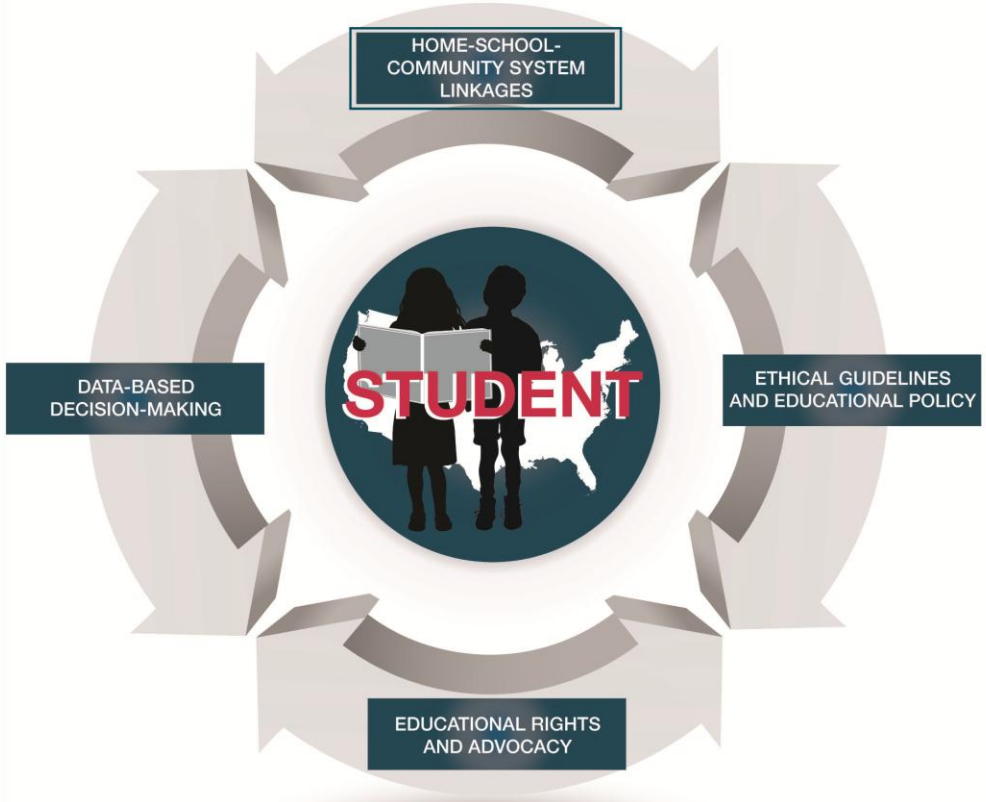
School Social Work

NATIONAL PRACTICE MODEL



PROVIDE SCIENTIFICALLY SUPPORTED EDUCATION, BEHAVIOR, AND MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

- Implement multi-tiered programs and practices
- Monitor progress
- Evaluate effectiveness

PROMOTE SCHOOL CLIMATE AND CULTURE CONDUCIVE TO LEARNING

- Facilitate student, family, and community engagement
- Enhance capacity of school personnel
- Promote effective policies and procedures

MAXIMIZE SCHOOL-BASED AND COMMUNITY RESOURCES

- Promote a continuum of services
- Mobilize resources and promote assets
- Provide innovative leadership, interdisciplinary collaboration, systems coordination, and professional consultation

IMPROVING ACADEMIC AND BEHAVIORAL OUTCOMES

SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA©

Executive Summary

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The National School Social Work (SSW) practice model is grounded in four key constructs and three practice features that take place within and across school, home, and community settings with the goal of improving academic and behavioral outcomes. The key constructs included in this model include: home-school-community system linkages, ethical guidelines and educational policy, educational rights and advocacy, and data-based decision-making. The three practice features are to provide scientifically supported educational, behavioral, and mental health services; promote school climate and culture conducive to learning; and maximize school-based and community resources. This model has been created from, and designed to be used in conjunction with, other nationally endorsed documents such as NASW's Standards for School Social Work Practice (National Association of Social Workers, 2012) and Code of Ethics (National Association of Social Workers, 2008), and SSWAA's Ethical Guidelines series (School Social Work Association of America, 2008). Together, these documents provide a unified set of national principles to guide graduate education, credentialing, professional practice and services, and ethical behavior of effective school social workers.

Key Constructs

Home-School-Community System Linkages

Home-school-community system linkages embody social work's historic commitment to an ecological approach that includes application of a social-ecological framework and risk, resilience, and protective factors to each of the model's three practice features. A social-ecology framework refers to transactions and interactions occurring among and between persons and their social and physical environment that dates from the 1960s and 70s (see Gitterman & Germaine, 2008; Hobbs 1960; Swap, 1974). A central feature of this framework is the concept of person-environment fit or match (Romer & Heller, 1983). This principle is defined by the extent to which an individual's characteristics (e.g., attitudes, skills, behavior or performance) fit or match up with the beliefs, demands, and expectations of the environment (e.g., a particular context or setting such as the school, classroom, or playground). For example, if a child is displaying challenging behaviors in the classroom setting, it is not simply the child's characteristics that are the focus of assessment and potential intervention. A social ecological framework considers how beliefs, demands and expectations of the faculty, classmates, school, home, and community affect the person-environment fit for this student. Further, a social-ecological framework analyzes the match between individual needs and the physical environment. For example, if a child has difficulty navigating a large school building, it is necessary to address this environmental challenge and facilitate transactions that help meet the student's needs (color coding hallways, or placing symbols or icons that identify parts of building). If a student has hearing or vision needs, physical placement of the student's desk in the classroom may help or hinder learning (near the white board or close to the teacher's desk).

A defining feature of students at risk for school failure is a lack of person-in-environment fit, and interventions promoted and implemented by school social workers using this model should reflect this theoretical approach. A "risk factor" is defined by Fraser and Terzian (2005) as "any event, condition, or experience that increases the probability that a problem will be formed, maintained, or exacerbated" (p. 5). Risk factors for school-related problems may be specific or generic in nature. Within the context of education, nonspecific risk factors such as poverty are not directly related to school adjustment and achievement problems. Nevertheless, they have the potential to create maladaptive emotional and behavioral contexts and outcomes that in turn have an adverse effect on academic performance (Greenberg, Domitrovich, & Bumbarger, 1999). Nonspecific risk factors may set into motion what Fraser and colleagues call a "chain of risk" (Fraser, Kirby, & Smokowski, 2004) that may culminate in negative outcomes such as academic failure. Other risk factors directly impact the likelihood of school adjustment problems and academic failure. For example, factors such as low commitment to school directly contribute to truancy, poor grades, and overall academic performance. Risk factors can be individual in nature or appear in the context of families, schools, or neighborhoods.

Protective factors are characteristics or traits that buffer exposure to risk. Protective factors include internal and external forces, but they must also include efforts aimed at micro, mezzo, and macro system assessments and interventions. Identifying risk, resilience, and protective factors on all three system levels broadens the array of school social work programs and services provided and moves away from a direct practice model with an individual pathological-focus toward a whole-school, whole-child framework. For example, in situations of high risk, macro protective factors such a safe and healthy school environment, mezzo protective factors such as effective parenting, and micro protective factors such as attachment to teachers or other adults at school may reduce risk, support resilience, and decrease the likelihood of school-related problems. Application of the practice features in this model should be employed to reduce conditions of risk, and promote resilience within and across home, school, and community.

Ethical guidelines and educational policy

Ethical guidelines and educational policy refers to the importance of adhering to ethical standards promoted with social work and education, as well as state and federal laws affecting student rights. Ethical guidelines for practice include the NASW Code of Ethics and SSWAA's ethical guideline series, which is meant to supplement the NASW Code. A careful reading of the NASW Code suggests that school social workers would also benefit from consulting other school-based professional codes, such as the Ethical Standards for School Counselors (ASCA, 2010) and the National Association of School Psychologists' Principles for Professional Ethics (NASP, 2010). Federal laws affecting students include, but are not limited to, No Child Left Behind (aka the Elementary and Secondary Education Act), the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments of 2008, and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). Legal practice is also affected by case law or court decisions. Supreme Court cases, such as Jaffee v. Redmond, affect all states, but state court cases, such as Tarasoff v. Board of Regents of the University of California, have had national influence. When applying laws and codes to specific ethical predicaments, school social workers should follow an ethical decision-making model (Raines & Dibble, 2011).

Education rights and advocacy

School social workers must understand the ways in which structural inequalities affect the quality of education and educational outcomes, and carefully balance their mandate to advocate for students and families in their position as a school employee. Advocacy and a strengths-based perspective are critical to this key construct. Specifically, school social workers are mandated to advocate on behalf of students and families, particularly those who are marginalized. This includes, but is not limited to, advocating for program and policy efforts that benefit students from disadvantaged backgrounds, since low socioeconomic status is a key risk factor for educational failure. Additionally, school social workers must remain committed to equal access to high quality instruction, and assist students and families to navigate the web of services and local, state, and national policies, within and outside of the education system. School-based practitioners are also legally required to take a strengths-based perspective (Raines 2008), and a strength-based orientation is central to social work practice. School social workers should employ a strengths-based approach across all of the practice features associated with this model, in part to guard against categorizing, stigmatizing, and stereotyping vulnerable students and families.

Data-based decision-making

Data-based decision-making refers to the process of integrating the best current research evidence with clinical expertise in the care of clients (Raines, 2008). This means that school social work services should be informed by the research literature, adapt empirically-supported interventions to fit student needs, and routinely evaluate the effectiveness of policies, programs, and practices. School social workers can use a variety of data sources, including records (e.g., attendance, tardiness, or grades), interviews (with students, teachers, or parents), observations (e.g., classroom or other settings), tests (e.g., rapid assessment instruments) or scaled questions about emotional states (e.g., anxiety or sadness). Grouped data can be shared with school administrators to demonstrate the effectiveness of social work interventions and advocate for maintaining or increasing services in schools, and data representing individual functioning should be used to monitor progress, and subsequently make decisions related to resource allocation.

Practice Features

This model requires school social workers simultaneously provide scientifically supported educational, behavioral, and mental health services; promote school climate and culture conducive to learning; and maximize school-based and community resources. All school social workers should be knowledgeable and competent in each of these features. However, the proportion of time a school social worker engages in these activities can be highly variable, depending on a variety of contextual factors, including the needs of the school and population they serve. In addition to describing these features, some guidelines are delineated in this section that can be used to help school social workers prioritize their allocation of time, and assist administrators to create job descriptions that are: 1) consistent with this practice model and 2) reflect the unique needs of the setting in which school social work services are provided. Importantly, no simple formula can account for all of the factors that influence a school social worker's role.

Provide scientifically supported education, behavior, and mental health services
Implementation of this practice feature is accomplished by: 1) implementing multi-tiered programs and practices, 2) monitoring progress, and 3) evaluating effectiveness. Consistent with the construct of home-school-community system linkages, school social workers assume that cause of academic and behavioral underachievement reside, not only within an individual (i.e., individual characteristics), but also across the web of interactions surrounding the child. Thus, school social workers should prioritize services that address changes in environmental factors; such as changes in school personnel's and families' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. While the proximal outcomes of school social work services may target these variables, the distal outcome should always be academic and educationally-appropriate behavioral outcomes. Consistent with the whole-school approach to children's mental health, strategies are implemented along a continuum ranging from promotion to maintenance (See Figure 1). Consistent with this continuum, school social workers should focus on screening, promotion, and prevention and intervention services within all of the spheres depicted in the model. Finally, it is recommended school social worker's time should be balanced among the three key practice features.

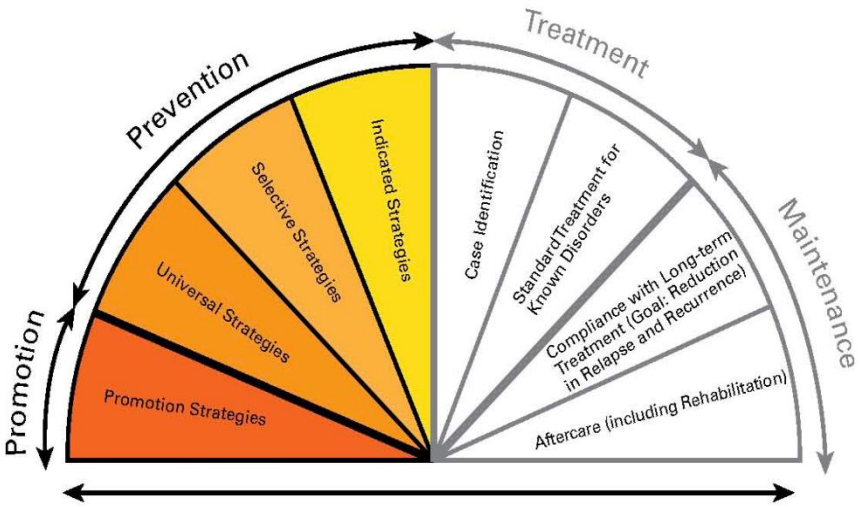

Figure 1. The continuum of mental health strategies (Education Development Center, 2011, p.11). Printed with permission from the Education Development Center.

Promote school climate and culture conducive to learning
Promoting school climate and culture conducive to learning refers to the psycho-social environment that fosters academic engagement and achievement. Schools with contexts conducive to learning have: 1) policies and procedures that produce safe and orderly environments; 2) supportive relationships within and between students, school staff, families, and community partners; and 3) capacity-building efforts to promote effective practices and implement them with fidelity. Implementing this practice feature is accomplished by: facilitating

student, family, and community engagement; 2) enhancing capacity of school personnel; and 3) promoting effective policies and procedures. Some services provided by school social workers should address these areas, with the goal of improving learning. Enhancing capacity is a component of this practice feature that is used infrequently among many school social workers (Kelly, et al.,2010). Capacity development involves the efficient use of school social worker's time and effort. Because schools are typically under resourced with staff who have knowledge about mental health, child welfare, and research; school social workers are most efficient when they leverage their skills to develop capacity in others, rather than attempting to work in isolation. Thus, it is critical for school social workers to employ a consultation approach and provide professional development to educational staff frequently (Sabatino, 2009).

Maximize school-based and community resources

Maximizing school-based and community resources involves insuring services that would result in improved academic and behavioral performance in school are available, accessible, and coordinated. This practice feature is implemented by: 1) promoting a continuum of services; 2) mobilizing resources and promoting assets; and 3) providing innovative leadership, interdisciplinary collaboration, systems coordination, and professional consultation. As described earlier, school social workers provide services for children with varying levels of need. However, when children have significant mental health disorders that require a treatment and maintenance approach, school social workers should strive to have the services provided by school employees supplemented by intensive services provided by specialists from community agencies. These services are typically provided by professionals representing medical, health, mental health, child welfare, and juvenile justice settings. Knowledge of these services and skill accessing them also represents a unique skill of specialized support instructional personnel trained in social work. School social workers can also advocate for students by ensuring the services provided within the school are accessible (e.g., before and after school care, special education). Coordination of services is a critical, and often overlooked, component of service delivery. Coordination is required with the school and for services provided in school, home, and community settings. Assisting the school to coordinate the services they provide is necessary to eliminate redundancy. School social workers are typically one of the only professional groups within the educational system with extensive knowledge of the scope of services available within the community, and the skills and knowledge to navigate other service delivery systems (e.g., health, mental health, child welfare, and juvenile justice). They are also likely the only professional within the educational system to assume an advocacy stance, even if it means challenging current policies and practices. Thus, we believe that all school social workers should assume this role.

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