



International Network for School Social Work

<http://internationalnetwork-schoolsocialwork.htmlplanet.com>

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Dream Job or Nightmare?

It can be a dream job for social workers. Working in a school every day, alongside professionals from different disciplines, provides the opportunity to help create a child-centered environment where children can thrive. With a contract that provides good working conditions the school social worker can realize the mission of empowering school children by helping them do well in school.

However the job can be a nightmare if working conditions make it difficult to work effectively on this mission. Many school social workers are not given the opportunity to show how successful they could be under the right conditions. Instead they are struggling to get the results they want while dealing with common problems in the workplace such as:

- **Lack of a contract for the terms of employment.** Without an employment contract that specifies starting and ending date, salary and benefits, the administration can terminate the social worker, possibly even without cause.
- **Low salary.** With the low status that is often found in largely female helping professions, school social workers may be poorly paid and lack bargaining power to better their situation.
- **Administrators who do not accept the social work role.** In some countries social work is not a well-established profession. Even where it is recognized, schools may not understand the range of social work expertise.
- **Lack of respect for social work qualifications.** Administrators may not understand the importance of hiring qualified social workers.
- **No space to work in or for interviewing families privately.** Competition for office space is a common problem.
- **Administrators who assign inappropriate tasks.** Administrators may see school social workers as an easy option for supervising the playground or substituting for absent teachers.
- **Too much paperwork.** Time spent on bureaucratic demands for paperwork can reduce time available for working with children.
- **Assignment covers too many schools.** Being spread too thin over several schools makes it difficult to develop a successful program.
- **Hostile work environment.** Intimidation with or without unwelcome sexual advances interferes with job performance.
- **Lack of support for children, such as teachers for children with disabilities.** School social workers are most successful when working with a team of professionals who can provide the services children need to learn.

In Trinidad and Tobago...

School social workers in Trinidad and Tobago have been protesting since 2009 that they cannot empower children when they are themselves disempowered. They experience many of the problems mentioned above including lack of space to interview clients, being assigned too many schools, dealing with red tape, lack of a contract and poor support from the administration. Government agencies have also hired unqualified people as school social workers. The Trinidad and Tobago Association of Social Workers has joined with the school social workers in highlighting these concerns. In 2015 a new Education Minister was appointed to remedy problems in the education system. Meanwhile the school social workers have continued to focus attention assertively on real problems in the system, the problems that lead school children into disruptive behavior and violence at school and the need for many pupils to receive sustained attention to help them overcome their problems. The ongoing activism of the school social workers may be getting results. Their concerns have been raised by a member of Parliament in the Senate, and the Education Minister is addressing the concerns regarding contracts and the number of social workers needed to address school violence and indiscipline. On April 12 the Minister, speaking in the House of Representatives, assured the school social workers that they would be paid. As of April 22 they still have not been paid, causing the student support service to be shut down. However their persistence has gained them attention and respect as partners in educating the children of Trinidad and Tobago, especially in helping pupils with behavioral problems that are fueled by problems in their community and home lives. <http://www.looptt.com/content/education-ministry-seeks-regularize-contract-workers>

Protections for School Social Workers

School social workers need support and sometimes protection through their professional associations. In the US the **National Association of Social Workers 2012 Standards for School Social Work Services** provide guidelines to, amongst other things, ensure that services provided are of high quality and to help school social workers participate in setting policy. One section covers administrative issues, including qualifications, administrative support, supervision, work setting, job tasks, professional development and ratio of pupils to social workers.

Despite active lobbying on behalf of members, professional associations for school social workers in the US do not provide collective bargaining or representation in grievance procedures. However professional teachers' associations in the US, through their local affiliates, do provide the services of a union and may include school social workers among their members. This makes it possible for school social workers to have the representation and protection of a union, such as inclusion in collective bargaining for salaries and benefits, and representation when a school social worker has a grievance about working conditions or unfair treatment in the workplace.

The **Norwegian Union of Social Educators and Social Workers (FO)** represents more than 24,000 child-care educators, social workers, policy makers, welfare workers and students, some of whom work in schools. As both professional association and trade union, it exists to improve members' pay and working conditions. The union also keeps the public informed about the roles played in society by its members. FO has paid employees all over Norway and shop stewards in major cities and institutions, so help is readily available to union members with problems at work.

One thing is certain: school social workers must advocate not just for school-children but also for themselves if they are to be effective.