



International Network for School Social Work

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Electronic Newsletter January 2012

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Water Cooler Conversations: Salaries and Working conditions

When colleagues gather around the water cooler the conversation is apt to turn to salary, working conditions and benefits. There may also be complaints of lack of administrative support, feelings of powerlessness and loss of job satisfaction. When social workers do not feel that they are recognized as an important part of the life of the school, or that their ideas are welcomed or that their work is making a difference in children's lives they may show signs of burnout or talk of quitting. While these are common issues amongst school social workers all over the world, the problems are highlighted by recent reports from Hong Kong and Kurdistan.

Woes blamed as school social workers quit (*The Standard Wednesday, September 14, 2011*)

Low salaries, lack of support, poor prospects for promotion and lack of job satisfaction prompted a third of social workers at elementary schools in Hong Kong to quit in 2010. Apparently they are hired on one-year contracts by the private agencies who have to bid each year to provide student guidance services, so there is little job security.

School social workers assigned other tasks (*The Kurdish Globe, January 14, 2012*)

The Kurdish Globe recently reported that social workers hired to help primary and secondary school students with social and personal difficulties are prevented from fulfilling this role by being assigned clerical work and other inappropriate duties. Although frustrated by this, the social workers have the backing of their professional association, and the Education Directorate has issued regulations that specify the responsibilities of the school social workers in providing students the help they need.

What causes stress for school social workers?

School social workers may have heavy caseloads, difficult work and low pay, but it is often not the work or poor compensation that produce stress. People tend to go into social work wanting this kind of challenge and knowing that the salary is not as high as in some other professions. However if they do not feel they have a voice in establishing working conditions, if they see unfair personnel decisions, or if they experience discrimination or harassment at work, workers may lose their enthusiasm, develop symptoms of stress or become burned out. Then there is likely to be a high rate of quitting due to stress, and the turnover of staff results in clients being assigned to new staff with less experience. When stressed or burned-out workers stay in the profession the quality of service suffers.

Salary Issues

Social workers know that their profession has never been highly paid. People tend to choose social work from a sense of mission rather than with a goal of achieving a high level of compensation. However, the relatively low salary along with other stresses may in time produce a feeling of being under-valued. Social workers have a commitment to equity, so are likely to become dissatisfied if the salary scale does not reward their educational level, length of service, experience and responsibilities, if pay lags behind inflation or female staff are paid less.

Representation for school social workers

Professional associations can help in many ways. In countries, such as Sweden and the US, with well-established school social work programs, strong specialty professional associations provide much-needed advocacy. Experience shows that lobbying to protect the social work role and avoid cuts in service is never-ending. The professional association is the means to communicate effectively with decision makers from the Ministry or Department of Education at both local and national levels. As the School Social Work Association of America has done, professional associations can join together with other associations representing school nurses, psychologists and counselors for greater impact in communicating about the need for children to have support at school. The association can help school social workers achieve improved job satisfaction by developing the job description (as was done in Mongolia), by defining professional standards and offering continuing education.

However helpful professional associations are in advocating for school social work jobs, they may be unable to help the worker with a grievance stemming from violation of workplace rights, so many school social workers turn to a union for such help. In the US, many school social workers belong to teachers' unions for help with grievances, as well as for negotiating salaries and working conditions. UNISON (a public service trade union representing 40,000 social workers) in the UK provides workplace help and lobbies for members. The 23,000-member Norwegian Union of Social Educators and Social Workers (*Fellesorganisasjonen for Barnevernpedagoger, Sosionomer og Vernepleiere*) combines a wide range of functions of both a professional association and a union for the 430 members who work in schools. Collective bargaining by these unions allows a collective voice for fair pay and working conditions.

Strikes and other work actions – know the issues before it happens

When collective bargaining breaks down, unions representing public employees including teachers and other school personnel may call for a strike. For example, on November 30, 2011 most schools in the UK were closed by a strike and social workers went out along with teachers. Social workers have little experience with strikes or guidance for conduct in such a situation. Since it is important to know the professional issues before it happens, social workers should consult general statements from sources such as the NASW Code of Ethics:

3.10 Labor-Management Disputes

(a) Social workers may engage in organized action, including the formation of and participation in labor unions, to improve services to clients and working conditions.

(b) The actions of social workers who are involved in labor-management disputes, job actions, or labor strikes should be guided by the profession's values, ethical principles, and ethical standards. Reasonable differences of opinion exist among social workers concerning their primary obligation as professionals during an actual or threatened labor strike or job action. Social workers should carefully examine relevant issues and their possible impact on clients before deciding on a course of action. <http://www.socialworkers.org/pubs/code/code.asp>