



International Network for School Social Work

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School Social Work and Children with Disabilities

155 countries have signed the 2006 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which requires that “States Parties shall ensure an inclusive educational system at all levels”. About 10 per cent of the world’s population, or 650 million people, have a disability. Many of them can benefit from social work services to develop their full potential and to participate in society with equal opportunity.

Some of the specific requirements of the Convention described in Article 24:

- ✓ Persons with disabilities are not excluded from the general education system on the basis of disability, and that children with disabilities are not excluded from free and compulsory primary education, or from secondary education, on the basis of disability;
- ✓ Persons with disabilities can access an inclusive, quality and free primary education and secondary education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live;
- ✓ Reasonable accommodation of the individual’s requirements is provided;
- ✓ Persons with disabilities receive the support required, within the general education system, to facilitate their effective education;
- ✓ Effective individualized support measures are provided in environments that maximize academic and social development, consistent with the goal of full inclusion.

The number of children under the age of 18 with disabilities around the world has been estimated to be between 120 and 150 million. An assessment of numbers is fraught with difficulty but the World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that one in 10 children in developing countries has special needs in education, or at least 60 million school-age children. In spite of guarantees from the 2006 Convention, many of these do not attend school. UNESCO estimates that “40 million out-of-school children have some form of disability”.

Education of children with disabilities in the US

The following gives some information about how the United States has made progress in educating pupils with disabilities and how school social workers are closely involved with all aspects of services to students with disabilities. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act is a federal law that authorizes special education for children with disabilities in the United

States. IDEA governs how states and public agencies provide early intervention, special education and related services (including social work services) to more than 6.5 million eligible infants, toddlers, children and youth with disabilities. Under IDEA, students with disabilities are entitled to receive special educational services through their local school district from age 3 to age 18 or 21.

The U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs' (OSEP's) IDEA website has detailed information about the law, its safeguards, programs and resources.

Students with a disability in one of 13 specific categories, including autism, developmental disability, specific learning disability, intellectual impairment, emotional and/or behavioral disability, speech and language disability, deaf-blind, visual impairment, hearing impairment, orthopedic or physical impairment, other health impaired (including attention deficit disorder), multiple disabilities and traumatic brain injury can receive special education services. Depending on the students' individual needs, they may be included in the mainstream or they may receive services in a special school, self-contained classroom or resource room. The Individual Educational Program (IEP) goals may address behavior, self-care, social skills, physical, speech, and vocational training. Parents are involved in making decisions at every step from giving permission to evaluate the child to participating in planning the Individual Educational Program. School social work services may be part of the IEP.

School social work services for children with disabilities

School social workers in the US have advocated consistently for social work to be included in IDEA as a related service and, for many school social workers in the US, providing service to children with disabilities is a major part of their role. Social work services in schools include:

- (i) Preparing a social or developmental history on a child with a disability as part of the evaluation. This typically involves a home visit with parents and often initiates the parents' involvement in the child's educational program.
- (ii) Group and individual counseling with the child and family. School social workers typically work with students with emotional and/or behavioral disabilities. They may also be specialists in working with children with certain disabilities such as deaf/blind students.
- (iii) Working in partnership with parents and others on those problems in a child's living situation (home, school, and community) that affect the child's adjustment in school. The school social worker is a link between home and school.
- (iv) Mobilizing school and community resources to enable the child to learn as effectively as possible in his or her educational program, for example making referrals to community agencies and developing in-school supports.
- (v) Assisting in developing positive behavioral intervention strategies. The social worker can help develop a behavioral plan, then coordinate it with the teacher and various partners and evaluate progress. Consistency and follow-up are key to successful interventions.

References

Article 24 Education <http://www.un.org/disabilities/default.asp?id=284>
http://www.unesco.org/education/efa/global_co/policy_group/children_out_of_school.pdf
http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=32969&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html
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