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Professor Guster

School Social Work Core Concepts

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### School Social Work Interview

On April 13, 2022, at approximately 10:45 in the morning, I got the opportunity to speak with Patty O'Shea who serves as a school social worker in the Hamilton County School System. Patty worked in the school system as a teacher for seven and a half years before returning to Southern Adventist University to get her MSW and her certificate for school social work. She has been working as a school social worker for 2 years now and is currently located in two schools, CSLA and East Brainard Elementary, and is on call for a third middle school.

Patty shared that there is no typical day which she enjoys. She tries to spend three days at one school, two days at the other school, and is on call for the third school for situations they might need her assistance for. While there is no typical day, there are certain things she does regularly. These include parent conferences to address behavior, meeting with children at certain times, having children drop into the office, collaborates with parents to connect children to services, follows up with children and families, paperwork, and lots of phone calls.

Our discussion then went a bit deeper as we started talking about challenges and strengths within her job. She explained that the greatest challenge within her job is the demand. There are so many children who are struggling that it is hard to keep up with each child. Adding on to this challenge is the struggle of having multiple schools to keep up with. Our textbook also mentioned how there are not enough school social workers to meet the demand in schools. While

Patty's number one goal is to build relationships, she expresses that the high demand and high caseload makes true relationships difficult to build.

While there are some challenges within the job, Patty also shared some strengths and positive sides to her job. She shared that the administrators really drive the school social worker's role. She feels blessed to have good administration that allows her to be flexible in her schedule and do what needs done when it needs done. Our textbook shares a similar observation that the role of a school social worker is different from state to state and school to school. While defining the role of a social worker has been tricky, Hamilton County School System has developed a job description/role specific to their school social workers. This can be viewed in Appendix A. She feels that the school counselors and her work well together to ensure that the children are getting the best possible access to support.

When I asked her what the most common issue, she sees among students was she immediately said self-image. While it might present itself in diverse ways, the root cause of the struggles is almost always self-image. Children these days have so much coming at them with social media, and they have a need to belong and figure out where they fit into life. This leads to struggles such as self-harm and suicidal ideation. When Patty works with children who are struggling with self-image, she is intentional about giving them an outlet and talking with them. If what they are struggling with is outside of her scope of competence, she refers them out to a therapist and works to get services lined up for them.

Our textbook referred to policy quite a bit especially how it relates to school social work. I was curious to get Patty's opinion on policies within the school system. She expressed one policy that makes it difficult for students to get services relates to the governments poverty line standards. The poverty line is too low which causes families who need services but are

technically above the poverty line to not qualify for TANF, SNAP or other benefits. However, these same families would qualify for these programs if they had another child. While the system may not have been set up to encourage larger families, it tends to pressure families who are struggling that way. If the poverty line were raised, children and families would be able to qualify for the services that they need.

One interesting topic that was brought up was relating to working with diverse cultures. Our textbook emphasizes the importance of understanding culture and diversity as it may impact how you help that child. Patty emphasized the importance of understanding diverse cultures that you work with as the family dynamics are vastly different. For instance, working with a child that comes from a Spanish culture tends to place a high value on education. In addition, there is often extended family members living in the home as well which could be utilized as a support system for the child. However, it is important to also understand that some Spanish homes are stricter and can cause a child to be resistant to call home and explain the situation that is going on.

One last topic that we discussed was areas that the school system can improve so that students are helped more effectively. Patty had an interesting insight on this as she shared how the focus used to be on testing and grades whereas now the focus is shifting towards Social Emotional Learning. She expressed the need for there to be more focus on Social Emotional Learning as this, in turn, improves testing and grades. She pointed out that the administration and staff within the schools are trying but there needs to be more training and more emphasis on just how important Social Emotional Learning really is. Lastly, Patty expressed that although there are so many more school social workers than there used to be, there still needs to be more. Within the Hamilton County School System alone there are around seventy-six schools with only

about thirty school social workers trying to service all of the schools. The textbook supports this in sharing how the demand and supply gap of school social workers is significant but is slowly working to decrease.

Getting the opportunity to complete this interview gave me a chance to see the concepts and case studies I had read about in the textbook come to life more. I was amazed at how big of a gap there was between the demand of needs and schools with the supply of school social workers. One thing that stood out to me was how important policy is within school social work. I had previously failed to see how much policy is intertwined with each practice and intervention method. I look forward to learning more about school social work and incorporating these concepts into my practice within schools someday.

## Appendix A

### **Job Description**

#### **Overview**

The purpose of this job is to serve as a liaison between the home, school, and community by providing casework services to address issues which impact student achievement.

#### **Responsibilities**

- Maintains appropriate licensure and acknowledges that continued employment with the Hamilton County Department of Education is contingent upon providing required documentation to validate licensure in a timely manner.
- Develops programs and plans to encourage regular attendance.
- Provides individual and group counseling services in collaboration with school personnel.
- Makes home visits as appropriate.
- Works with families and community agencies to develop intervention plans and/or procure goods and services necessary for student success.
- Works collaboratively with the juvenile court system to resolve student truancy, unruliness, dependency and neglect, and juvenile delinquency issues.
- Communicates the role of the social worker and available services to students, parents, and community.
- Conducts research and evaluation of job functions and collects data for developing new policies and programs to enhance family and community participation in education.
- Follows established procedures to ensure assigned areas are safe.
- Works collaboratively with administration, parents, students, staff, and other stakeholders.

- Addresses problems in a positive, respectful manner.
- Treats students and others with respect.
- Attends work and arrives to work on time.
- Maintains confidentiality.
- Adheres to the Teacher Code of Ethics as defined by Tennessee Law.
- Uses computers and other technology to enter and access information related to essential job functions.
- May operate a motor vehicle to conduct various work activities.
- Performs other duties as assigned.

### **Qualifications**

- Bachelor's degree and current valid TN School Social Work license OR MSW and willing to obtain TN School Social Work license
- Demonstrates excellent verbal and written communication skills to deal effectively with students, educators, parents, and community members.
- Demonstrates excellent planning, organizational, problem-solving, decision-making, and time management skills.