



# The Domains and Demands of School Social Work Practice

*A Guide to Working Effectively with Students, Families,  
and Schools*

Michael S. Kelly



# THE DOMAINS AND DEMANDS OF SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

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For Lucy, Ben, Isaac, and Freddy  
for their inspiration and love

For the grandparent army whose love  
and time helped me write this book

For all the students, teachers, parents,  
and principals who taught me  
how to do school social work

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## Preface: Trying Things

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I remember the day I was first hired as a school social worker: May 17, 1993. It's not hard, as it was also the same day I was interviewed for the job. That morning, I had sat around a table with my school district's HR person, my eventual school principal, and the director of special education. The interview had gone well, and that afternoon they offered me the job. I have this mind's eye memory of running down the street in excitement, eager to get home and tell my fiancée and parents. That night Michael Jordan hit the game-winning shot to put away the Cleveland Cavaliers in the NBA playoff semifinals.

Since I was about to finish college, I knew that I wanted to be a school social worker, and now after 2 years of full-time master's course work, including a yearlong internship in a high school, here I was, the school social worker at a large junior high school in Chicago's suburbs.

Then a slow, creeping feeling of dread began to make its way into me. It began to dawn on me that I was alone in this new position, and that unlike many of my other friends in social work who had taken jobs in agencies or large nonprofits, I was going to be the only social worker in a building of 50 faculty and 1200 students. I was new, excited, passionate, and terrified.

My wise school social work supervisor had encouraged me to "go with the panic" and schedule a meeting with my new principal to see what ideas she had for my first year on the job. It was summer, so getting meetings with her wasn't hard, and she agreed to meet with me a few days later. I walked in and she immediately told me how excited she was to have me because the "last few school social workers we had weren't so great." She told me she was a former school counselor and that improving and protecting the mental health of students was a high priority for her. I asked her to give me a sense of what she wanted me to do this year, and her response was what I was to learn was typical of her: short and cryptic. "I want you to try things. The last two school social workers we had just sat there. Get out there and try things."

This book may not find you in the place I've just described, but I imagine that you too have a story about your first school job. Was your first job as a school social worker like it was for me, and did you have all that attendant first-job wooziness and anxiety? Or maybe you were moving into schools after practicing in other social work settings, and thought of it as just another way to share your skills with students, parents, and teachers. Whatever your initial state of mind, you likely reached a point early on in your school social work practice where you realized that the job you had signed up for had changed, or maybe even deepened. You had joined this complicated, confusing, thrilling social organization known as a school, and beyond whatever was in your job description (assuming, of course, you had one; I never had one in 14 years of practice in two school districts), you knew that there were areas you wanted to practice in, people you wanted to help, but . . . how?

This book represents my attempt to marshal the most current and rigorous evidence on key aspects of school social work practice to help school social workers address the multiple Yoles they are expected to fulfill and be effective in doing so. The problems and case examples in this book will hopefully remind you of your own challenging cases. The difference is that with some of the skills, resources, and perspectives offered in this book, you might be able to look at your challenging cases anew and come back to your work recharged and ready to, as my first principal said, "Get out and try things."

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## **Introduction: School Social Work in the 21st Century—Making Evidence-Based Practice (EBP) Work in School Social Work Practice**

### **School Social Work Is in Its Second Century: How Are We Doing?**

School social work is one of social work's oldest subspecialties and just entered its second century. In the United States, school social work has grown from a few "visiting teachers" in 1906 working in community schools in Boston, New York, Hartford, and Chicago to a profession that now numbers over 20,000, having a national and more than 30 state associations (School Social Work Association of America [SSWAA], 2005). Internationally, recent estimates place school social work in over 40 countries, with over 50,000 practitioners (Huxtable, 2006).

School social work is alive and (relatively) doing well, and in some areas, like in Illinois, where I have practiced and taught for the past 15 years, appears to be growing. But what's behind these numbers of school social workers? What are school social workers actually doing in their positions? And in the spirit of this volume, what kinds of interventions are they using, and what does the best available evidence tell us about what school social workers might do to make their practices even more effective?

### **Individual Treatment in Schools: Are We Clinicians, Something Close, or Not Quite?**

One of the persistent issues I hear when I give presentations about school social work is the notion that school social work needs to decide if it is a

clinical social work job or not. Some states (like Illinois) have seemed to embrace the clinical role wholeheartedly, and many colleagues I've worked with over the years have described their work as a version of doing psychotherapy in a school setting. Other colleagues I've met from other states (California and Indiana come to mind) eschew the "clinician" tag and instead portray their work as more akin to a school-based consultant, working with teachers, students, parents, and administrators to create and implement behavior plans for students. Still others have characterized their school social work practice in terms of their acting as a prevention specialist, designing programs to increase social-emotional learning (SEL) for all students and addressing topical issues such as bullying or school violence (Anderson-Butcher, Iachini, & Wade-Mdivanian, 2007; Staudt, Cherry, & Watson, 2005).

The national associations (SSWAA and National Association of Social Workers [NASW]), in their mission statements, tend to sidestep the clinical/macro-practice distinction, emphasizing the "unique knowledge and skills" school social workers bring to multiple school contexts (SSWAA, 2005) and the range of individual, group, community organizing, and policy development skills necessary to practice as a school social worker (NASW, 2002). Though a range of practice modalities may be discussed by national school social work leaders and researchers, the tendency to view school social work through a clinical lens appears to be growing in the professional literature that documents actual practice (Allen-Meares, 1994; Johnson-Reid, Kontak, Citerman, Essma, & Fezzi, 2005; Staudt et al., 2005).

Some of these questions about school social work practice are almost as old as the profession itself. As Shaffer (2007) and Allen-Meares (1993) have noted, the field of school social work has struggled for years to adequately define its professional identity and capture the complexity of the many different roles school social workers play in their schools. This book won't settle that struggle because school social work is still too broadly defined across a variety of practice settings for there to be one national definition that has any validity. However, this is not true of all school-based mental health professions. School psychologists appear to have fairly uniform training requirements and practice roles across the 50 states, while school counselors have similar variability in school social work professional requirements (Altshuler, 2006).

It is certainly challenging to generalize about school social work roles and practices in the United States, but some important framing questions can at least get things started in thinking about the different ways by which school social workers might learn how to make their practice (whatever it is) more rooted in EBP. The following questions will help organize this book and provide clues to what is known about school social work practice in 2008:

- Are school social workers still working with mostly students with individualized treatment plans, and are they doing so within traditional clinical service delivery models?
- Are they employing EBP interventions to help students, or are they relying on “practice as usual” interventions that may or may not be effective?
- More to the point, what do they consider are their preferred “practice as usual” interventions and what can be done to highlight effective practices in these areas?
- To what degree are school social workers serving their whole school population through more systemic and prevention-oriented practice, designed to help students, parents, and teachers and improve the overall learning environment of their particular school?

## **All School Social Work Is Local**

To understand the nature of practice in schools better, the first concept that will be defined and discussed is school social work practice. A historical perspective, as well as current demographic data and labor statistics, will be delineated from local, national, and international perspectives. The second concept addressed in this book is EBP, which will be defined as a process by which school social workers can access the best current evidence to address client problems in a collaborative and culturally competent fashion (Gibbs, 2003). But ultimately, this book will be most effective to the degree that it allows school social workers to apply and implement these ideas in their own school and their own local context. To paraphrase Tip O’Neill (1995), all school social work is local, and the challenge for school social workers is to adapt the process of EBP to their own school and make it work for them, and most important, for their school clients.