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## The Role of a School Social Worker from an Administrator's Perspective

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The Role of a School Social Worker from an Administrator's Perspective

Submitted by Alexia A. Poppy

May, 2012

MSW Clinical Research Paper

The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project and publicly present their findings. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

School of Social Work  
St. Catherine University & University of St. Thomas  
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## **Abstract**

This mixed method study explored the perceptions of school administrators regarding the role of school social workers. School Administrators received a survey via email that contained twenty-five questions pertaining to the functions, tasks, benefits, evaluation, and professional development of school social workers. Administrators reported that improving student attendance, collaboration with teachers, and decreasing student discipline were primary functions of the school social worker. They also reported that participating on child study team, facilitating skill groups, and making referrals and building relationships with outside agencies were primary tasks of a school social worker. Overall, administrators agree that school social workers are vital to the success of the school and engagement of students. They reported that they would like to see an increase in school social workers in their site, increase funding for general education social workers, and a more consistent way of evaluating and reporting outcomes of school social workers.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank each of my committee members, Paul and Linda, for being so supportive through this research project. Your encouragement, knowledge, and experience have made this experience so much more rich and positive. Your excitement about the project helped fuel my determination in the last several months. And, my chair, Valandra, thank you so much for your continued guidance and patience with me through this research. I appreciate the insight and ideas that you have given me in and outside of research.

I extend many thanks to the hundreds of administrators who took the time to participate in my survey. I know you are all busy and have many other tasks on your plate, so taking the time to contribute to a research project is wonderful. Thankfully, to you, we have contributed to the body of knowledge in the research for both the field of Education and Social Work.

Lastly, thank you to all of my family members and friends who have helped support my time away to be in the library, computer lab, analyzing data, etc. and support in the care of my wonderful son while I have gone through this research process. Thank you.

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## **Introduction**

The profession of school social work began in the 20th century, fueled by immigration, life struggles, social conditions, and poverty which affected the development and expansion of educational opportunities for all children (Allen-Meares, 2006 & Agresta, 2004). Over the time of the Great Depression (1930s) social workers refocused their earlier commitment to changing adverse conditions in the schools and acting as the link between home, school, and community; therefore, school social workers sought a specialized role in providing emotional support for troubled children (Hall, 1936). Then in the 1940s and 1950s there was a shift and the term visiting teacher was replaced with the term school social worker and the profession adopted a more of a therapeutic and clinical approach for individual children within the schools (Agresta, 2004). In 1973, The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) met for the first time and identified many issues facing school social workers: inflation, budget cuts, attack of the public school system, dual roles within the school and community, and other school personnel claiming roles similar to those provided by school social workers (Allen-Meares, 2006). In 1976, the first standards for school social work services were developed by NASW. The standards included: attainment of competence, organization and administration, and professional practice. And an important theme across all standards was prevention (Allen-Meares, 2006).

The 1980s and 1990s introduced more changes and recognition for the profession of school social work. Giancesin (1996) stated that school social workers began getting recognition for their use of a “systems approach” and that is the difference from other counseling service providers. Within this recognition it was found that there was a need for adopting and communicating clear professional roles (Tower, 2000). He suggested that school social workers were not greatly valued by school administrators because the administrators do not know what

school social workers do. In addition, it must be recognized that school social workers face significant pressure to function within a system that differentiates treatment based on students' presenting problems.

The education and social work systems have ethical standards. NASW (2002) has 41 professional standards along with six ethical principles. It is especially important that school principals understand how schools social workers contribute to academic achievement, because principals are generally responsible for deciding which, if any, helping professionals will work in their schools. However, there is little literature that measures whether school administrators and school social workers have the same beliefs about what the core fundamentals and roles and responsibilities are for school social workers (Bye, Shepard, Partrige, & Alvarez, 2009). This can lead to the possibility of negative attitudes towards school social workers (Tower, 2002). The researchers suggest that the school social workers need to do a better job of presenting the benefits of their services to school administrators in order for school social work to be sustained. The school organization must understand and value the roles and responsibilities of social workers (Bye, et al, 2009).

For the statistical year 2009-2010 the Minnesota Department of Education reported that there are 1,992 public schools, 837,640 enrolled student learners, 52,734 full-time public school teachers, 1,233 full and part time social workers; Calculated that is approximately one teacher per 15.88 students and one school social worker per 679.35 students (Minnesota Department of Education, 2010). The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), also known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), identifies an 800:1 student to school social worker ratio. The School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA) recommends a 400:1 ratio. Realistically, the actual ratio should take into account the range of services the school social worker is expected to

deliver, as well as the targeted student population, e.g., poverty level (US Department of Education, 2010).

The purpose of this research is to examine the school administrator's perceptions of the role of a school social worker. The research design is a mixed method written survey, including quantitative and qualitative questions that will be sent to approximately 100 administrators to complete an online survey that will take roughly fifteen to twenty minutes to complete. The goal is to gain knowledge from the administrators on how school social workers are utilized within their school districts and if there are areas for improvement of school social workers.

## **Literature Review**

### **History of School Social Work**

The history of school social work is significant and rich in influence by many social, political and economic factors (Allen-Meares, 1990 & 2006). The profession of school social work began in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, fueled by immigration, life struggles, social conditions, and poverty which affected the development and expansion of educational opportunities for all children (Allen-Meares, 2006 & Agresta, 2004). In addition, Allen-Meares (1990) stated some specific influences such as the depression that brought attention to the lack of basic needs being met and without basic needs, food and shelter, the children were unable to learn. Social workers were known as “visiting teachers” and were responsible for ensuring children went to school and to collaborate with teachers to help them understand the new immigrants (Agresta, 2004). In the early 1900s social workers provided a vital link between school and communities to address truancy problems related to the family and community (Gainesin, 1996). It was not until 1913, in New York, that the first board of education approved and funded a visiting teacher program, and from the visiting teacher program emerged the National Association of Visiting Teachers (Allen-Meares, 2006). Beginning in 1918 each state had passed its own attendance law. The lack of effective enforcement of school attendance led to an examination of the problem. As a result, the responsibility of improving school attendance was recommended to be assigned to the school social worker, someone who is knowledgeable about the needs of children and the effects of social conditions (Allen-Meares, 2006). The development of social work within the schools was greatly impacted by the Great Depression of the 1930s, as were other social service programs for children. Due to the provision of food, shelter, and clothing occupying the majority of social workers time, services provided by visiting teachers were either abolished or seriously

cut back (Allen-Meares, 1990). Hall (1936) found in this time of crisis social workers refocused their earlier commitment to changing adverse conditions in the schools and acting as the link between home, school, and community; therefore, school social workers sought a specialized role in providing emotional support for troubled children. Agresta (2004) found that within the 1940s and 1950s the term visiting teacher was replaced with the term school social worker and the profession adopted a more of a therapeutic and clinical approach for individual children within the schools. School social work is defined as,

Social work services provided in the setting of an educational agency by credentialed or licensed school social workers. This specialty in social work is oriented toward helping students make satisfactory adjustments and coordinating and influencing the efforts of the school, the family, and the community to achieve this goal (NASW, 2002, p. 9).

At the same time the development of the idea of social caseworker was developed, which described the school social worker's efforts of helping children use what the schools offers vs. social change and repairing neighborhood conditions (Allen-Meares, 2006). Allen-Meares (1990) emphasized the expansion of services provided, in addition to casework, another social work method was being introduced to schools, group therapy. Allen- Meares (2006) suggested that this change in social work was due to the increased scrutiny of public education and initiated experimentation with different methods of social work. By the 1960s and 1970s the profession of school social work turned to addressing social forces interfering with school's ability to teach fundamental skills (Granesin, 1996). The lack of achievement of students was found to be both related to individual characteristics of the student and school conditions. This led school social workers to focus their efforts on the conditions of the school, to identify school policies and

arrangements that adversely affect children, and assisting specific individuals simultaneously (Allen-Meares, 2006).

The Costin study (1968) conducted the first national study on tasks performed by school social workers. She concluded that individualistic clinical casework was their identified primary definition of service and that school social workers were not responding to the crisis of the school and community and were not willing to delegate tasks to personnel with less than a master of social work degree. Costin (1968) found that school social workers were not paying attention to community and school conditions that contributed to the problems in learning and that they did not emphasize an importance of the roles in leadership and policy. The national workshop for social workers held at the University of Pennsylvania in 1969 focused on stimulating innovation and change in the school social work practice nationwide to take on roles of leadership (Allen-Meares, 2006). With the push for school social workers to take on more leadership roles it was identified that there was a confusion of roles between social workers and other guidance staff, and that there needed to be a clear direction of roles and responsibilities of school social workers (Allen-Meares, 2006).

In 1973, The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) met for the first time and identified many issues facing school social workers: inflation, budget cuts, attack of the public school system, dual roles within the school and community, and other school personnel claiming roles similar to those provided by school social workers (Allen-Meares, 2006). At the same time Alderson and Kirishef (1973) replicated the Costin (1968) study and found that school social workers showed more willingness to assume leadership roles and delegate tasks and individualistic casework activity was rated lower. With the shift in thinking of school social

workers, the forming of NASW and new legislation for education defined yet another shift in school social work.

The Individuals with Disabilities Act of 1975 (P.L. 94-142) specified that school social workers would take the role of gathering and writing social histories, counsel children and families using group and individual methods, mobilize community resources, and work with home, school, and family to facilitate student adjustment (Humes & Hohenshil, 1987). In 1976, the first standards for school social work services were developed by NASW. The standards included: attainment of competence, organization and administration, and professional practice. And an important theme across all standards was prevention (Allen-Meares, 2006). The 1980s and 1990s introduced more changes and recognition for the profession of school social work. For example, school social workers were included as “qualified personnel” in Part H of the Education of the Handicapped Act Amendments of 1986 (Allen-Meares, 2006). The challenge to reform the system along with the debate about the quality of education nationwide initiated several studies around the area of school social work and their dual role within schools and communities. Timberlake, Sabatino, and Hooper (1982) and Johnson (1987) both conducted studies that focused on the impact of P.L. 94-142 on school social work service delivery. Timberlake et al. (1982) found that there had been yet another shift in service. The shift included emphasis on consultation and short-term counseling and on diagnostic assessment for the special education populations. Johnson (1987) found that 75 percent of their time was spent on assessment. He acknowledged that assessment is not something that school social workers prefer to do, but because it was mandated by law it needs to be part of social workers role within the school. Johnson (1987) also cautioned that though assessments are essential, not to lose the

characteristic of being innovative and having impact on schools and social environments rather than serving a caseload.

In 1994, which was known as the year of education reform, school social workers were once again included in a major piece of legislation, the American Education Act, PL 103-227. This act included eight national goals, the major objectives where to “promote research, consensus building, and systemic change to ensure quality of education opportunities for all students” (Allen-Meares, 2006, p. 38). Therefore we had the educational mandates of school social work services provided by educational acts and the NASW report stated the key to excellence in education by school social workers. NASW reported the keys to excellence in education:

strengthening the linkage between school, home, and community; increasing parental involvement in the educational process; emphasizing early intervention and prevention; establishing ongoing collaboration and coordination between schools and community agencies’ developing methods to promote positive images of all students; and developing alternative discipline policies and programs (Allen-Meares, 1990).

## **Recent Trends**

More recently school social workers had been called on to address violence in the schools, such as bullying (NASW, 2000). Allen-Mears, Washington, & Welsh (2000) suggested that throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century the social work profession has been preoccupied with answering the question of “who is the school social worker?” (Agresta, 2004, p. 152). Agresta (2004) found that it is suggested by colleagues, that school social workers should embrace roles that position school social workers to influence policy in the education arena. Gianesin (1996) stated

that school social workers use a “systems approach” and that is the difference from other counseling service providers. “School social works are a strength to school districts because they can be organizers, leaders, catalysts for change, and advocated for children and families” (Gianesin, p. 36). In addition Tower (2000) stressed the importance of adopting and communicating clear professional roles. He suggested that school social workers are not greatly valued by school administrators because the administrators do not know what school social workers do. As issues that are highly familiar to school social workers are considered, it must be recognized that school social workers face significant pressure to function within a system that differentiates treatment based on students’ presenting problems. Kimberly Harrison and Richard Harrison (2009) describes the areas in which social workers are key to education,

the school social worker has the ability to understand and improve system dynamics; coordinate and synthesize information; frame the individual within the context of his or her social environment for a deeper understanding of behavior function; analyze individual and group strengths to create comprehensive strengths-based interventions targets to the individual, family, school, and community” (pp. 120-121).

The education and social work systems have ethical standards. NASW (2002) has 41 professional standards along with six ethical principles (see attached).

### **Perceptions of the School Social Work Role**

It is especially important that school principals understand how schools social workers contribute to academic achievement, because principals are generally responsible for deciding which, if any, helping professionals will work in their schools. However, little literature exists that measure whether school administrators (defined as Superintendents, Principals, Assistant

Principals, Dean of Students, and/or Director of Special Education) and school social workers have the same beliefs about what the core fundamentals and roles and responsibilities are for school social workers (Bye, Shepard, Partridge, & Alvarez, 2009). Rowen (1965) conducted a study in New Jersey to determine the differences in the perceptions of the role of a school social worker by school superintendents and school social workers. Rowen (1965) found significant disagreement existed in approximately one out of every four tasks performed by school social workers. Superintendents saw the school social worker's role as encompassing more tasks than most of the workers actually performed. The tasks included: investigation of the child's home, neighborhood, and environment; assistance in the collection of background materials on the child and family for the psychologist when mental retardation was suspected' and service on the community committees and other social agencies.

Constable & Montgomery (1985) completed a study that compares school superintendents' and school social workers perceptions of the school social work role in Illinois, that had a high density of school social work services. Research interviews were conducted with superintendents and identical questionnaires were mailed to the social workers servicing the same districts (Constable & Montgomery, 1985). In comparing superintendents' perceptions of the school social worker's with those of the social workers themselves in general, the superintendents were quite familiar with the role of the social worker, in particular when their social worker had been involved in a more difficult case that gained administrative attention. In addition, the superintendents of larger districts showed somewhat less familiarity with the school social work role than the superintendents from smaller districts (Constable & Montgomery, 1985). Constable & Montgomery (1985), looked at the perceptions of the school social worker's involvement in problem areas (social dysfunction, disruptive behavior, learning, and family

breakdown), their involvement in the school process, school social work tasks, school social work role, and perceived effectiveness. The findings that were most notable were 1) Eighty-eight percent agreement between superintendents and school social workers; 2) Superintendents disagreed in school social workers involvement with school entry and school suspension. The superintendents saw less of an involvement in these processes than did the school social workers; and 3) in the area of perceived effectiveness, 34 percent of Superintendents indicated a desire for increased social work time in their district. (Constable & Montgomery, 1985).

Picton and Keegel (1978) received a grant for a two year project to look at the expectations teachers have for school social workers in Australia. At the time of this study, school social workers were not employed by the schools in Australia unless they had a teaching background. The goals of the project were to provide a generic social work service within the school setting with a focus of encouraging staff and students to maximize their individual potentials and to focus on prevention (Picton & Keegel, 1978). The approach of the social workers was to provide direct service to students and staff as well as working towards system changes within the school as became evident through their work (Picton and Keegel, 1978). Picton and Keegel (1978) reported the findings as ten significant areas. The areas to highlight are: 1) Teachers generally perceived the school social worker as a resource to be consulted with regarding difficulties with a student or group of students; 2) Teachers need and value support, encouragement, and recognition in their work with demanding students; 3) The importance of accessibility for the staff, students, and families as a resource readily available at the time they are experiencing difficulties; 4) There is no shortage of work for the social worker and 5) Teachers suggested that the discussions and resolution of conflicts with staff and students allows learning to take place in the school environment (Picton and Keegel, 1978). Also worth noting

where the struggles social workers had within the school system. 1) The area of social change, facilitating changes in the school structure in response to the social worker's perceptions of students needs was a challenge; 2) The opportunities for social work interventions within a school are very diverse and the social worker must make decisions on priorities and allocation of time; 3) Conflicts of goals and values between social workers, classroom teacher, and administration (Picton and Keegel, 1978).

Tower (2000) conducted a study to learn about the attitudes towards school social workers from special education staff and administrators perspectives. She specifically targeted the State of Nevada, where there are only five school social workers for more than 250,000 students. Tower (2000) hypothesized that educators' attitudes towards social worker are inhibiting the expansion of school social work services. The survey consisted of 50 open-ended and closed-ended questions about the special educator's attitudes and experiences with school psychologists, counselors, and social workers (Tower, 2000). Break down of results showed that 14.2 percent of respondents rated social workers as equal in value to school psychologists and counselors. A significant relationship was found between the special educators' knowledge of social work roles and the value they assigned to their services. For example, only 27.7 percent of the 368 respondents were able to identify three social workers' tasks from a brief list of eight common support tasks. In comparison, 64.9 percent were able to identify all three school psychologists' tasks (Tower, 2000). Lastly, Tower (2002) found a contrast in the results regarding attitudes about social work services. When special educators' were asked to rank the importance of tasks to increase the success of their students with disabilities (home visits, advocating for resources for students, helping teachers discover new resources, liaison between school and welfare agencies, working to change policies, etc.), without disclosing that the tasks

were associated with school social workers, consistently educators agreed that these social work tasks are important to student success. Tower (2002) suggested that the implications of this study showed the recurrent theme of negative attitudes towards school social workers:

Social workers, in general, are struggling with the often inaccurate and defamatory image of the profession. The media is responsible for some of the misconceptions. For instance, television and newspapers are quick to point out the rare cases in which children suffered at the hands of an overburdened child welfare system. However, few reports publicize the success of social workers in protecting children and strengthening families (Tower, p. 6).

Interdisciplinary teams within the schools must attempt to understand the others' perspective on practice (Tower, 2000).

Bye, Shepard, Partidge, and Alvarez (2009) also recognized the lack of research that measures the perception of school social worker services from an administrator perspective. They noted in their thorough literature search of "school social work" and "principals" from 1970 to 2008 yielded 42 articles, seven of which included a focus on principals' perceptions of school social work services. Bye, et al (2009) developed two questionnaires for this study: one for school administrators and one for school social workers. They were designed to identify services, outcomes sought by school social workers, outcomes expected by school administrators, and funding obtained as a result of social work services provided. The most significant agreement between school administrators and school social workers in the perceptions of outcomes for social work services were increased attendance and decreased discipline problems. The highest discrepancy was the percentages of administrators, 50 percent,

and school social workers, 83 percent, for their involvement in the outcome of increased parent involvement (Bye, et al, 2009). The questionnaire also had narrative questions that were categorized according to main themes for qualitative data. Both school administrators and school social worker viewed being frontline of mental health services as a major benefit of employing school social workers. In addition, there were two categories of social work service benefits that were statistically significant from the school administrators and school social workers perceptions, twenty-three percent of social works felt that serving as an advocate is a major benefit but only 5% of administrators felt similarly. (Bye, et al, 2009).

The researchers suggest that in the areas of statistical difference that the school social workers need to do a better job of presenting these as benefits of their services to school administrators (Bye, et al, 2009). In conclusion Bye, et al (2009) suggested that for school social work to be sustained, the school organization much understand and value the roles and responsibilities of social workers. In addition, it is important for the school social workers to ensure that the district leaders understand what they can provide through outcome based assessments, including cost effectiveness of school social work which is another gap in research. The outcome based research and presentations to school organizations is a “challenge that is well worth undertaking if school social work is to be sustained at a level where it can effectively address the needs of students and families” (Bye, et al, 2009).

Intermediate school District 287 did a survey within their district in the 2010-2011 school year, at the request of the Superintendent, to evaluate the role, caseload, and best practices as it pertains to the district positions of social workers, school psychologists, and school counselors (Myklebust, 2011). The survey consisted of twenty-five questions that were created with the collaboration of the focus team from District 287 and Anne Gearity from the University of

Minnesota. Specific to school social worker role, they were asked within the survey to: 1) identify main job duties, 2) identify how much time they spent doing certain tasks, 3) identify how many programs they were responsible for, 4) size of case load, and 5) identify how they were used by administrative and educational teams. As a result the focus team was able to make a proposal to the school board and administration team to retain current staff levels and ultimately, gain more social work positions (Myklebust, 2011). A brief summary of the recommendations given to the school board and administration team from the results of the school social work survey are given below because this resource is not a published document:

- All social workers are licensed as a LICSW (Licensed Independent Clinical Social Worker) and licensed through Minnesota Department of Education as a school social worker.
- Recommended social work caseloads are 34:1 for emotional behavior disorder and autism spectrum disorder programs and for the alternative schools (area learning centers) could be in the range of 50-60:1.
- Social workers will have a critical role in consultation and participation with educational teams.
- Social workers time is best spent assisting students with management with mental health and emotional crises rather than responding to behavioral management in the classroom.
- Social workers concur that a large percentage of their work involves parent and community consultation.
- Social workers need to promote awareness with educational team and administration as to their expertise and knowledge in assisting in the mental health and educational objectives with students.

- Social workers be involved in student intakes and educational meetings.
- Social workers are required to participate in logging MA billing activities with generates district revenue.
- Social workers need additional clarification and direction from the district regarding the responsibility in providing supervision for paraprofessional duties.
- Social workers need to convene on a regular basis to collaborate and participate in ongoing training to ensure professional growth and development.
- Appoint a lead social worker that can represent the social workers on an administrative level (Myklebust, 2011).

According to Paul Sterlacci (2011), Safe Schools Coordinator with Independent School District 287, the survey was a success in gathering information and for use in retaining the number of social workers within the district. They now have a social worker within almost every program within their district, 16 social workers for 7 program sites.

Studies of school social worker's perception of the roles of school social workers began with Chavkin (1985); she researched the status of school social work activities, specifically what the pattern of service delivery is in the schools. The research was based on two questions sent out to over 200 school social workers in three States: New York, North Carolina, and Connecticut. The research questions measured 11 social work activities: consultation with school administrators around administrative policy, consultation with teachers on general classroom issues, group work with students, work with parents on students' rights issues, assistance in resource development and planned change in the community, direct service to individual students, direct services to families, consultation with teachers on individual students, interpretation of school social worker services, preparation of social case histories, and liaison

between the family and the community (Chavkin, 1985). Direct services to individual students were performed most frequently and the social case history the least often. She found that the top three areas of performance were the traditional social work skills individual students, individual consultation, and working with families (Chavkin, 1985). Chavkin (1985) stated that this study has significant implications for school social worker. While traditional activities are important (individual work with students, families, consultation, etc.), “they are not sufficient to meet the challenges of leadership in the areas of consultation to administrators, resource development and community change, students’ rights, group work, and general consultation with students” (Chavkin, p. 11). She concluded with the suggestion for school social workers that they should continue to examine and define their field of practice and with further understanding about their role and goal in today’s schools will make school social workers more effective (Chavkin, 1985).

In a study by Jonson-Reid, Kontak, Citerman, Essma, and Fezzi (2004), individual case data was collected from a large Midwestern U.S. school district with 21,228 students. A restricted sample of 602 students referred to the school social worker was analyzed for referral reason, service category (interventions), and year-end outcomes. Of those referrals, 27.9 percent were referred for academic concerns, 38.9 percent were referred for attendance issues, 10.8 percent were referred for disruptive behavior, and 33.9 percent of the students had three or more referral reasons. In the service category used by the school social worker that was most effective was collaboration/consult with regular school staff (84.6 percent). Next were student counseling (51.2 percent), followed by liaison with parent and/or guardian (30.7 percent). The end of the year outcomes reflected that 41 percent of the students’ issues were resolved, while 31.2 percent of the students’ cases were pen for the same issue (Jonson-Reid et al., 2004).

Constable and Alvares (2006) conducted a similar study to capture roles that have been important in school social work practice. This study utilized school social workers and superintendents to focus on the most important components of the school social work role. In this diverse role there were twenty-seven tasks/skills rated “very important” by the social workers and an analysis of these skills resulted in a sequence of importance:

1. Consultation with others in the school system and the teamwork relationships with make consultation possible;
2. Assessment applied to a variety of difference roles in direct service, in consultation, and in program development;
3. Direct, personal work with children and parents in individual, group, and family modalities; and
4. Assistance with program development in schools (Constable & Alvarez, p. 124).

The ranking of skills served as a basis for a process development of specialization of school social work in Indiana. This produced six overall standards of school social work practice: foundations of school social work practice, collaboration, assessment, intervention, prevention, and professional development (Constable & Alvarez, 2006). The defining of the standards has given school social workers new licensure requirements and an intensive performance based assessment for recertification that will lend credibility to the field of school social worker in the state of Indiana (Constable & Alvarez, 2006).

## **School social work in Minnesota**

For the statistical year 2009-2010 the Minnesota Department of Education reported that there are 1,992 public schools, 837,640 enrolled student learners, 52,734 full-time public school teachers, 1,233 full and part time social workers; Calculated that is approximately one teacher per 15.88 students and one school social worker per 679.35 students (Minnesota Department of Education, 2010). The researcher compared this statistic to other states: Florida, one social worker per 2,475 students, California, one social worker per 2,378 (Los Angeles), North Carolina one social worker per 2,500 students, and Wisconsin one social worker per 1,019 (US Department of Education, 2010).

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), also known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), identifies an 800:1 student to school social worker ratio. The School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA) recommends a 400:1 ratio. Realistically, the actual ratio should take into account the range of services the school social worker is expected to deliver, as well as the targeted student population, e.g., poverty level (US Department of Education, 2010).

## **Cost of School Social Workers**

National data on income generated for school districts by school social workers is even more difficult to obtain than research of social workers within the schools and is typically not available (Bye et al., 2009). Bye et al. (2009) are the only researchers to generate a survey that was designed to identify funding sources for school social workers and income generated by school social workers, as reported by school administrators and lead school social workers. They found that both administrators and school social workers agreed that the top two funding

sources are special education and the school district, however there appears to be a disconnect on the percentage of funding from each source. For example, social workers reported 64 percent of funding for social work comes from special education and 34 percent from the school district. In comparison, the administrators reported 75 percent of funding for school social workers from special education and 18 percent from the school district (Bye et al, (2009). In addition, they also reported that school social workers “can generate funds for their school districts by obtaining grants and community partners to contribute funds for specific programs. They can also bill private insurance companies, State Children’s Health Insurance Programs, and Medicaid for mental health services for eligible students” (p. 106).

The Minnesota School Social Work Association (MSSWA, 2001) recently published how school social workers are cost effective:

- School social workers are qualified to provide: crisis prevention and intervention, therapeutic services, parent/guardian education and training, case management, advocacy, and collaboration and coordination of programs specific to student needs.
- School social workers address the social and emotional needs of all students in their school(s) which includes students whose needs may require special education support as well as students within the general education setting.
- Interventions provided through school social work services have shown improved student attendance, reduction of child abuse and neglect, improved graduation rates and early identification of a disability. These factors are directly related to increased student achievement.
- Minnesota school social workers are dual licensed by the Board of Social Work and the Department of Education to provide mental health services in schools.

- Our practice is guided by the Board of Social Work Code of Ethics, as well as School Social Work standards set forth by the National Association of Social Workers

### **Current Study**

Given the importance of school administrators' perceptions of school social work services there has surprisingly been little research on this topic (Bye et al., 2009). In contracts there appears to be plenty of research on the benefits of school social workers and identified specific and measurable service outcomes for school social workers (Bye et al., 2009). This researcher's intent is to fill a gap in literature by collecting data and reporting the results of this study that identified the perceptions of the school social worker role by school administrators in regard to the school social work guiding principles, more specifically the Administrative Structure and Support principles.

## Conceptual Framework

For the purpose of this research the lens used when examining and developing this research study will be the Standards for Administrative Structure and Support principles developed by The National Association of Social Work (NASW). NASW was formed in 1955 from the merger between American Association of School Social Workers (AASSW) and six other social work associations (NASW, 2002). In 1978 NASW developed Standards for School Social Work Services that have served as guidelines to the development of school social work. The standards have morphed several times to promote professionally sound practice. The standards were revised first in 1992 and again in 2002, to reflect changes in practice and policies with the goal of providing a guide for high-quality professional services to schools, students, and families (NASW, 2002). In the NASW standards for professional practice contain 41 principles and six values. The principles are divided into four sections: 1) Standards for Professional Practice, 2) Standards for Professional Preparation and Development, 3) Standards for Administrative Structure and Support, and 4) Ethical Principles (NASW, 2002). The Administrative Structure and Support principles include 14 standards:

1. State departments of education or other state entities that license or certify educational personnel shall regulate school social work practice.
2. State departments of education or other state entities that license or certify educational personnel shall employ a state school social work consultant who is a credentialed and experienced school social worker.
3. School social work services shall be provided by credentialed school social workers employed by the local education agency.

4. Local education agencies shall employ school social workers with the highest level of qualifications for entry-level practitioners.
5. Social workers in schools shall be designated “school social workers”
6. Salaries and job classification of school social workers shall be commensurate with their education, experience, and responsibilities and be comparable to similarly qualified professional personnel employed by the local education agency.
7. The administrative structure established by the local education agency shall provide for appropriate school social work supervision.
8. The administrative structure of the local education agency shall delineate clear lines of support and accountability for the school social work program.
9. The local education agency shall provide a professional work setting that allows school social worker to practice effectively
10. The local education agency shall provide opportunities for school social workers to engage in professional development activities that support school social work practice.
11. The goals, objectives, and tasks of a school social work program shall be clearly and directly related to the mission of the local education agency and the educational process.
12. The local education agency shall involve school social workers in developing and coordinating partnerships with community health, mental health, and social services providers linked with or based at school sites to ensure that these services promote student educational success.
13. All programs incorporating school social worker services shall require ongoing evaluation to determine their contribution to the educational success of all students.

14. The local education agency shall establish and implement a school social work-student population ratio to ensure reasonable workload expectations (NASW, 2002).

The State of Minnesota statues (2009) have both Administrators and teachers code of ethics, administrators' ethics contain 11 standards of professional conduct and the teachers' code of ethics contain 10 standards of professional conduct (see attached). Sharon Issurdatt (2011), a senior practice associate with NASW, at the National level, stated that NASW added the Administrative Structure and Support principles in 2002. She expanded by stating that "they were written to capture how school administrations, local education agencies, etc. could support school social work practice" (Issurdatt, 2011). Previously, the standards were written with a focus on the social worker's role and responsibilities. This section (Administrative Structure and Support principles) adds how the school social worker can be supported in their unique roles, currently they are under revision (Personal communication, 2011).

The lens of Administrative Structure and Support principles developed by NASW will guide this researcher through the survey development and gathering of data around the perceptions of the school social workers role from a school administrator's perspective in the state of Minnesota, or the public school district, or whatever the parameters are of your study.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

The purpose of this research is to examine the role of a school social worker from a school administrator's perspective. The research design is a mixed method written survey, including quantitative and qualitative questions. The survey was administered online via Qualtrics. An email with a link to the survey was sent out to school administrators in the state of Minnesota. The link directed the participants to the survey questions that took approximately ten to fifteen minutes to complete in addition, a second email was sent out to increase participation.

### **Sample**

Selection criteria for school districts to survey was based on the need to obtain geographic (within Minnesota) diversity as well as socioeconomic diversity. The sample included administrators from four geographically and socioeconomically divergent school districts in the state of Minnesota. Participants for this study were accessed using the Minnesota Department of Education and Minnesota Association of School Administrators database as well as school districts' staff directories online. Approximately 500 School Administrators were sent the survey with a short description of the study and a link to the survey. Once participants click the link to the survey, they were directed to a page that describes the research project in detail and serves as a letter of informed consent to the participants.

## **Measurement**

The Cost Benefit Study of School Social Work Services for Superintendents, Assistant Superintendents, Student Services Administrators, School Principals, and Special Education Administrators was developed by Bye et al. (2005) for her pilot study in Minnesota school systems to analyze the cost and benefits of employing school social workers in P-12 schools. The items were developed in consultation with school social workers and administrators. The survey questionnaire was piloted in another Midwestern state and modified on the basis of the feedback received before the revised questionnaire was then used in Bye et al.'s (2005) study. The majority of Bye et al (2005) survey was used for this researcher's current study to gather information from administrators regarding their perceptions of the role of school social workers.

The survey used in this study was created based on four major sources: Bye et al. 2005 survey, school social work history, guiding principles for social workers and administrators, and the desire to have Administrators beliefs and philosophies about the role(s) of school social workers captured. The survey included 25 total questions: 21 multiple choice questions and four, open-ended questions (Survey Tool, 2005). The survey was given to Administration within public Minnesota middle and high schools and will take approximately ten to fifteen minutes to complete (Survey Tool, 2005). See Appendix B for a copy of the survey instrument.

## **Protection of Human Subjects**

The research is designed to protect the participants in the study. All participants will be provided an informed consent at the beginning of the survey (Appendix C) and information obtained would remain confidential. The target population for the survey is school

administrators. They are professionals and not a vulnerable group. The study is anonymous as each participant is emailed separately.

The survey instrument contained questions that are not sensitive and the study is anonymous as it is distributed online. There are no identified risks or benefits associated with participation in the study. Participation in the survey is voluntary and if the participant decides to click the link, it takes them directly to the survey at Qualtrics. The participants are able to exit the survey at any time without repercussions.

### **Data Analysis**

The responses to the administrator survey were collected using the email-based survey created in Qualtrics. The data collected from the administrator survey was analyzed by using descriptive statistics. The descriptive statistics include a frequency distribution. This procedure was used to determine the distribution of the respondents' professional role within the school, type of school, area location of school, and full time vs. part time social workers.

The other descriptive analysis used was cross tabulation. This was used with two variables as a comparison to understand how the respondents' professional role matched with various responses where respondents' were able to check "all that apply."

Prior to beginning the content analysis process for the open ended questions, I created a list of start codes (Monette, Sullivan, & DeJong, 2008), or themes that I expected to find in the transcripts based on the literature review and my own theoretical and hypothetical projections. Themes that are expected to be found include: high social worker to student ratio, primary job duty similarities, need to more social workers, special education focused, increased need for funding for social worker, and accountability of job duties.

I used the Qualtrics data to collect and print out the written answers from the administrators. I then began with a series of first level open-coding of the answers to locate recurring words and phrases that might represent common themes (Berg, 2009). I conducted a second series of open-coding to search for additional codes that may have been missed based on researcher bias, only noticing those codes that were anticipated. Second level coding was then completed, as the complete list of codes was analyzed for dominant theme and subthemes, manifest and latent content within the transcripts, and the relationships between these themes (Monette, Sullivan, & DeJong, 2008).

### **Strengths and Limitations**

Based on the design, the survey having both quantitative and qualitative features, it had qualities to capture in depth information in a time conscious way for administrators that may have increased participation. The interview questions were also supported and informed by the literature on the role of a school social worker and the code of ethics, thus the findings could be compared and contrasted with other studies. The use of the online survey also allows for a high number of participants as well as an expedient distribution of the survey and collection of the data. An additional advantage of using the online survey was for the participants to remain anonymous.

The major limitation of this research design would include the lack of dialog with the participants. The researcher may have gotten more clarity in certain areas of the research if dialog was present. The researcher was also the only person analyzing the data, which may decrease the reliability of the study.

## Findings

The findings section attempts to explore the participants' attitudes, belief, and understanding of the role of a school social worker from an administrators' perspective. The findings section describes both the qualitative findings using descriptive statistics and well as qualitative data using direct quotes which are in italics.

The researcher sent out 500 surveys, 83 bounced back as email addresses that were no longer in use, 249 surveys were opened, 51 partially completed and 198 were fully completed, for a total response rate of 47%.

### Demographics

Of the 198 surveys that were fully completed, 32% (n=63) of the respondents were Superintendents, 44% (n=86) were Principals, 1% (n=2) were Assistant Principals, 2% (n= 4) were Dean of Students, and 23% (n=45) selected other. Other included administrative positions that included: Director of Special Education, Assistant Superintendent, Director of Teaching and Learning, and/or Director of Student Support Services. Of the administrators that responded 10% (n=19) report working in an urban environment, 25% (n=49) in a suburban environment, 61% (n=118) from a rural environment, and 5% (n=9) selected other. Of the administrators who selected other, they reported: State schools, mix of all three environments, outstate city, charter school, and greater Minnesota. The majority of respondents are working within a public school setting, 94% (n=181) and 6% (n=12) reported working in a private or charter school.

Of the Administrators' who responded 27% (n=52) had at least one full time school social worker, 15% (n=30) had two, 65% (n=12) had three, and 34% (n=66) had four or more full time school social workers. There was also a significant number of Administrators who

reported having part time school social workers: 18% (n=34) had one, 5% (n=10) had two and 3% (n=5) had three and 8% (n=14) had four or more part time school social workers.

Table 1.

*Area of School district and the Number of Full time School Social Workers*

		Full Time School Social Workers					Total
		0	1	2	3	4 or more	
Area of School District	Urban N=	1	3	3	0	14	21
	Suburban N=	8	4	5	4	28	49
	Rural N=	23	43	20	9	21	116
	Other N=	1	1	3	0	4	9
	Total N=	33	51	31	13	67	195

Table 2.

*Area of School district and the Number of Part time School Social Workers*

		Part time School Social Workers					Total
		0	1	2	3	4 or more	
Area of School District	Urban N=	8	0	5	2	4	19
	Suburban N=	25	8	3	3	4	43
	Rural N=	85	23	2	0	4	114
	Other N=	5	2	0	0	2	9
	Total N=	123	33	10	5	14	185

Administrators' were asked to report their school social worker to student ratio. There were 169 respondents that varied with their school social worker to student ration from 1:25 all

the way up to 1:1500. Several wrote that they were not aware of their ratio and/or if it was a higher ratio the administrators’ also responded that they have “*school counselors and school psychologists that overlap in some areas.*”

Administrators who are referring to social work services provided in an elementary, middle school, and high school setting were captured in the following table. There was a wide variety of grades served by the administrator. Participants were allowed to “check all that apply” so there is some overlap between answers, which is why there are more than 198 responses. Many participants answered with two or more responses. This table shows the wide range of environments the participants are responding from.

Table 3.

*Number of Administrators Represented in Each Grade Level*

Grades	Number	Percentage Total
Pre K	76	38%
K-5	158	79%
6-8	146	73%
9-12	139	70%
Transition	40	20%
Other, please specify	8	4%

Of the breakdown of grade levels served the participants were also asked to “check all that apply” regarding the area education the social work support was given, 81% (n=157) selected general education, 82% (n=159) in special education, 26% (n=51) in alternative education, and 2% (n=3) selected other. Other included: adult education and care and treatment.

Table 4

*Number of Administrators and Length of Time in Current District*

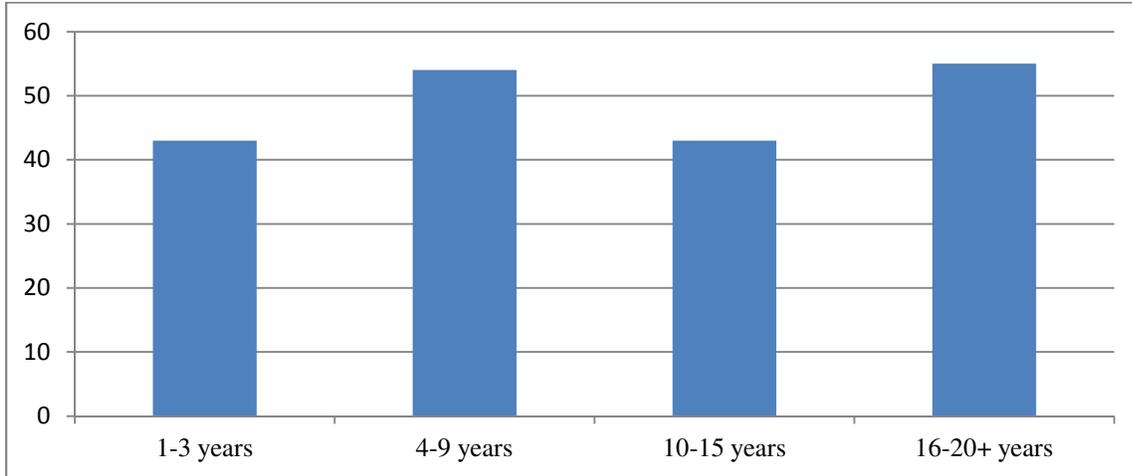


Table 4 illustrates there were 43 administrators who have been in their current school district for >1-3 years, 54 administrators for 4-9 years, 43 administrators for 10-15 years, and 55 administrators for 16-20< years.

### **Role of a School Social Worker**

The first three questions of the survey were “check all that apply” and open questions. The Administrators’ perceptions of the functions and tasks of a school social worker are displayed on the tables below. They are broken down by the role of the administrator followed by the qualitative data regarding functions and tasks of school social workers.

Table 5.

*Functions of a School Social Worker from an Administrators Perspective*

		School Social Workers Functions										Total	
		Attendance	Improving student achievement	Decreasing student discipline	Improving school climate	Decrease dropout rate	Decrease school violence	Increase parent involvement	Decrease teen pregnancy	Collaboration with teachers	Other		
<b>Current Administrative Role</b>	<b>Superintendent N=</b>	60	52	55	45	55	52	51	37	57	7	64	
		93.75%	81.25%	85.94%	70.31%	85.94%	81.25%	79.69%	57.81%	89.06%	10.94%	32.32%	
	<b>Principal N=</b>	81	69	68	65	62	64	73	42	81	15	88	
		92.05%	78.41%	77.27%	73.86%	70.45%	72.73%	82.95%	47.73%	92.05%	17.05%	44.44%	
	<b>Assistant Principal N=</b>	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	0	2
		100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	0.00%	1.01%
	<b>Dean N=</b>	4	2	3	2	2	2	4	1	3	1	4	
		100%	50.00%	75.00%	50.00%	50.00%	50.00%	100%	25.00%	75.00%	25.00%	2.02%	
	<b>Other N=</b>	40	37	41	38	38	38	41	27	39	19	45	
		88.89%	82.22%	91.11%	84.44%	84.44%	84.44%	91.11%	60.00%	86.67%	42.22%	22.73%	
<b>Total N=</b>	182	159	165	150	156	155	166	108	177	42	198		
	91.92%	80.3%	83.3%	75.7%	78.7%	78.2%	83.84%	54.5%	89.3%	21.2%	100.0%		

\*the percentage listed in the row% for the total amount of administrators who selected that individual task and is broken down by role of administrator

Both Superintendents and Principals agree that improving school attendance (Superintendents 93% and Principals 92%) and collaboration with teachers to improve caring and coping skills in the classroom (Superintendents 89% and Principals 92%) are the two highest rated functions of school social workers. The largest areas of discrepancy between administrators in the functions of a school social worker are decreasing the dropout rate (Superintendents 86% and 70% Principals) and decreasing school violence (Superintendents 81% and Principals 72%).

The qualitative responses regarding the functions of school social workers n=13 responded that a school social workers primary function is to provide referrals to outside agencies and build relationships with outside resources. *“Our social workers are very busy, they walk on water, collaboration with outside agencies and wrap around services to refer students and families to in order to provide extra support is important.”* Skill group facilitation and other social emotional learning is another function that administrators, n=10, wrote as a response to primary functions of a school social worker. *“Working with students on social communication, social cognition, and emotional well-being (skill building) is critical to students and overall school environment.”*

Table 6.

*Tasks of a School Social Worker from an Administrators Perspective*

		School Social Workers Tasks															Total		
		Child study team	Student intervention	Behavior intervention	Facilitate groups	Mediations	Liaison	Truancy	Referrals to outside agencies	Home visits	Building leadership team	Intakes and re-entry meetings	Developing /coordinating partnerships	PLC	Due process	Fundraise		Organize events	
<b>Administrative Role</b>	<b>Superintend.</b>	59	52	49	54	35	30	44	58	41	25	19	51	43	30	3	8	64	
		92%	81.25%	76.56%	84.38%	54.69%	46.88%	68.75%	90.63%	64.06%	39.06%	29.69%	79.69%	67.19%	46.88%	4.69%	12.50%	100%	
	<b>Principal</b>	79	64	72	76	49	42	59	79	53	25	37	71	57	47	2	18	88	
		89.77%	72.73%	81.82%	86.36%	55.68%	47.73%	67.05%	89.77%	60.23%	28.41%	42.05%	80.68%	64.77%	53.41%	2.27%	20.45%	100%	
	<b>Assistant Principal</b>	1	1	2	2	2	1	2	2	2	1	1	2	1	0	0	0	0	2
		50.00%	50.00%	100%	100%	100%	50.00%	100%	100%	100%	50.00%	50.00%	100%	50.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	100%
	<b>Dean of Students</b>	3	4	2	3	2	0	2	3	0	1	0	3	1	1	0	0	0	4
		75.00%	100%	50.00%	75.00%	50.00%	0.00%	50.00%	75.00%	0.00%	25.00%	0.00%	75.00%	25.00%	25.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	100%
	<b>Other</b>	41	39	35	41	26	27	32	43	32	15	25	40	31	24	2	11	45	
		91.11%	86.67%	77.78%	91.11%	57.78%	60.00%	71.11%	95.56%	71.11%	33.33%	55.56%	88.89%	68.89%	53.33%	4.44%	24.44%	100%	
<b>Total</b>	179	157	156	172	111	96	136	181	124	65	81	163	129	100	7	35	198		
	90.40%	79.29%	78.79%	86.87%	56.06%	48.48%	68.69%	91.41%	62.63%	32.83%	40.91%	82.32%	65.15%	50.51%	3.54%	17.68%	100%		

\*the percentage listed in the row% for the total amount of administrators who selected that individual task and is broken down by role of administrator

Superintendents, Principals, and “other” administrators (“other” administration being primarily Special Education Directors) agree that the child study team (Superintendents 92%, Principals 90%, and Other Admin 91%), facilitation of groups (Superintendents 84%, Principals 86%, and Other Admin 91%), and referrals to outside agencies (Superintendents 90%, Principals 90%, and Other Admin 91%) are the highest rated tasks of school social workers. The largest areas of discrepancy between administrators in the tasks of a school social worker are being a school/community liaison (Superintendents 47%, Principals 48%, and Other Admin 60%) and doing home visits (Superintendents 64%, Principals 60%, and Other Admin 71%).

The qualitative responses from administrators when asked to prioritize the primary tasks/roles within the school: n= 65 to provide interventions with students and families (addressing truancy, behaviors, mental/medical issues, bullying, peer/family conflict, home visits, improving academic achievement, etc.), *“Working with students who are struggling with issues that can include; truancy, bullying, grades, medical issues, or peer/family issues. Then helping the student and family find the necessary resources and making the necessary referrals or connections in the school building to make the student have the best chances for success.”* Another administrator stated,

*I would suggest that establishing and supporting student intervention efforts on behaviors, attendance, and academic issues have to be high on the list of priority tasks. Most of the social workers have done all of the tasks listed above, but of those tasks the direct interventions with students should be highest on the list.*

Administrators, n=28, also responded that a school social workers primary tasks is to facilitate and/or be an intricate part of the child study team, n=23 to facilitate groups and conduct

mediations, and n=19 for school social workers to be a school community liaison, developing partnerships, and making community referrals. This administrator wrote a summary of their school social workers primary tasks,

*Social workers play a vital role in meeting student needs outside of academics. They provide the support services and referral that are vital to student stability and eventual graduation. They also work to support the mental health needs of students through facilitating groups. They train and support interns who then supports our students. They form important partnerships with local community resources to meet student needs.*

## **Evaluation and Outcomes**

Fifty percent (n=98) of Administrators, reported that evaluations for their school social workers are done by formal observations of the school social worker performing a primary function or task followed by 45% (n=88) of administrators who stated that they evaluate their social worker by reviewing the success of the social worker's performance goals. Other types of evaluation included: tally the number of students/families served 15%, survey students, parents, and teachers 14%, other (rubric, informal observation, outside agency, anecdotal evaluation) 22%, do not evaluate 12%, and unknown 8%.

Seventy-four percent (n=145) of Administrators reported that school social workers share outcomes in their district by meeting with building administration followed by 61% (n=118) of administrators who reported that school social workers report outcomes through informal conversations. Other ways reporting outcomes included: faculty meeting 29%, written report 29%, formal presentations to the school board/administration 10%, other (IEP goals, written log

of activities, data gathering through interventions, meeting with special services director, no protocol in place) 11%, and unknown 10%.

### **Benefits of a School Social Worker**

The dominant theses that emerged from the review of the written responses included: provided critical services and referrals, community/family liaison, mental health support, social emotional skills, reducing barriers to learning, connecting with students to reduce drop out, supporting special education goals (IEP), providing/supporting interventions (academic and behavior), supporting staff, and several one word descriptive answers (“vital”, “critical”, “versatile”, “engagement”, etc.). These themes and their related subthemes are identified in the following tables, and supporting quotes are provided to correspond with each subtheme.

Table 7.

#### *Administrators Perception of School Social Workers as Liaison and Advocate*

<b>Dominant Theme</b>	<b>Subthemes</b>
Liaison/Advocate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A. Advocate for student needs</li> <li>B. Advocate for parents</li> <li>C. Liaison to/from community agencies</li> </ul>
A.	<i>“The school social worker is an advocate for students, provides tremendous support and counseling for students individually and in groups, and provides a key link between school and home for students.”</i>
B.	<i>“They are a link with families and often connect them with community services, advise them on parenting and medical issues (i.e. ADHD and other processes for getting medical attention), as well as help them understand the educational system for their child’s success”</i>
C.	<i>“They are a liaison to families and community organizations and connect resources to our schools and our families.”</i>

Overall there were 36 Administrators who wrote the benefit of their social worker being an advocate and/or liaison for the students, parents, and outside agencies. Table 7 illustrates the

dominant theme critical services and subthemes of social emotional learning skills, reduce barriers to learning/achievement, and interventions.

Table 8.

*Administrators Perceptions of School Social Workers and Critical Services Provided*

<b>Dominant Theme</b>	<b>Subthemes</b>
Critical Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A. Social Emotional Learning Skills (SEL)</li> <li>B. Reduce barriers to learning/achievement</li> <li>D. Interventions</li> </ul>
<p>A. <i>“We were without a school social worker for around a month, due to the past social worker leaving for another job and there was a gap before the new social worker was hired. We missed the assistance with issues involving suicide, pregnancy, and students that need the assistance with social issues like fitting in and being bullied. We also really benefit from the education and prevention piece, involving the social worker going into the classroom and providing skill based learning and attending staff development to train students and staff.”</i></p>	
<p>B. <i>“They work with students at risk of not graduating from high school and the social worker can help to break down the barriers that are getting in the student's way of success.”</i></p>	
<p>C. <i>“In providing on-going interventions on the group and individual level which assist in student growth and development. I don't believe our school would be as successful as it is without the support network established by our social worker.”</i></p>	

Overall 67 Administrators wrote testimonials regarding critical services being a primary way of school social workers benefitting their school. Table 8 illustrates the dominate theme of mental health and subthemes of special education, connecting with students, and providing insight for staff around student needs and mental health.

Table 9.

*Administrators Perceptions of School Social Workers and Importance of Mental Health*

Dominant Theme	Subthemes
Mental Health	A. Special Education/IEPs B. Connecting with Students C. Insight/training for staff around mental health
A.	<i>“Their primary role is serving the needs of students with IEPs. Students that receive direct services from a social worker will have a greater chance of success in school.”</i>
B.	<i>“They fill an important niche for us in connecting with students”</i>
C.	<i>“They are a very important part of our educational process. They help link struggling students and their families to the needed services which in turn, we hope, helps them attend to the educational process more successfully. They are able to link social services and the school together. They give the other staff members a place to turn when they sense that a family needs help and they are unsure of where to go and around mental health”</i>

For the dominate theme of mental health 67 administrators provided insight into these themes as to how a social worker benefits their district. There were several other one word or short phrase quotes from administrators, n=15, such as: “versatile”, “irreplaceable”, “frontline staff”, “crisis support”, “critical need”, “TREMENDOUSLY BENECIFIAL”, “has the pulse of the student body”, etc. that contribute to the benefits of having a school social worker from an administrators’ perspective.

**Areas of Improvement**

There were 169 administrators that provided written answers for how they, as the administrator, would improve or change the social work services provided within their school district. Through analyzing the responds there were two areas of improvements suggested, structural and personal/professional improvements.

## Structural Improvements

Dominate themes to the structural improvements were: increase time available for general education students (non-special education) *“Move to 50-50 funding using special education and regular education dollars.”* Increase total number of social workers, and secure more funding in the general fund vs. special education budget *“You have probably heard this one already, but the ratio between social workers and students is extreme. The ratio must drop and the only way to make this happen is with more staff on hand. We need more of these folks to do the work effectively. Too often, it is a Band-Aid approach.”* Another significant quote from an administrator around the increase of social workers, *“have him/her full time in one building -- rather than job sharing between buildings. Make sure that we do not put so many demands and expectations on the person that they cannot be successful. Bottom line, we need more!”* Several administrators (n=55) commented on the themes above. One of the dominate themes of securing more funds from the general education fund vs. special education fund to support general education students is supported by another question on the survey (Q12), how school social workers are funded in their district, there were able to “check all that apply,” 68% (n=128) of administrators selected through the school district general funds, 70% (n=132) special education funds, 26% (n=50) federal, state, and/or local grants, 8% (n=15) title 1 funds, and 17% (n=33) selected “other” (examples: county contributes, PACT, mental health grant, compensatory funds, safe schools, etc.). *“Improve school funding so every school district could employ the number of school social workers necessary to take care of the needs in the school district. These positions should be fully funded by the state.”*

## **Personal/Professional Improvements**

Dominant themes for personal/professional improvements were: gain more knowledge of the educational system, *“Help them understand the ‘education’ lens as much as they understand the ‘human service’ lens.”* Develop systematic approach for interventions/outcomes with students as well as clarity of roles and responsibilities, *“Provide a more consistent common delivery system as opposed to each social worker ‘doing their own thing’.”* Spend more time with staff within the classroom, include social workers on leadership teams, more accountability of time, more involvement in prevention vs. crisis, *“less emphasis on due process and greater emphasis on pro-active intervention.”* More home visits to support parenting skills, *“Meet with parents/caregivers and help them to provide a healthy environment at home so that students come to school ready and eager to learn.”* And the last dominant theme for improvements was for social workers to provide additional groups and mental health services within the school. There was n=21 responses around personal/professional improvement of school social workers from an administrators perspective.

## **Perceptions of Licensure Requirement**

The administrators’ perception of the licensure requirement of school social workers is 45% (n=88) believe that a BA-LSW is required, 8% (n=15) MSW-LGSW is required, 19% (n=37) MSW-LICSW, 5% (n=9) selected “other”, and 23% (n=45) selected unknown. Table 10 provides the licensure requirement data broken down by area served.

Table 10.

*Administration Perception of School Social Work Licensure Requirements by District Area*

		Degree and Licensure Requirement for School Social Worker(s)					Total
		BA-LSW	MSW-LGSW	MSW-LICSW	Other	Unknown	
		District Area	Urban N=	8	2	7	
42.11%	10.53%			36.84%	0.00%	10.53%	100.00%
Suburban N=	9		2	15	1	23	50
	18.00%		4.00%	30.00%	2.00%	46.00%	100.00%
Rural N=	70		11	11	6	18	116
	60.34%		9.48%	9.48%	5.17%	15.52%	100.00%
Other N=	2		0	4	2	1	9
	22.22%		0.00%	44.44%	22.22%	11.11%	100.00%
Total N=	89		15	37	9	44	194
	45.88%		7.73%	19.07%	4.64%	22.68%	100.00%

\*% listed= the total % of administrators by district area who identified that licensure requirement per row.

Thirty percent (n=15) of administrators from suburban districts hire more MSW-LICSW compared to other areas or other licensures; whereas 60% (n=70) of the administrators' from the Rural communities have a higher number of BA-LSW level than other areas or licensures. It is also important to point out that 23% (n=44) administrators were not aware of the licensure requirements for their school social worker. Table 11 breaks down the licensure requirement by administrator's role within their district.

Table 11.

*Administrators Perception of School Social Work Licensure Requirements*

		Degree and Licensure Requirement for School Social Worker(s)					Total
		BA-LSW	MSW-LGSW	MSW-LICSW	Other	Unknown	
Administrative Role	Superintendent N=	35 55.56%	6 9.52%	10 15.87%	3 4.76%	9 14.29%	63 100.00%
	Principal N=	38 44.71%	2 2.35%	15 17.65%	4 4.71%	26 30.59%	85 100.00%
	Assistant Principal N=	0 0.00%	1 50.00%	1 50.00%	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	2 100.00%
	Dean of Students N=	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	1 25.00%	0 0.00%	3 75.00%	4 100.00%
	Other N=	17 37.78%	7 15.56%	12 26.67%	2 4.44%	7 15.56%	45 100.00%
	Total N=	89 45.88%	15 7.73%	37 19.07%	9 4.64%	44 22.68%	194 100.00%

\*\*% listed= the total % of the administrator by role who identified that licensure requirement per row.

Data broken down by administrative role shows 56% (n=35) of Superintendents, 45% (n=38) of Principals, and 38% (n=17) of “Other” (special education directors and director of teaching and learning), for a total of 46% (n=89) of all administrators who completed the survey agree that the school social workers must have at least a BA-LSW degree and licensure. The next significant selection of licensure requirement is “unknown” with a total of 23% (n=44) of administrators who did not know the licensure requirement in their district.

**Resources for Professional Development**

**Internal Professional Development**

Administrators reported that 53% (n=102) of them offer specific activities on professional development days to support school social workers and 47% (n=90) of

administrators reported that they do not provide specific professional development for school social workers. There were n=89 administrators that provided specific ways they support school social worker activities on professional development days. The major themes were: within their Professional Learning Communities (PLC's), *"Specific activities are planned for the District Social Workers--they operate as their own PLC in addition to being in a PLC group at their school"* and professional mental health trainers come in for all staff, *"we have three social work meetings per year. We bring in professionals to discuss topics pertain to the school social work profession (such as pharmacology, etc.)."*

### **External Professional Development**

There were 87% (n=161) administrators' who reported that they support professional development (CEU's) of school social workers by supporting them to attend professional trainings off site. Additionally, 52% (n=97) of administrators reimburse school social workers for their professional training fees and 70% (n=129) support school social workers to attend professional trainings as part of their work scheduled day. There were 75% (n=143) of administrators' who reported that they set aside district funds for professional trainings of school social workers are 25% (n=47) that do not set aside district funds for professional trainings.

## **Discussion**

This research fills a gap in the literature by reporting on the results of a mix method survey that identified what the role of a school social worker is from an administrators' perspective in terms of tasks, functions, benefits, improvements, funding, and professional development. Much of the data was broken down by the role of the administrator (Superintendent, Principal, etc.) as well as the area of the school district (Urban, Suburban, and Rural).

## **Implications**

This exploratory research study adds knowledge to both, the educational and social work world. The research points out the various tasks and functions of a school social worker and the importance of all tasks. The qualitative research provides insight and conveys the needs for an increase in social workers in the schools.

There is insight to gain from the administrators in the study for policy and practice changes/improvements. It would be in the schools best interest to increase social work time to decrease the large social worker to student ratio. This would improve effectiveness of social workers. In addition, it would be important to explore the various funding streams for school social workers and create more of an equal funding from the general education funds and special education funds to more students could be served. Another impact of securing general education funds would be to allow for more prevention vs. crisis work with students.

Future research could benefit from continued work in breaking down data by Urban, Suburban, and Rural communities in contrast for available resources for the school districts, students, and families. Bye et al (2009) gave ideas for increasing funding for school districts to

employ school social workers; there would be a benefit of exploring the various funding resources with administrators to increase their knowledge and awareness. In addition, the importance of the school board's influence was mentioned throughout the various studies done previously. Research gathering the perceptions from a school boards perspective of a school social worker's role would be critical as they are generally in the position of approving or not approving social work positions within districts. And finally, to add to the body of research, exploring the tasks and functions from a school social worker perspective based on their licensure and education levels and how that impacts the tasks and functions that administrators want and feel are benefits in their school districts.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

#### **Demographics**

The demographics showed that the sample was very diverse. The population was drawn from the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) and the Minnesota Association of School Administrators (MASA). The majority of the respondents were Principals followed by Superintendents and the "Other" category. It is interesting to point out that "other" included professional administration such as Director of Special Education, Director of Student Services, and Assistant Superintendents. There was not a large representation of Assistant Principals or Deans of Students; one may assume they are not included on the email list from MDE and MASA as administrators. In addition, this researcher was hoping for more representation from the "other" category as generally they have more direct contact with school social workers due to their role with behavior and discipline.

The administrators who identified themselves as reporting from a Rural District made up the majority of respondents, 61%. The researcher could assume that the administrators in a rural setting had a more intimate relationship with their school social worker and was more aware of their role. Constable & Montgomery (1985) would confirm this idea, the superintendents of larger districts showed somewhat less familiarity with the school social work role than the superintendents from smaller districts. One may also assume they have fewer resources so they lean on, value, and are more involved with their school social workers. The data also captures a good sample of perceptions from administrators across grade levels and years of experience (~70% representation per grade level), ranging from Pre-K through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. This would show the consistency of perceptions from elementary through high school for the role of a school social worker. This researcher assumed that there would be more of a difference in the roles and tasks of a school social worker based on an administrator's role within an Elementary, Middle, or High school setting. Administrators experience level varied, however, the majority of administrators were in their role between 4-9 years (28%) and 16-20+ years (28%). This validates the experience level of working with the school social worker(s) within their district and the knowledgebase they answered this survey from.

Administrators who reported their ratio of school social worker to student ratio varied from 1:25 up to 1:1500. The ratios that were higher also suggested that they had school counselors and school psychologists who are also part of the team to support students. This relates to Tower (2002) study that showed the blurred perception of the roles of school social worker, school psychologists, and school counselors. Tower (2000) found in his study that when the respondents were not aware of who was providing the specific task the majority of tasks that were most desirable were school social worker tasks. All but 18% of respondents were able to

say they had at least one school social worker and 35% were able to say they have four or more school social workers. As for the amount of part time school social workers 66% of administrators said that they do not have any part time school social workers followed by 34% who have one to four or more part time social workers. The amount of full time school social workers was higher than the amount of part time social workers, which is positive data to read. This researcher's perception was that the part time social worker rate would be higher due to the ongoing budget cuts. However, this researcher could also connect the higher number of full time social workers with the high ratio of the number of students to school social worker; in that, yes, there is a higher number of full time social worker, but they are covering more than one building and/or a high case load of students. Therefore, one could conclude that the number of full time social workers is promising, however, the number of students and or building they are expected to serve in also high.

Overall, the data represents a diverse group of administrators from location/area of district, years of service, number of school social workers they work with, and administrative role within the district which is helpful in validating the results of this study.

### **Role of a School Social Worker**

Administrators indicated that the most important function (they could select more than one) of a school social worker was improving student attendance followed by collaboration with teachers to improve caring and coping skills in the classroom, it is also important to point out that of the other seven functions listed for administrators to select from, the percentage of importance is still significant ranging from 55%- 83%. This would say that even though administrators can select a top function, all of them are very vital to the role of a school social

worker and how they function within a school system. Additionally, of the list of 16 tasks performed by school social workers for administrators to select from (they could choose more than one) referrals to outside agencies followed by participating/facilitating the child study team, and facilitate skills groups were the highest ranked. This research confirms the previous research done by Bye et al. (2009) with the administrators who agreed with the social workers that a couple of their primary roles is increase attendance (92%) and decrease discipline (83%). It also confirms Bye et al. (2009) finding of school social workers being the front line of mental health for the school. However, this research contradicts Bye et al. (2009) finding of administrators' perception of a school social workers role of increasing parent involvement. She found only 50% of administration saw parent involvement as significant, whereas, in this study 83% of administrators selected this as a priority for school social workers. In addition, this research found administrators to perceive a benefit of school social workers being an advocate for students and families, whereas in Bye et al. (2009) student they only found this significant for 5% of administrators.

This research supports Constable & Montgomery (1985) findings in the importance of school social workers in the intake and/or re-entry meetings. They found that Superintendents disagreed with the priority a school social worker involved with intake/re-entry meetings and the Superintendents in this study rated this task at 30% of importance, this was ranked 13<sup>th</sup> out of 16 tasks. This research also confirms Constable & Montgomery (1985) finding that Superintendents desire an increase of school social worker time in their districts.

There was a contrast when sorting the data by administrative role. When the data on the functions of the school social worker was broken down by the administrator's role the Superintendents ranked both "decreasing the dropout rate" and "decreasing school violence"

higher than Principals. This discrepancy may be interpreted because of the Superintendents overall vision of a school district and for grant writing goals and objectives the school social worker may be involved in both decreasing dropout rate and school violence. In addition, there was a discrepancy between administrators in the tasks of a school social worker. Both “being a school/community liaison” and “doing home visits” were ranked significantly higher by the category of “Other Admin,” who the majority is made up of Directors of Special Education and Directors of Student Services. The researcher speculated that this is due to the nature of students that the “Other Admin” category primarily works with, special education. It makes sense that they would find home visits and being a school community liaison very important due to the vulnerable population served.

### **Evaluation and Outcomes**

The majority of administrators reported that the way their social workers are evaluated was through a review of performance goals and through formal observations. Furthermore, when they were asked how outcomes were being reported the majority of administrators said through meeting with building administration and informal conversations. One administrator stated, *“The role of a social worker is hard to quantify. But you know when you have a good one and you know when you have a bad one.”* The administrators in this current study would validate the social workers in Bye et al. 2009 study. Bye et al. (2009) reported that in her study the administrators were not aware of how outcomes were being reported and the social workers in her study reported informal conversations as the primary way of reporting outcomes. In addition, Bye (2009) found that written reports and meetings with principals were the primary way of sharing outcomes; this current study would again validate Bye’s findings as the primary ways in which outcomes are shared. Bye et al. (2009) also suggested the importance of social

workers reporting outcomes to the school board due to their influence of hiring additional social workers. In this study, 10% (n=20) of administrators reported that their school social workers report to the school board. NASW (2002) also outlines the importance of evaluation and outcome reporting, “All programs incorporating school social worker services shall require ongoing evaluation to determine their contribution to the educational success of all students.”

### **Benefits of a School Social Worker**

The results from the question to administrators regarding the benefit of a school social worker were significant and positive. Several administrators commented on similar aspects of the role of a school social worker. Many administrators view social workers as the staff who have the pulse on the higher risk students, community supports, the gateway to engaging a family, mental health support and overall providing academic and behavioral support to staff. One administrator stated, “*They used to be home/school interventionists but now have become academic interventionists. This position does not look at all like it did when it was first instituted.*” This is an interesting comment given the focus on test scores and no child left behind in the last several years.

### **Structural Improvements**

Dominate themes to the structural improvements were: increase time available for general education students, increase total number of social workers, and secure more funding in the general fund vs. special education budget. The feedback from this study compliments Bye et al. (2009) study where they found both school social workers and administrators noted that most of the funding for school social work positions comes from special education funds and the need for increasing general funds. The Bye et al. (2009) study also suggested that administrators

become more aware of the money school social workers can generate through billing insurance, Medicaid, and other potential income resulting from school social work services provided such as improved school attendance. The researcher is aware that the concern around billing continues to change and depends on the level of licensure the school social worker has. It is important that we find a way to effectively evaluate and quantify with numbers and with anecdotal information regarding the effectiveness of a school social worker to bring alive to the powers that be in education to help generate and allocate more money for these services within schools for ongoing services and prevention.

### **Personal/Professional Improvements**

There were 21 administrators who offered a response on how services could be improved. Dominate themes were: gain more knowledge of the educational system, develop systematic approach for interventions/outcomes with students, clarity of roles and responsibilities, spend more time with staff within the classroom, include social workers on leadership teams, more accountability of time, and more involvement in prevention vs. crisis. Chavkin (1985) would agree with the administrators who suggested clarity of their role; in 1985 she concluded her research with a suggestion for school social workers that they should continue to examine and define their field of practice with further clarity and understanding about their role as school social workers. In contrast, NASW (2002) stated that it is the role of the educational system (administration) to develop goals, objectives, and tasks of a school social worker/program and that they will be clearly and directly related to the mission of the local education agency and the educational process.

It appears that the more the school social worker and administration can understand each others mission, system, and goal, the clearer the role will become. And with a clearer role the functions, tasks, and role of a social worker will become even more increasingly consistent for data collection and reporting.

### **Perceptions of Licensure Requirement**

The majority (45%) of administrators reported LSW as the requirement in their district. Interestingly, the next highest rated answer was “unknown,” 23% of administrators were unaware of their school social work licensure requirements. This has implications when it comes to roles and responsibilities for the school social worker. The LSW has a bachelor level degree and the LGSW, LCSW, and LICSW all have graduate level degrees. As your licensure increases your knowledge and expectations are more clinical. Myklebust (2011) outlined in Intermediate District 287 the requirements for their school social workers, one being licensure requirement; all school social workers are licensed as a LICSW and licensed through Minnesota Department of Education as a school social worker.

The benefits of having a BS-LSW would be the hiring salary range for school social worker; however, they are trained as more generalists. Hiring LGSW, LCSW, or LICSW's increased the hiring salary range, but also allows the district to most likely bill insurance for their services and they are trained more in mental health diagnosis and treatment of mental health disorders. Both degrees of social worker are beneficial, however, this researcher could see the benefits of the schools that were reporting from a school with a primary population of all special education programs were further knowledge in mental health diagnosis and treatment would be

beneficial for their students and families well-being, especially in an area where resources are limited.

### **Resources for Professional Development**

This researcher was very encouraged to see that NASW (2002) outlines the expectation that the local education agency shall provide opportunities for school social workers to engage in professional development activities that support school social work practice and also encouraged to see the results of the administrators' responses. Over half of the administrators in this survey comply with this expectation of NASW of on-site professional development. In addition, the majority of administrators supports social workers attending professional trainings within their work day and will fund these activities. This is very encouraging to see.

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## Appendix A

### Survey Questions

Q1. The role of the school social worker(s) includes the following functions (check all that apply)?

- Improving student attendance
- Improving student achievement
- Decreasing student discipline
- Improving school climate
- Decrease dropout rate
- Decrease school violence
- Increase parent involvement
- Decrease teen pregnancy
- Collaboration with teachers to improve caring and coping skills in the classroom.
- Other, please specify

Q2. School social workers in your district expected to participate in the following tasks?

- Child study team
- Student intervention team
- Behavior intervention
- Facilitate student groups, i.e. skill group
- Mediations

- School/Community liaison
- Truancy
- Referrals to outside agencies
- Home visits
- Participate on building leadership team
- Participate in intakes of new students and/or re-entry meetings
- Developing and coordinating partnerships with community health, mental health, and social services providers that are linked or based at school sites.
- Participate in a PLC (Professional Learning Community)
- Due process team
- Fundraise
- Organize school/community events

Q3. Of the tasks listed above what would you prioritize as the school social worker(s) primary tasks/roles within the school?

Q4. How do you evaluate school social work services within your school(s) (check all that apply):

- Review success of employee performance goals
- Tally the number of student/families served
- Formal Observations

- Survey of students, parents, and teachers
- Other, please specify
- Do not evaluate
- Unknown

Q5. How do school social worker(s) report outcomes in your school district? (check all that apply)

- Formal presentations to the school board/administration
- Meeting with building administration
- Faculty meeting
- Written report
- Informal conversation
- Unknown
- Other, please specify

Q6. Overall, how do you see school social work services benefiting your school district?

Q7. How would you improve/change the social work services provided within your school district?

Q8. We currently have \_\_\_\_\_ full time school social workers within the school district.

- 0
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4 or more

Q9. We currently have \_\_\_\_\_ part time school social workers within the school district.

- 0
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4 or more

Q10. What is the school social worker to student ratio within your school district?

Q11. The degree and licensure requirement for school social worker(s) in your district is:

- BA- LSW
- MA- LGSW
- MA- LICSW
- Other
- Unknown

Q12. How are school social workers in your district funded (check all that apply)?

- School district general funds
- Special education funds
- Federal, State, and/or Local grants, please specify
- Title I funds
- Other, please specify

Q13. School social workers direct supervisor is:

- Principal
- Assistant Principal
- Director of Special Education
- Other

Q14. On professional development days are there specific activities to support the work of the school social workers?

- If yes, please describe the activities:
- No

Q15. How does the school district support professional development (CEU's) of school social workers (check all that apply)?

- Supporting staff to attend professional training(s)
- Reimbursement for professional training fee(s)
- Attend professional training(s) as part of social worker's work schedule

Q16. Are district funds are set aside for social workers to attend professional training(s)?

Yes

No

Q17. How are funds allocated?

Social worker request

Program Site

Other

Q18. Is your school district:

Urban

Suburban

Rural

Other

Q19. When you complete this survey are you referring to school social worker services provided in a \_\_\_\_\_ school?

Public

Private

Charter

Other

Q20. When you complete this survey are you referring to school social work services provided in grades (check all that apply):

PK

K

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

Transition

Other, please specify

Q21. When you answer this survey are you referring to school social work services provided in (check all that apply):

- general education
- special education
- alternative education
- other

Q22. My current administrative role within the school district is (check all that apply):

- Superintendent
- Principal
- Assistant Principal
- Dean of Students
- Other

Q23. How many school districts have your worked in?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5 or more

Q24. How long have you worked in your current school district?

- Less than 1 year
- 1-3 years
- 4-6 years
- 7-9 years
- 10-12 years
- 13-15 years
- 16-19 years
- 20+ years

Q25. My occupational background is:

- Business
- Education
- Special Education
- Social Work
- Other, please specify