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School Social Work: A Vital Link in Schools: A report on School Work Services for the Mankato Area Public School District

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Johnston, R. (2013). School Social Work: A Vital Link in Schools: A report on School Work Services for the Mankato Area Public School District [Master's capstone project, Minnesota State University, Mankato]. Cornerstone: A Collection of Scholarly and Creative Works for Minnesota State University, Mankato. <https://cornerstone.lib.mnsu.edu/etds/857/>

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School Social Work: A vital link in schools

A Report on School Social Work Services for the Mankato Area Public School District



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SIGNIFICANCE AND PURPOSE

- The purpose of this research project was to obtain additional information, beyond the school social work job description, and document the job responsibilities, roles, activities, challenges, and contributions of the three school social workers working in the Mankato Area Public School District.
- The primary research question was: *To what extent does the school social work job description match the work actually performed by the school social workers?*
- The recommended ratio of school social worker to students by the National Association of Social Work (NASW) is **1:250 general education students or 1:50 at-risk or intensive needs students**¹⁶. The 3 school social workers are currently serving 7,594 enrolled students in 16 schools at a ratio of approximately **1: 2,531**.

METHODOLOGY

- This qualitative research study used two methods to obtain data: field observations and semi-structured interviews. The three school social workers serving the Mankato Area Public School District agreed to participate in the research.
- A limitation of this research is that the school social workers were only observed for 1.5 days each. However, all three participants indicated the observations accurately represented the work they performed on a typical day as a school social worker in the Mankato Area Public School district.

PART 1: FIELD OBSERVATIONS

- Field Observation consisted of observing each school social worker separately for 1.5 days (approximately 12 hours each).
- A field observation log was created to document the location, types of contacts (e.g., meetings, consultations, home visits, telephone calls, and conferences), job responsibilities, and amount of time spent performing tasks.
- Each school social worker was assigned a code to provide anonymity (i.e. SSW100).
- The student researcher unobtrusively recorded all tasks performed.
- Qualitative data analysis was used to organize the data collected from the observations.¹²
- The observation logs were separated by school social worker and day.
- The individual observation logs for each school social worker were tabulated to establish a total number of minutes per day spent at each coded task.
- These totals were then compiled to determine a percentile based on the overall time spent performing the job responsibilities or tasks.
- Tasks were evaluated to look for common themes for each individual school social worker and as a group.

PART 2: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

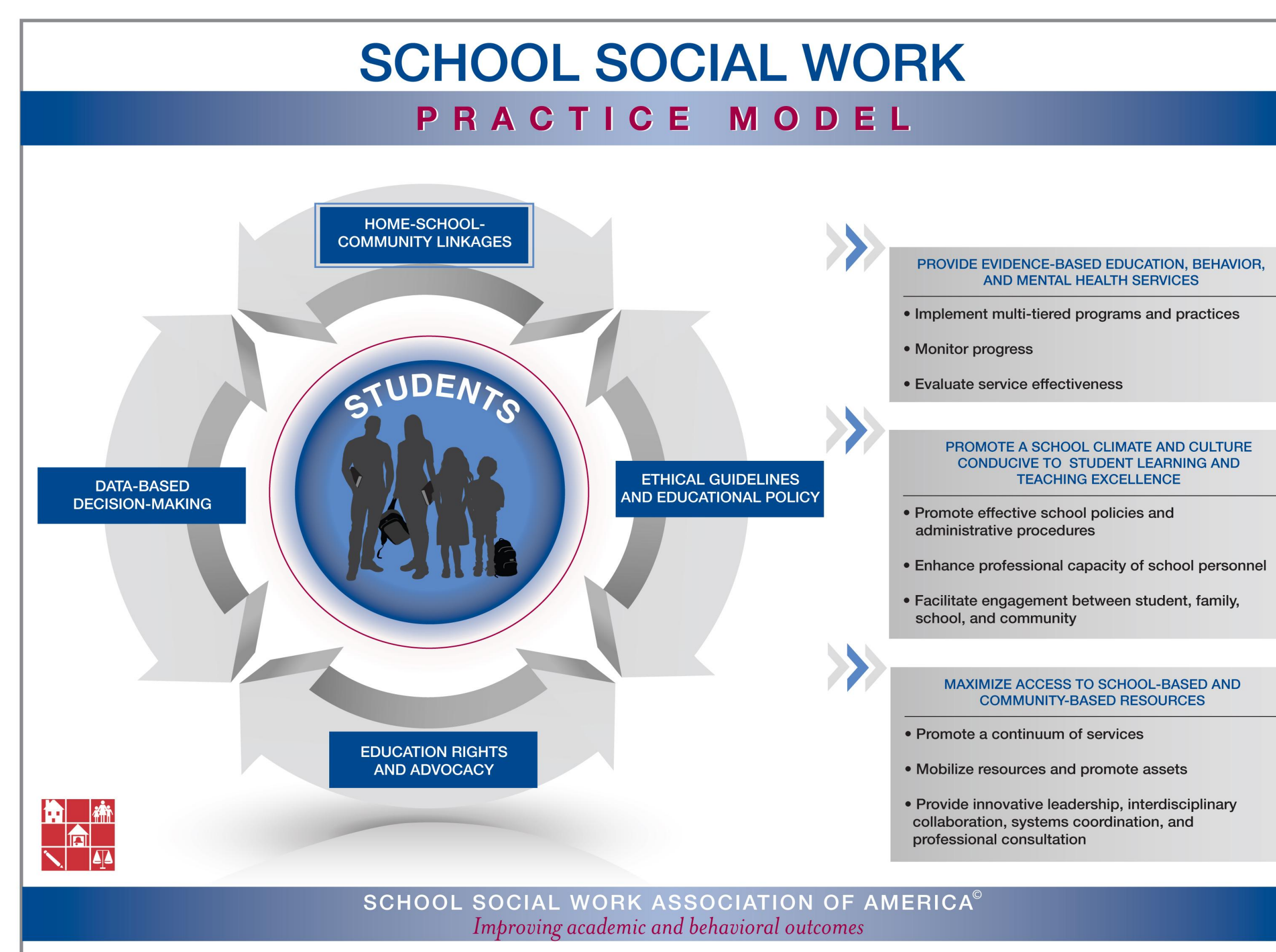
- Each school social worker participated in a 90 minute 1:1 face-to-face interview.
- The interviews were conducted in a private office in the Department of Social Work at MSU, Mankato.
- A six-page semi-structured interview form was created specifically for the interviews.
- The responses from the school social workers were recorded by the student researcher on the data collection forms.
- Each interview began with the school social workers reviewing the observation findings, followed by asking a series of questions pertaining to their roles, activities, challenges, and contributions.
- The qualitative data was analyzed by question and by each social worker and then collectively as a group to discover common themes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

For over a century, school workers have been providing services that span the boundary between home and school. School social workers help create a bridge between a student's home, school and community.¹⁵ As a vital member of the schools and community, school social workers acquire an array of specialized skills and knowledge that is crucial to understand the complexity and diversity of students, as well as, provide alternative perspectives on service delivery within the school district.²

A school social worker's role is multifaceted and crucial within the educational setting in addressing student's needs.¹⁵ They are educated to:

- Help students with mental health and behavioral issues.
- Offer positive support to increase a student's behaviors and academics through collaboration, consultation, assessments, evaluation, and intervention with students, parents, families, teachers, administrators and the community.
- Offer individual and group skills services.¹⁸



FIELD OBSERVATION FINDINGS

The five areas the school social workers collectively spent the majority of their time during the 1.5 day observation period was:

- Collaboration (24.8%),
- Meetings (14.1%),
- Education (13.9%),
- Correspondence (12.77%),
- Skills group (12.6%).

Code	Service Provided	SSW 100 %	SSW 200 %	SSW 300 %	Total %
RESRC	Resource	3.1	0	0	.8
COLLB	Collaboration	13.8	36.7	21.9	24.8
TRANS	Transportation	1.5	0	1.4	.9
SKL GRP	Skills Group	31.3	12.7	0	12.6
MTG	Meeting	16.7	14.7	11.97	14.1
CORR	Correspondence	13.8	9.8	11.1	12.77
INTRVN	Intervention	3.1	2.9	6.31	3.03
IND SUPP	Individual Support	0	9.8	14.02	8.9
SUPRVSN	Supervision	0	0	4.3	1.7
PRG NTE	Progress Note	7.4	6.9	5.6	6.5
EDUC	Education	9.2	6.5	23.4	13.9

Overview of Tasks performed by each School Social Workers over 1.5 days observed:

- Working with students, families, and teachers to address problems that were impacting students' academic achievement and social-emotional and mental health well-being.
- Extensive use of time-management and organizational skills to effectively perform all duties.
- Problem -solving crisis situations throughout the 16 schools.
- Providing individual and group services to students and their families to address social, emotional, behavioral, mental health, and academic needs.
- Conducting home visits pertaining to attendance, homelessness, and academic issues, as well as concerns for basic needs, child welfare, and transportation barriers.

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW FINDINGS

An overarching theme was the feeling by all 3 of the school social workers that they are less effective as direct result of being spread too thin throughout the school district – and it is difficult for the three school social workers to effectively respond to 16 schools and 7,594 enrolled students – let alone prevent problems and engage in evidence-based practice.

- Reflected their job description, however went well beyond the written job description.
- Engage in **primary prevention** services to stop problems from occurring in the first place is very limited. School social workers spend the majority of their time responding to problems, rather than engaging in practices that can prevent a problem from occurring.
- Engage in **secondary prevention** services to deal with crisis situations and deal with immediate short term needs of students, families, and school personnel.
- Spend a significant amount of time engaging in **tertiary prevention** - meaning they are intervening to deal with the long-term consequences of unmet needs and long-standing problems impacting students and families.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In addition to **increasing the number of School Social Worker**, the following are 3 of the 8 specific recommendations that emerged out of the research.

- Examine the role of the school social worker within the larger organization and determine how they can help to better address social, emotional, behavioral, mental health, academic and other needs of students.
- Determine how to better restructure their job responsibilities so the school social workers can better utilize their time, knowledge, skills, and expertise to meet the needs of students, families, school personnel and the district.
- Based on the research, the model most effective is having one school social worker in a school building. This would be more in-line with the national recommended ratio of having 1 school social worker serving 250 general education or up to 50 at-risk or intensive needs students.¹⁶