



Who You Gonna Call? The School Social Worker

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Pasco County Middle Schools are expanding the role of the school social worker to help bridge the gap between home and school.

"The most vital, previously untapped ingredient for enhancing Pasco County Middle Schools is parent involvement. If we could develop additional resources to connect with the homes, particularly of at-risk students, our middle schools would increase effectiveness." With these insights provided by a middle school principal, the Pasco County school system undertook to develop a school-based social worker program in 1988. A central objective of the program was to employ a qualified school social worker to provide vital communication links between the school, community and home.

The need for additional school social work services is evidenced by alarming trends in Florida. Related to five central issues of poverty, breakdown of the family, substance abuse, juvenile delinquency, and school failure, the following statistics illustrate the problem:

1) **Poverty** - Almost 600,000 of Florida's children are

growing up in poverty. Of these, 202,000 of them are under five years of age; ninety percent of children born to teenaged mothers in 1987 will live in poverty.

2) **Breakdown of the family**

- Cases of child abuse, neglect, chronic truancy and runaways increased by seventy-two percent between 1981 and 1987. During the same period, HRS increased its counseling staff by only twenty-eight percent.

3) **Substance abuse** -

Waiting lists for Florida's drug and alcohol treatment centers contain eight hundred names. A history of substance abuse was reported for sixty-four percent of the juveniles arrested in Florida last year.

4) **Juvenile delinquency** -

More than 100,000 juveniles were arrested in Florida last year, 546 for murder or rape. There are about four

hundred children under age eighteen in Florida's prisons and another five hundred fifty in jails, an increase by one third over the previous year. In 1986-87, 33,000 youths were admitted to Florida's secure detention centers.

Operating the detention centers, which are chronically overcrowded, expends one third of the state's delinquency budget. Pretrial custody, without any treatment, costs thirty-five million dollars annually. Forty-five percent of the juvenile offenders will appear in juvenile court a second time.

5) **School failure** - Eighty percent of Florida's inmates did not graduate from high school.

During the first year of the middle school social workers program operation, social workers followed flexible schedules in which they were

able to visit parents and set up conferences during late afternoon, accommodating hard-to-reach families. Workers have been able to reach parents who were previously uninvolved in their children's school life. The school social workers contribute to the middle school by providing services that include individual counseling, truancy interventions and group counseling sessions on topics such as peer relationships, family systems dynamics and coping, self-esteem building and school survival skills. Social Workers refer students and families to community agencies for counseling and related services. The social workers consult with each middle school academic team to receive referrals from teachers then provide information back to the team on home and family issues. Home information is a crucial component in understanding the whole child and assisting the team in providing the best educational program for the child.

Within the current middle school movement, attempts are being made to reduce the negative effects of moving from the one-classroom, one-teacher relationship model of elementary schools to the complex high school environment. Much has been accomplished through a teaming structure, with the use of advisor-advisee programs. Social workers within the middle school assist students in meeting the unique needs of adolescence in this transitional school period.

Two particularly exciting projects undertaken by the middle school social workers in 1988 included a drop-out prevention week at Bayonet Point Middle School and counseling groups for parents of alternative education students at Stewart Middle School. The drop-out prevention week was an annual objective for each

middle school for 1989-90. The program consists of an entire week devoted to the "positive experience" and personal accomplishments that come from

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high school graduation. A series of motivational guest speakers were utilized each day. The feeder high school is involved in the planning, while middle school staff members, as well as students, are asked to identify their year of graduation, whether it be 1970, 1958, or 1995. Students and teachers are photographed in caps and gowns and wear graduation-related garb throughout the week. Tree planting and other ceremonies at the high school are culminating events. The focus is celebration of the importance of high school graduation, a valuable goal for all middle school students.

At Stewart Middle School, the social worker organized a weekly parent counseling and support group for all parents of alternative education students. Parents are asked to commit to an eight-week counseling program with the social worker if their child is to be staffed into the motivational alternatives classroom. The program is highly successful in changing parental attitudes about school. A particular benefit of this approach is building support among the parents. When parents of troubled adolescents discover they are not alone, they begin to take more respon-

sibility in understanding problems and seeking assistance.

SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS AS CHANGE AGENTS

School Social Workers are change agents within the school setting. They provide therapeutic services to students and families. The debate of whether mental health services should be offered in public school has been argued for several years. Some believe the mental health needs of students are superfluous to the learning environment. Others adhere to the belief that school mental health is an integral part of the holistic educational experience. It is clear that Pasco County believes that feelings, social development, emotional well-being and family dynamics affect the student's ability to learn; Pasco county schools are focusing on teaching the whole child.

The school social worker not only employs the dynamics of one-to-one relationships and group work but also utilizes child advocacy within the school's ecosystem. The theoretical basis of much of what the middle school social worker does comes from family systems theory, as advocated by therapists such as Salvador Minuchin. By analyzing the child's unique family and social system, the social worker can assist the child in coping and possibly making changes in the environment in order to be more productive and successful at school.

Advocacy takes the form of dealing with behavioral interventions, remediating family problems or dealing with social service agencies through referral and follow-through.

Resistance to change may come from individuals, families

and even schools. All systems tend to level eventually toward homeostasis, and the school environment is no different. The key to change has been to explain and involve all professional and parent team members in the problem-solving approach (treatment plan) for the student.

School social workers find that student clients are impressed with the realization that change does not happen by chance. Change must be planned, monitored and reevaluated on a regular basis. The school-based social worker can monitor and follow-up in the same school on a daily basis and also provide the consistency and opportunity for planned change that is often needed by at-risk children.

SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS AS LIAISONS BETWEEN SCHOOL AND HOME

Social workers are frequently utilized as "ambassadors" between the countries of "school" and "home." These two countries have similar interests (i.e. the education of children) but at times differ in philosophy and approach. Parents express feelings of being intimidated, belittled and being incapable of communicating effectively with school personnel. These feelings are a resurgence of their experiences as students. They may bring animosity, insecurity and resistance to their dealings with school personnel about their children. Teachers and administrators may view parents as being unwilling or incapable of supporting the school's efforts to effectively educate their children. The seed for these feelings of both parents and school personnel may be based on erroneous assumptions.

When a student is identified

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as having a problem that impacts on his/her educational performance, the school and the home may be eager to point fingers at each other as being the root of the student's problem. Sometimes, parents and teachers can reach consensus on how to deal with the child's problem through discussion at a parent-initiated or teacher-initiated conference. When parents and teachers reach an impasse or are reluctant to initiate contact with each other,

the school social worker can serve as a liaison.

One of the reasons Pasco County middle school principals requested school-based social workers was to augment the home-school communication efforts already being facilitated. School-based social workers have the opportunity to have continual contact with a finite group of parents. They are in constant contact with teachers, who express their concerns about their students' performance in team meetings and informal conferences. Being school-based, the social workers have become more sensitive to the needs of the school's community, its socioeconomic make-up and character. With this developed awareness, plus social workers' unique professional expertise, the role of home-school liaison is one naturally assigned to the social worker.



The view provided by the social worker provides helps combat some of the stereotypical attitudes that the school or home may have toward the other. By being aware of school policies, expectations of teachers for their students and the personalities of school personnel, the social worker can provide the family with a picture of their student's life at school. In addition, the social worker's visits to the home can provide the school with a clear understanding of the student's environment, including economic stresses, family dynamics and family expectations for their child's education. This can "personalize" the view that teachers and parents have of each other, in that they come to know the individual personalities involved instead of the impersonal institutions that each group represents.

In the case of continuing lack of communication between home and school, the social worker may be called upon to act as a mediator in a face-to-face conference between parents and teachers. The social worker acts as the child's advocate in the conference, not openly siding with either the parent or the school. He/she also continues to provide expertise to each group on the characteristics of the other. The social worker's goal in this situation is to facilitate an environment of mutual trust and cooperation that will create a partnership between the home and school.

As new families move into our community, changing its character, schools will need to be more flexible in understanding and addressing the educational needs of the whole child. School social workers will continue to play an important liaison role as Florida grows and changes.

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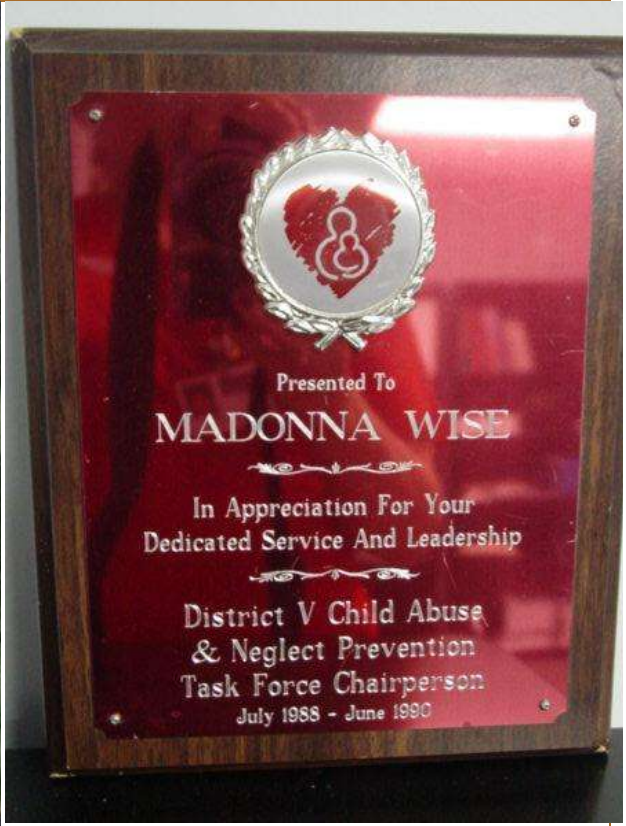
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