

**Ilsia Bonilla**

### **School Social Worker Interview Reflection**

For this assignment, I interviewed Julianna Vess, school social worker for Calhoun High School in Calhoun, Georgia. The interview covered many areas of her role with topics ranging from family/student engagement to the culture of the workplace. From this interview, I learned that school social workers are continuous learners and being able to observe, research, and take action can truly improve the dynamic for the underserved students in the district.

Calhoun High School is in a small town so, community resources are quite limited. The biggest gap in the area is housing. Calhoun does not have shelters that specifically cater to women and/or children. Although Mrs. Vess's role is not to address student housing, she does address their direct needs that interfere with their academic achievement. Mrs. Vess works closely with the McKinney Vento school social worker, Mrs. Errickson. Due to the influx of undocumented students enrolling, Mrs. Vess works hard to address their common challenges of navigating their new life, mental health, being unaccompanied and/or homeless.

Mrs. Vess's role is catered to working with students in 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Since seniors are graduating, her caseload typically increases in the spring semester. During this time, she focuses on making sure the at-risk seniors are approached with other interventions that may address their delay. She finds that many students struggle with mental health and transportation. Running attendance reports is another factor that affects her caseload. Many students who have attendance issues would rather stay home than take the bus. According to Mrs. Vess, the ongoing pattern of missing school is a symptom of a greater issue that has not been addressed for a long time. Typically, if she is able to build rapport with the student when they do come to school, she tends to have a greater chance at improving their attendance.

Building relationships and communicating with students is important for Mrs. Vess's role. Mrs. Vess identifies as a White woman so, when she engages with students from a different cultural background, she approaches them by respecting their space and asking how she can better serve them. Mrs. Vess takes advantage of professional learning opportunities shared by the Director of Student Services throughout the year. Many webinars and local trainings have allowed her to continue expanding her expertise. Mrs. Vess also builds relationships with students by texting. Many students do not like having phone calls with school personnel. Texting them through a Google Voice number allows the school social worker and student to practice boundaries and communicating on their terms.

My last question for Mrs. Vess was to share any advice for new school social workers regarding their relationship with the staff/faculty. Her genuine response was based on having balance and creating connections with the right people. Surrounding yourself with positive staff/faculty makes the job more enjoyable and also helps you to better serve the students/families. I have to keep in mind that many of the staff/faculty come from different backgrounds and do not have knowledge on mental health so, it is important to use your role to introduce change in a positive and humble way.

Overall, I believe that this interview gave me a better understanding of Mrs. Vess's role as a school social worker as I am taking over next school year. We had a great discussion on what to expect, challenges, and her perceptions on the school's culture. The role of a school social worker is to look at the school as a system that plays a huge role in how an adolescent develops. Essentially, school is a student's second home. School social workers must work diligently to help students succeed in school while educating, communicating, and advocating for

change that is in the best interest for the students. I hope to continue this mission as a new professional entering this field of social work.