjustment in school
- Mobilizing school and community resources to enable the child to learn as effectively as possible in his or her educational program
- Assisting in developing positive behavioral intervention strategies

Most recently, because of their knowledge, skills, and values, School Social Workers are being recognized as important visionary leaders in two major movements in education - Response to Intervention (RtI) and Social Emotional Learning (SEL) (Johnson, 2012). The uniqueness of having School Social Workers implementing RtI is they use what's known as an "ecological perspective", which includes looking at children, families, cultures, physical and social environments, and policies to identify the strengths between these systems and to develop evidence-based prevention and intervention programs and practices in the education setting. School Social Workers are part of a multidisciplinary team that includes School Psychologists, School Nurses, School Counselors and Chemical Health Specialists providing a continuum of care. School Social Workers also use "holistic thinking" to provide a paradigm for understanding how systems and their interactions can maintain a student's academic, social, or emotional behavior.

School Social Workers serve as a resource to teachers and other school staff on understanding the process and requirements of RtI initiatives. Through the process of RtI, School Social Workers use a system-wide approach to provide prevention and intervention services using a three-tier model of implementation. This approach allows for early identification to help resolve issues or barriers to student success. School Social Workers assist school staff to understand mental health and behavioral concerns of students identified as needing assistance and the potential impact of chosen interventions.

School Social Workers Response to Intervention Implementation Model



Social Emotional Learning (SEL) falls under the umbrella of RtI and epitomizes the work of the School Social Worker. SEL plays a critical role in improving children's academic performance, social interactions and mental health. SEL is the process through which we learn to recognize and manage emotions, care about others, make good decisions, behave ethically and responsibly, develop positive relationships, and avoid negative behaviors (Zin et. al. 2004). School Social Workers implement SEL by teaching children specific skills such as how to calm themselves when angry, make friends, resolve conflicts respectfully, make ethical and safe choices, and contribute constructively to their community (Payton et. al., 2008). School Social Workers utilize evidence-based SEL programs to teach students the specific skills needed to become productive citizens. School Social Workers also collaborate with educators to integrate these skills into the core curriculum on a daily basis.

Children who have not developed these skills tend to struggle academically, socially, emotionally and behaviorally. Children with mental health disorders struggle even more so with acquiring these skills. Due to the fact that all students must attend school, there is an imperative need to have School Social Workers in school to support these students. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, one in five children have a mental health disorder, yet few of them have been properly diagnosed and fewer still don't receive treatment to support their healthy functioning (Merikangas et. al., 2010). Children are more than capable of accessing learning and experiencing social success when they have the skills and tools to manage their daily life. School Social Workers are able to work within the school system to assist in identifying students with mental health disorders, assessing student's needs, and developing a plan to give students the tools they need to be successful. Examples of this work may include School Social Workers teaching social thinking skills to children with autism spectrum disorders, behavior management and coping strategies to children with depression, anxiety, a mood disorder or oppositional defiant disorder, impulse control to children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, or organizational skills to children with fetal alcohol syndrome. School Social Workers also address the acute needs of students who are in crisis or their families are in a situation where support is needed to stabilize the environment or person. Crises that may arise include but are not exclusive to: suicidal ideation, domestic violence, sexual violence, homelessness, grief and loss, and child abuse or neglect. Many of these children can be seen walking the halls of our schools. They deserve to feel safe and supported so they can access learning at their highest potential and develop healthy relationships, which give them the security to take academic and social risks.

So how are School Social Workers linked to school success? Student's academic achievement is the priority of all School Social Workers as they are responsible for assisting kids overcome the barriers that are in the way of their learning. School Social Workers are travelers with the children, their families and school staff helping them to achieve academic and social success. Students who develop meaningful relationships with adults at school are more likely to attend school. The more time students spend in school the more exposure to curriculum they receive which leads to increased academic success. Students who learn coping skills will be more focused in the classroom, which leads to greater engagement in their learning. Students who learn how to make good decisions or to solve problems will have greater self-esteem and confidence in their abilities. Students who learn to manage their emotions will have greater self-control and ability to develop social competencies, which leads to a healthier, happy lifestyle.

Children are often the “canaries” who will speak or act up when something in their environment is amiss just as the canaries served that purpose in the mines for the miners. Children will share when someone listens and will trust when someone is authentic with them. They deserve the greatest attention as they are the future stakeholders and decision makers; they will remember when they were listened to and cared for as well as when they were invisible or ignored. With the help and support of School Social Workers, the outlook for students experiencing educational, social or emotional barriers to learning, can become more optimistic and full of hope for a better future. School Social Workers are the vital link between schools, students and families, and the community, often being the constant variable for all of these systems.

Tammie Knick, LICSW
Minnesota School Social Workers Association President

Heather Alden Pope, LICSW
Minnesota School Social Workers Association Past President and 2012 National School Social Worker of the Year

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