



AASW

.....
Australian Association
of Social Workers

Scope of Social Work Practice
School Social Work

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Introduction

The Australian Association of Social Workers' (AASW) '**Scope of Social Work Practice: School Social Work**' document provides an overview of the role, contribution and evidence of school social work practice. The social work profession operates at the interface between people and their social, cultural, physical and natural environments while recognising the impact of the economic, psychological, emotional, political, social, legal and environmental determinants on health and wellbeing.

With this in mind, the aim of this document is to highlight in a concise, accessible and informative manner the crucial role and services that social workers provide and that employers and clients can expect.

The social work profession

The social work profession is committed to **maximising the wellbeing of individuals and society**. We consider that individual and societal wellbeing are underpinned by socially inclusive communities that emphasise **principles of social justice and respect for human dignity and human rights**, including the right to freedom from intimidation and exclusion.

Drawing on theories of social work, social sciences, psychology, humanities and Indigenous knowledge, social workers focus on the interface between the individual and the environment and recognise the impact of social, economic and cultural factors on the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities. Accordingly, social workers maintain a dual focus in both assisting with and improving human wellbeing and identifying and addressing any external issues (known as systemic or structural issues) that may impact on wellbeing, such as inequality, injustice and discrimination.

Social work is a **tertiary-qualified profession** recognised nationally and internationally. The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) is the key professional body representing social workers in Australia and is responsible for the accreditation of social work university programs.

The academic qualifications that applicants to the AASW are required to hold are: a **Bachelor of Social Work, Bachelor of Social Work with Honours**, or a **Social Work Qualifying Master's degree**. The curriculum provides entry-level professional social work education addressing education, knowledge, skills and values that can be applied across the diverse range of practice settings, fields of practice and methods of social work practice, and includes an extensive period of field education.

Graduates of AASW-accredited social work courses are eligible for membership of the AASW. Click [here](#) for a full list of AASW accredited courses.

Role of school social work

School social workers have been employed in Australian schools for more than 65 years and in UK and US schools for more than a century. The school social work role is unique in its approach as it focuses on the student in the school environment in order to facilitate successful learning outcomes through the relief of distress, the removal of barriers or inequities, and the development of safe and inclusive schools and communities. School social work is a vast area of practice that responds to the needs of the student population and school community. Most importantly, in their commitment to human rights and social justice, school social workers advocate for the rights of students against the discrimination and reduced opportunities they can sometimes experience.

School social workers work across primary and secondary education to assist students to realise their full potential through learning.

The AASW recommends a minimum ratio of **one school social worker per 500 students**.

With students as their focus, school social workers also provide support to principals, teachers, school staff and families so that they can best meet the learning, social and emotional needs of students. Students have diverse backgrounds, experiences, abilities and needs and it is the belief of social workers that all students are entitled to a quality and supportive educational environment.

School social workers **provide interventions regarding a wide range of social, school, family and emotional issues** that may impact negatively on school engagement and learning, including:

Social and emotional

- Grief and loss
- Mental health issues
- Trauma, abuse and neglect
- Gender and sexuality
- Life transitions and family change
- Personal and social skill development, e.g. problem-solving, anger management
- Bullying and anti-social behaviours
- Disability
- Alcohol and other drugs
- Social relationships and supports
- Lowered social inclusion on the basis of cultural or linguistic background
- Students in juvenile justice, out-of-home care

Family issues

- Family relationships and parenting
- Family poverty
- Family violence
- Child abuse and neglect
- Housing and transience
- Limited community and social supports
- Alcohol and other drugs

Schooling issues

- Home-school relationship
- Support for students with disabilities
- Engagement and attendance
- Need for modified curriculum, wellbeing strategies and learning environments

Scope of practice of school social work

As a specialist practice area in the broader profession of social work, school social workers use a broad range of methods and interventions. The **scope of practice of school social work includes:**

- **Casework:** Psychosocial assessments identifying barriers (at a personal, family, social or school level) to learning and engagement; risk assessments; student and family counselling; advocacy; education and resourcing, consultation; referrals; crisis interventions.
- **Group work:** Development and implementation of therapeutic group work; prevention and early intervention programs; personal or social skills education groups for students; parent education.
- **Advocacy:** Advocacy, consultation and professional development with school staff with the aim of making schools' more inclusive environments.
- **Research and policy:** Development of research projects focusing on student wellbeing; the evaluation of practice, including individual and group interventions; school policy analysis and development.
- **Community and professional development:** Teacher and school staff professional development; liaison with external community service providers.
- **Critical incident management:** Emergency management and critical incidents response; interventions to reduce the negative impacts of traumatic incidents; planning for school responses; provision of psychological first aid, counselling and support; referrals and service coordination; monitoring recovery.

Contribution of school social workers

School social workers have the expertise to address the social, emotional and behavioural problems students might experience and can impact negatively on school engagement and learning outcomes. School social workers play a central role in the delivery of school services as their assessments and interventions also contribute to the decision-making processes of other education professionals, including teachers and principals.

School social workers have specialist knowledge for working with children, young people and families, and skills for school-specific activities including preventive whole class and small group education for personal safety, mental health, dealing with difficult emotions, building friendships and coping with peer and subcultural pressures. They can assist teachers in the analysis of student difficulties with learning and behaviours, and make recommendations for teaching, learning and curriculum modification, individualised support, behaviour management, student groupings and classroom environments. They also offer transition preparation and support for children beginning primary school or graduating to secondary school and tertiary education.

School social workers' expertise can greatly enrich the knowledge base and decision-making capacity of school staff (including teachers, coordinators, principals and integration) through the provision of professional development on matters such as the impact of psychosocial factors on brain development and learning capacity, or strategies for building positive relationships with students in the face of challenging behaviours.

School social workers have the necessary skills to provide parent education and advice on communication in the family, dealing with separation, difficult behaviours and transitioning through child and family life stages.

School social workers have an essential role in supporting school with issues of non-attendance, school refusal, and the personal and organisational impacts of suspension and expulsion. In this context school social workers are also well equipped to apply their range of skills and knowledge to not only intervene with families and individual students, but also liaise and coordinate with relevant systems of care, including the courts, child protection, health and mental health, and education systems.

School social workers are the professional group whose knowledge, skills and experience is best suited to support schools in achieving the aim of ensuring that every student remains connected with school and engaged in learning.

Conclusion

School social workers strive to uphold the rights of all children and young people to access an education (Article 28 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child) and aim to remove barriers to learning in order to maximise engagement and opportunity. School social workers are at the forefront of helping schools, individuals and families address complex social issues and have the specialist knowledge and skills necessary to make sure that students are connected and engaged in their learning. Accordingly, school social workers play a significant role in the education system.



Evidence Informing Practice

Key Journals:

Australian Social Work (Taylor & Francis)

British Journal of Social Work (Oxford)

Children and Schools (Oxford)

International Social Work (Sage)

Journal of School Psychology (Elsevier)

Research on Social Work Practice (Sage)

School Mental Health Journal (Springer)

School Social Work Journal (Lyceum)

Key Articles/Chapters:

Barrett, C.A. (2014). *School social work in the state of Victoria, Australia: 65 years of student wellbeing and learning support* (PhD thesis), University of Melbourne

Chui, WH (Ed.) (2013). *School social work: Current practice and research*. New York: Nova Publishers.

Gansle, K. A. (2005) The effectiveness of school-based anger interventions and programs: A meta-analysis. *Journal of School Psychology*, 43(4), pp.321-341

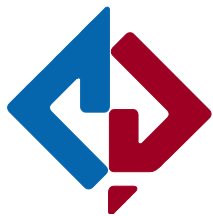
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Kelly, M. S., Raines, J. C. (2010) *School social work: An evidence-informed framework for practice*. UK: Oxford University Press.

Raines, J. C. (2008) *Evidence based practice in school mental health*. UK: Oxford University Press.

Testa, D. (2014), 'What do students say about school social workers?' in *International Journal Qualitative Studies in Education*, 27, (4), p.1-19

Whitfield, G. W. (1999) Validating school social work: An evaluation of a cognitive-behavioural approach to reduce school violence. *Research on Social Work Practice*. 9 (4). p.399-426



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