

# Perceived Role of School Social Workers in Hamilton County Tennessee

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## ABSTRACT

School social work, which began around 1906 in three major north eastern cities, was intended to meet the needs of the underprivileged. Called "visiting teachers" (Allen-Meaers, 2007, p. 26) these social workers provided a vital link between the burgeoning immigrant community and the schools. According to Allen-Meaers (2007), factors that had implications to the school social work profession were compulsory attendance laws, knowledge of individual differences in learning, realization of the strategic position of education and the relevance of education on the lives of students. From these early beginnings to now the role of the school social worker has evolved from attendance officer to social caseworker to parent/school liaison and more recently with the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) back to attendance officer.

The NASW became involved in 1973 by conducting a study that first documented the overlapping of roles of guidance counselors and school social workers that was later confirmed in similar studies (Allen Meares, 2007; Hernandez, Pais, Garza, 2002; Agresta, 2004). This confusion in roles causes misunderstanding of the school social worker's position and "Services that are not understood are often targeted for elimination when financial times are hard" (Garrett, 2006, p. 115). During the eighties and nineties several educational legislative acts included the school social worker as an integral part of the educational team. Further complicating the definition of the school social worker's role is the lack of a uniform data collection system that tracks referrals, caseloads, services provided, and case dispositions (Johnson-Reid, Kontak, Citerman, Essma, Fezzi, 2004).

Although several legislative acts have recently included the school social worker as part of the educational team, their role is still not defined. This study focuses on the perceived role of school social workers in Hamilton County Tennessee. It will utilize the current data collection system to evaluate actual statistics against the perceived role that the school social workers have in Hamilton County among school administrators, principals, teachers, parents, and the school social workers.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is the perceived role of the school social worker in Hamilton County Tennessee?
2. How does this perceived role help or hinder the school social work profession?

## PURPOSE/RATIONALE

School social work is a specialized area of the social work profession. Early definitions found in the literature express that the school social worker is the only person who has knowledge of the student in both the home and the school setting. While school social workers are in the best position to provide the essential link between these two environments, they are often underutilized as agents in prevention, education, and case management resources for the student and their parent or guardian. Most often, the school social worker is hired to be the attendance police and has very little time to spend on underlying issues that are preventing the student from regular attendance. The school social worker's role is usually ill-defined and often overlaps other personnel such as guidance counselors. This role confusion may also cause school staff to be less likely to refer students to the school social worker. The literature overwhelmingly agrees that another major issue of the school social work profession is identifying, documenting, and evaluating practice outcomes (Staudt, Cherry & Watson, 2005; Garrett, 2006; Slovak, Joseph, & Broussard, 2006; Johnson-Reid, Kontak, Citerman, Essma & Fezzi, 2004). Without documentation, policymakers can not understand the vital role that social workers play in the school environment.

## DESCRIPTION OF SAMPLING FRAME

Desired population for professional survey will be the administrators, principals, teachers, and social workers who are currently employed with the Hamilton County Department of Education in Tennessee (approximately 2000). Desired population for parent survey will be parents (100) with children in five randomly chosen schools in Hamilton County.

Desired secondary data will come from the Hamilton County Department of Education Student Services.

## DESCRIPTION OF METHODS TO SELECT STUDY SAMPLE

1. Create exploratory questionnaire through Survey Monkey to be administered to all Central Office administrators, principals, teachers, and school social workers presently employed with Hamilton County Department of Education with a goal of two hundred (200) completed surveys.
2. Create a paper survey for parents that will be administered at four PTA/parent classes on at least five (5) randomly selected campuses with a goal of fifty (50) completed surveys.
3. Obtain secondary data from HCDE Student Services that shows referrals, case disposition, and caseloads for each school social worker for 2006-07.



## DATA ANALYSIS STEPS

1. Data will be collected, coded, cleaned, and entered in SPSS.
2. Descriptive statistics will be run to check for data distribution and skewness.
3. For the first research question, the data from the online Survey Monkey and paper parent questionnaires will be entered into SPSS where frequencies will be run to determine range of scores, mean scores, and standard deviations. T-tests will be administered to look for differences between the groups. A correlation analysis will be run to examine relationships between the independent and dependant variables.
4. For the second research question, the secondary data from Hamilton County Department of Student Services will be entered into SPSS where frequencies will be run to determine range of scores, mean scores, and standard deviations. T-tests will be administered to look for differences between the groups. Correlation analysis will be run to examine the relationships between the independent and dependant variables.

All findings will be reported in aggregate form. Findings will be utilized in an electronic format and in a formal research paper/report.

## RESULTS/DISCUSSION

For the professional online survey, females represented seventy-eight percent of the total overall sample (N=415) and Caucasians were the majority at eight-seven percent. Teachers were the largest participants at sixty-nine percent of the total overall sample. Of the remaining participants, school social workers counted for only one point nine percent of the total respondents. In the secondary 2006-07 school social work dataset from Hamilton County Department of Education, male students represented fifty-two percent of the total overall sample (N=3999) and Caucasian students represented fifty-seven percent of the total students referred to school social workers. No demographic data was requested on the ten question paper parent survey. The secondary dataset was further divided into three categories: elementary, middle and high school. Elementary referrals comprised almost half of the total overall sample (N=3999) at forty-five percent, middle school students made up twenty-five percent and high school students totaled twenty-eight percent. At the elementary level, Kindergarten and first grade students were almost equal in number of referrals while the middle school reported a higher percentage of seventh graders were referred. At the high school level, ninth grade students had the most referrals at twelve percent. Each successive year the referrals dropped substantially with only twenty-three students receiving referrals at the twelfth grade level.

An independent-samples t-test was calculated comparing the mean scores of the school social worker role by school administrators and school social workers. No significant difference was found ( $t(45) = .100, p > .05$ ). The mean of the administrator ( $M=1.92, SD=1.20$ ) was not significantly different from the mean of the school social worker ( $M= 1.88, SD=1.45$ ). However, when an independent-samples t-test was calculated comparing the mean scores of role overlap between the school social workers and school guidance counselors by school administrators and school social workers a significant difference was found ( $t(45) = 2.03, p > .05$ ). The mean score of the administrators ( $M= 3.69, SD= .73$ ) was significantly higher than the mean score of the school social worker ( $M= 3.13, SD= .64$ ).

This study confirmed that the perceived role of the school social worker in Hamilton County Tennessee is primarily seen as attendance. This one-dimensional role hinders the school social work professional from assisting families in crisis when the emphasis for intervention centers around student attendance.

## FIVE IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS

1. School social workers must participate in evidence-based research
2. School social workers must develop and utilize a uniform documentation system
3. School social workers must advocate for their profession within the school system
4. School social workers must educate the school system, the parents, and the community about their profession
5. School social workers must become the vital link between the parents, the community, and the school

