

Social Workers in the K-12 Education System



Social Work Practice in Newfoundland and Labrador

Social work is defined in the *Social Workers Act* (2010) as the assessment, remediation and prevention of psycho-social problems and the enhancement of the social, psycho-social functioning and well-being of individuals, families, groups and communities by

- (i) *Providing direct counseling and therapy services to a client*
- (ii) *Developing, promoting and delivering human service programs, including those done in association with other professions*
- (iii) *Contributing to the development and improvement of social policy and*
- (iv) *Conducting research in the science, technique and practice of social work*

This definition covers a diverse range of social work activities including direct practice with individuals, couples and families, community development, health promotion, policy development, administrative practice and research.

The Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Social Workers (NLASW) is the regulatory body and professional association for social work in Newfoundland and Labrador. NLASW is responsible for regulating the practice of social work under the *Social Workers Act*. Registration with NLASW grants the *Registered Social Worker (RSW)* designation which is required to use the title “*social worker*” or to practice within the scope of the social work profession in this province.

Social work is one of the largest health professions in Newfoundland and Labrador with over 1500 Registered Social Workers employed throughout all regions of the province. Social workers practice in hospitals, long term care facilities, adult and youth corrections, child welfare, addictions, mental health, community based organizations, government departments and universities. Social workers are also self-employed in private practice and consulting businesses.

The NLASW recommends that the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development examine the current staffing complement within all provincial schools and consider the valuable role which social workers can play within the education system.

Social Work & Safe and Caring School Environments

Children and youth spend a significant portion of their time in schools. This is an environment in which children and youth learn and grow; academically, socially, emotionally and developmentally. At the same time, many children and youth struggle with issues such as poverty, family relationships and dynamics, violence, drug and alcohol use and mental health. Many students also struggle with transitions in their lives (e.g., parental separation and divorce, grief and loss, aging out of care, etc.). The school environment is not immune to the impact of these issues on the ability of children and youth to meet their full academic potential. As community resources are not always available in a timely manner, schools are increasingly tasked with having to address these issues within the school community.

The K-12 education system in Newfoundland and Labrador aims to foster safe, caring and inclusive learning environments. In 2013, the Safe and Caring Schools Policy was revised. As outlined in the policy “The creation and maintenance of a safe, caring and inclusive school requires creativity, on-going collaboration and recognition of the complexities involved” (p. 5).

Section 4.2 of the Safe and Caring Schools Policy (School-Wide Positive Behavior Supports) outlines the areas which need to be addressed to improve student academic and behavioural outcomes. These include:

- 4.2.1.1. Fostering preventative approaches to inappropriate behaviour and creating or maintaining an inclusive, engaging, responsive and productive environment.
- 4.2.1.2. Addressing classroom management and disciplinary issues.
- 4.2.1.3. Supporting students whose behaviours require more specialized assistance (e.g., emotional and behavioural disorders, mental health).
- 4.2.1.4. Maximizing academic engagement and achievement for all students.

Incorporating social work into the education system in this province would assist in the implementation of a safe and caring school policy and in addressing the complexities that impact on academic achievement in the school environment.

Nationally and internationally, school social workers are a vital and integral part of the education team in schools. According to the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) “School social workers offer a unique perspective and knowledge to educators working with children, adolescents and their families. This can assist educators in offering the most valuable and complete education to all students to facilitate the development of students as healthy, contributing members of society”.

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Social workers assist students to maximize their academic potential by providing or engaging in:

- Assessment, screening, and intervention
- Counselling and therapy for individual, families and groups
- Education and support for school staff and parents
- Referrals and linkages with community agencies
- Community development programming
- Resource development
- Mental health promotion

According to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) (2012) “School social workers seek to ensure equitable education opportunities; ensure that students are mentally, physically, and emotionally present in the classroom; and promote respect and dignity for all students” (p.1). This perspective is also in line with the Safe and Caring School Policy.

School-Based Mental Health & Social Work

The mental health challenges facing children and youth are becoming more visible within the school environment. A review of the current literature and statistics demonstrates a clear need for enhanced mental health services and programs in schools. In particular, the 2012 Newfoundland and Labrador Drug Survey noted:

- Significantly more students were determined to have “very elevated” depressive symptoms (8.4%) when compared to 2007 (4.8%) based on the screening tool used
- In the 12 months before the survey, while 20.3% of students reported needing help for depressive symptoms, only 6% got help.
- One out of six (17%) of students reported seriously considering suicide in the 12 months before the survey, while 14.1% made plans to attempt suicide and 8.4% attempted suicide.
- 4.3% met the definitions of “at-risk” or “problem” gambling based on the survey tool used in the survey.
- 30% of students had used cannabis in the 12 months prior to the survey
- In the 30 days before the survey was administered, 27.8% of survey students reported experiencing drunkenness

Nationally, it has been noted that:

- 50% of mental disorders develop by age 14 (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2011).
- Up to 70 per cent of young adults living with mental health problems report that the symptoms started in childhood (Mental Health Commission of Canada, n.d.).

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- In 2009, 5% of Canadian youth and young adults were diagnosed with an anxiety disorder (Butler & Pang, 2014).
- In the 2006 Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) national survey of students in grades 6 – 10, 36% of students reported being victims of bullying, 39% reported being bullies and 20% reported being both (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2011).
- In 2009-2010, self-injurious behaviours led to over 17,000 hospitalizations among Canadians aged 15 and older; the highest incidence was among adolescent girls (aged 15 to 19 years) (Butler and Pang, 2014).

A report produced by the Mental Health Commission of Canada (2013) titled *School-Based Mental Health in Canada: A Final Report* noted the need for “Attention to organizational conditions for effective school mental health at the provincial, district and school/community level.....Ensuring adequate numbers of trained mental health professionals in schools is also part of this required commitment if we are to be successful across the continuum of care” (p. 15). The Newfoundland and Labrador Federation of School Councils has also recommended the need for more on-site staff resources to address social problems which are beyond the scope of the current personnel complement, and a report by Senators Kirby and Keon (2006) titled *Out of the Shadows At Last* recommended the establishment of school based teams that included social work.

Social workers are one of the largest providers of mental health care in the province. Social workers within the education system in Newfoundland and Labrador could provide necessary services, supports and programming to positively impact the school environment and improve student academic achievement. In fact, a meta-analysis completed by Franklin, Kim & Tripodi (2009) highlighted the positive impact school social workers may have in addressing the emotional, mental, behavioral and academic needs of students.

Schools that have social workers on site, benefit from the knowledge, skills and expertise of a profession who can help to address issues relating to transitions, anxiety, grief and loss, mental illness, bullying, addictions, anger and coping, eating disorders, and low self-esteem. Research by Bye, Shepard, Partridge & Alvarez (2009) highlighted that school administrators viewed the provision of front line mental health services as a significant benefit of having social workers employed in schools.

According to the Indiana School Social Work Association “The uniqueness of school social work lies in the ecological perspective in which the student is viewed within the context of the classroom, the family, the community and his/her culture”. Social workers believe that early intervention and prevention efforts are important within the school environment. Skilled in the areas of conflict resolution and crisis intervention social workers are able to collaborate with teachers and other school staff to intervene early and effectively to ensure that each student receives an equal opportunity to thrive academically and socially. According to Lynn, McKay, and Atkins (2003), referencing Richman & Bowen (1997), “School social workers in

collaboration with teachers have the potential for reducing risk and increasing resilience in children” (p. 202).

Social workers employed with schools would be available to all students, staff and educators. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) (2012) highlights a multi-tier model for social work in schools which includes school wide interventions, group work, and intensive, individual services for children and youth. School based interventions performed by social workers can positively impact the school environment and ultimately academic success for students. Through their leadership, school social workers can facilitate educational programs and resources to meet the specific needs of schools, and offer professional development to educators and school staff. In addition to school wide interventions and group work, social workers in schools can work with individual students to meet their specific needs. This work would also include family interventions and class room support for teachers. Hopson and Lawson (2011) note that social workers “perform a critical role in schools by addressing students’ individual needs and facilitating the development of socioemotional competencies” (p. 116). School social workers also bring knowledge of and connections with community resources and programs, and when necessary, can refer students and their families to outside agencies in meeting their identified needs. However, through a case management perspective, school social workers are able to maintain the linkage with the school and work with all stakeholders to ensure that each student is able to focus on their academic goals.

Education as a Determinant of Health

As a profession, social workers have a unique understanding of social and economic conditions that impact on the health and well-being of individuals, families, groups and communities. These are referred to as the Social Determinants of Health (SDOH). Education as a determinant of health lays the foundation for a healthy and vibrant province. It is therefore imperative that conditions are put in place to remove barriers that impact on the ability of children and youth to thrive in the academic setting. While the priority for the Department of Education is on the K-12 education system, the focus is also about preparing our youth for post-secondary education and becoming contributing members of society. It is widely recognized that mental health is critically important to one’s overall health and well-being. Therefore, the timing is now to enhance mental health services in the K-12 education system that will have a positive impact on the lives of children, youth and families in the province while improving academic functioning.

Conclusion: Social Workers in Schools - A Model for Success

School social workers have an integral role in the education system; nationally and internationally. According to the School Social Work Association of America, school social workers “have special expertise in understanding family and community systems and linking

students and their families with community services essential to promote student success”. As primary health care providers, school social workers are able to address issues in the here and now and to identify strategies that will help children and youth meet academic goals.

The NLASW recommends that the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development explore the role of social work in the K-12 education system and to develop a strategy to ensure a timely integration. According to the World Health Organization (2008) “investments in the early years, provides one of the greatest potentials to reduce health inequities within a generation.” Investments to support the mental health needs of children and youth within the school environment will positively impact all children, youth and families living in Newfoundland and Labrador. This is important as we look at the policy directions being taken by government including the Population Growth Strategy and the Poverty Reduction Strategy.

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