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**Teachers and Social Workers:
Collaboration in a Changing Environment**

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Abstract

Society places great expectations on schools and teachers to provide a quality education for students. Students range in diversity not only in racial and ethnic identity, but in family income, geographical location, financial and emotional resources, and health and mental health status. Students in middle level schools are at a developmental point of physical, cognitive, social and emotional transition. Social identities, challenges and resources impact the learning experience for students, heightened for students in developmental transitions. Social workers are uniquely trained in these areas that present great challenges to learning. The six core values of the social work profession, including service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence guide the work of social workers in schools (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2008). Given the realities of the current educational climate, this paper will highlight the importance for collaboration between teachers and social workers in middle level schools. Such

collaboration draws on the expertise of both the education and social work professions to enact goals set forth for educating adolescents by the Association for Middle Level Education (2009). It highlights the strengths that can be found in teamwork and cooperation in middle school environments, and provides an invaluable resource for middle school educators and social workers to support each other in a challenging work environment.

Teachers and Social Workers: Collaboration in a Changing Environment

The current educational climate holds teachers accountable for student learning. In an age of *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB), school boards, politicians, parents, and taxpayers expect educators to bring our children to a point of knowledge. This point of arrival has been defined for educators as certain scores on specific assessment measures, usually standardized tests. As debate about the merits of NCLB has demonstrated, this approach certainly has its challenges! Student well-being and motivation, family systems and socioeconomic variables also impact learning and demonstration of the knowledge NCLB hopes to capture. For middle grades students, transition through puberty, personal and social adjustment, and growth in many facets of one's cognition, emotion and social relationships also impact the student experience. The Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) has elevated standards for middle level educators to provide a relevant learning environment for students (2009). These goals include preparing middle grades students "to think rationally...develop his or her strengths...make responsible, ethical decisions...respect and value the diverse ways people look, speak, think and act...develop the interpersonal and social skills needed to learn, work and play...assume responsibility for his or her own actions...and, accept obligations for the welfare of others" (AMLE, pp. 1-2). School counselors and school psychologists also have much to contribute to achieving these goals (Akos & Kingsley, 2008); however, the focus here will specifically address the role of social workers in supporting the aspirations of AMLE educators. Social workers excel in comprehending the complexities of ecological systems theory, engaging in advocacy strategies to identify resources, and empowering students to achieve in the areas AMLE has identified. Social workers embrace collaboration with all professions, and in collaborating with middle level educators, social workers can promote successful attainment of these competencies.

Students and the Educational Climate of the 21st Century

Many have heard comments similar to the statement that students today "aren't like they used to be." First, let us rejoice in that fact! One would hope that with the advances in knowledge, technology, medicine and access in our schools, our students would reflect those changes that have indicated we as a society are evolving and changing beyond a stagnant redundancy of "doing things that way because we have always done them that way." Middle grades students of the 21st Century present to classrooms with health, mental health and learning issues identified earlier in their development. These students have experienced most of their lives in a recession economy overshadowed and shaped by a post-9/11 world view. Their parents and guardians can be extremely

supportive and involved with them, while at other times they hover and expect individualized attention at every step from educators and school systems. Many of these same adults waste no time procuring a lawyer when feeling their rights or demands have not been met in an immediate and satisfactory manner. One teacher recently looked around the lunchroom during a discussion of lawsuits and realized that only one or two teachers in the room had *not* been involved in some legal case or formal mediation process with parents (L. Campo, personal communication, June 25, 2011). Despite increasing their demands, some of these same constituencies balk at the prospect of paying for them. Many states do not have teacher unions, and in those that do, political candidates will posture by using labor unions as their example of financial largess and waste. Such approaches can have the effect of increasing negative attitudes to public sector employees including educators and social workers by society because of the economy. Without a doubt, these are challenging times for teachers and other professionals in the school system. And then of course, there are the students. Remember the students?

Many students are happy, healthy, talented and learning in our classrooms. Yet, even these students face challenges of the 21st Century. For example, students today must understand the role of technology in their lives, building on its strength yet learning to set appropriate limits on its consumption of their precious time. The AMLE highlights the goal for students to “use digital tools to explore, communicate and collaborate with the world” (AMLE, 2009, p. 1). Yet, how much is too much time spent viewing television, video games and Facebook? Even the most entertaining educational presentation may overwhelm children with shortened attention-spans who are easily distracted by reading text messages on cell phones under their desks. Some students feel intense pressure to obtain high grades so they can attend the very best high schools and colleges. Students multi-task friends, school, family, sports and band practice. Many children are able to enjoy the benefits of techno-toys like cell phones and electronic games, yet 18.2-20.8% of children in North Carolina still live in poverty (U. S. Census, 2011). Their families face unemployment, under-employment, addictions, foreclosures, homelessness and other housing issues, domestic violence and other stressful situations. These students bring many concerns to school before ever worrying about their score on the NCLB exam. For 21st Century students, test scores can be impacted by mental and physical health, learning disabilities, ADHD, poverty, family issues, hovering parents, a society wrought with political division and in-fighting, hunger, fatigue, and motivation. Given these challenges, what resources are available to educators to complete their primary task, the education of students, in a way that prepares students to face their future placed squarely in the heart of the 21st Century with its unique challenges? How are educators strengthened to refill their own cognitive and emotional fuel tanks amidst such growing demands? The AMLE (2009) highlights significant culture and community characteristics such as a safe school environment, personal development adult advocates for students, comprehensive guidance and support services, and support for health and wellness (p. 2). These are lofty goals that social workers are equipped to support by virtue of their training in systems and individual needs, diversity, advocacy and understanding of individuals within social contexts.

The Role of Social Workers and the Core Social Work Values in Schools

Social workers have had a long and significant role in schools (Franklin, Kim & Tripodi, 2009). They have been active in efforts to reduce truancy (Lawrence, Lawther, Jennison & Hightower, 2011). Social workers have also intervened with families of children to increase achievement levels (Popoviciu, Popoviciu, Pop, & Sass, 2010). Their efforts have targeted all levels of intervention, including individuals, groups, families, schools, and communities, and they have directed advocacy for policies at all levels of government (Massat, 2011). Most recently, social workers and nurses have collaborated in North Carolina schools in a school-based Child and Family Support Team Initiative (CFST) to assist students and families at risk for success in education (Gifford, Wells, Bai, Troop, Miller & Barinski, 2010). The CFST demonstrates how teamwork by committed, trained professionals can contribute to positive outcomes for student success.

The six core values of social work include service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence. These values inform the role of social work in collaborating with students and families as well as with educators. Through *service*, “Social workers draw on their knowledge, values, and skills to help people in need and to address social problems” (NASW, 2008). School social workers can serve students and families with finding resources to address their poverty, homelessness, and other social concerns, but they can also assist educators as well. School social workers can help teachers to find resources within school and community systems and serve to assist educators with addressing challenges that interfere with educators’ ability to deliver the curriculum in their classrooms.

Through the core value of *social justice*, social workers “pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people... primarily on issues of poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and other forms of social injustice” (NASW, 2008). School social workers assist children and families with addressing social challenges that draw energy away from learning and school. The CFST Initiative demonstrates the contributions social workers can make in this area in North Carolina schools. Educators can draw on social workers’ support to assist those students who are homeless, targeted by bullying and facing discrimination because of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, religion, disability status or sexual orientation. Social workers have long studied the intersections of these identities and statuses such as race and class (Cousins, Michelson, Williams & Velasco, 2008) and their impact on development and education. Yet, social workers also advocate for their colleagues, including middle level educators, on issues of social injustice as well. Social workers can collaborate with educators to raise awareness not only of unmet needs in the lives of students, but also of gaping holes in the educational system that may prevent educators from the successful fostering of learning in students. This can include supporting effective assessment measures that capture genuine progress in student learning. While advocating for students is primary, social workers also advocate for resource allocations to middle school projects and to programs such as the CFST

Initiative (Gifford et al, 2010). Social workers also can advocate for equitable wages and benefits for North Carolina middle level educators.

Social workers also value the *dignity and worth of the person*, aiming to “treat each person in a caring and respectful fashion, mindful of individual differences and cultural and ethnic diversity” (NASW, 2008). Social workers aim to view not only each student but each parent, teacher, principal and school board member as someone worthy of dignity and inherent respect just by virtue of being a member of the human race, and to embrace families in the important role they play in the lives of their children. This value is compatible with the AMLE characteristic that “the school actively involves families in the education of their children” (AMLE, 2010, p. 3). Social workers invite all families to assist children, including those from wealthy and low-income backgrounds, all racial and ethnic groups, married, single-parent, divorced, or widowed families, and straight or gay families of any religious background. Social workers are educated to understand the nuances of culture including for multicultural youth (De Anda, 2002), Latina students (Zambrana & Zoppi, 2002), and differences between African American and European American families in enhancing student learning and achievement (Seyfried & Ick-Joong, 2002).

The *importance of human relationships* also undergirds social work practice. Research has suggested that relationships between students and educators can enhance the learning experience for students from working class backgrounds (Van Galen, 2007). Social workers can collaborate with teachers in settings with economic diversity to participate in building such bridges. Other researchers have explored how building relationships in training pre-service teachers and social work interns has enhanced the ability for both groups to be successful in urban school settings (Kransdorf, Doster & Alvarez, 2002) and in working with families of exceptional children (Lam, 2005). Another study found that social work assistance to educators on strategies for working with students with mental health issues decreased stress levels in teachers (Schaubman, Stetson & Plog, 2011). These collaborative relationships have increased satisfaction for both professional educators and school social workers, indicating that collaborative relationships with teachers even promotes social workers decision to remain in the field of school social work (Caselman & Brandt, 2007). The CFST Initiative through Duke University clearly demonstrated that there are students in need in North Carolina (Gifford et al, 2010); these students are best served when teachers, social workers and other professionals unite their efforts to promote positive results for all.

Finally, social workers also value *integrity* and *competence* in their professional role (NASW, 2008). Educators can expect honesty and ethical behavior in interactions with school social workers. They can also expect that social workers will continue to update their knowledge and skill base. Historically social workers have mastered group processes and run groups for students in schools. Social workers on middle school campuses model ethical behavior, non-violent problem-solving and competence in conflict resolution. Social workers in school settings desire to learn more from both the social work and educational literature to ensure that the delivery of services is current and relevant.

The 21st Century: Greater Collaboration for Educators and Social Workers

Given the climate of change for public sector employees and public education, it is more important than ever for teachers and social workers to collaborate on the delivery of education and services to students. Each professional provides a unique contribution to the student experience, and each of these contributions is enhanced through the synergy that rises from the supportive collaboration of educators and social workers. Thus, teachers and school social workers should work together and unite in their efforts to provide excellence in education for students. They can utilize each others' professional training and experience to enhance the learning experience for students, to advocate for better policies and to build relationships of strength and support. This approach has proven invaluable for social workers and nurses in North Carolina schools (Gifford et al, 2010)

School social workers can assist teachers to greater efficiency by assisting with problem-solving, educating families on student classroom needs and processes, making referrals to external resources, facilitating home visits and parent conferences, providing individual and small group counseling, developing after school programs, initiating community networking and resourcing, providing consultation and assisting with attendance and truancy issues. They are also available to help students with families and parent relationships and social issues (hunger, homelessness, poverty). School social workers can also assist schools with understanding cultural diversity, including race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, ability/disability status, and socioeconomic status concerns. Whether rural, urban or suburban context, there is no limit to the role that social workers can provide to middle level educators in North Carolina to assist them in delivering the curriculum to students.

In conclusion, teachers and school social workers will continue to present a human face to students amidst booming technological advances and the unfolding 21st Century. Already at a time of physical, cognitive and emotional transition developmentally, middle grades students are particularly vulnerable to getting lost in the whirlwind of social, economic and technological changes. Education will most likely continue to face scrutiny at the hands of politicians, parents, school boards and tax payers. Educators and school social workers are uniquely positioned to collaborate and unite their efforts to provide content knowledge to students, as well as growth in the areas of human interaction. In a time of budget cuts and loss of resources, this collaboration can be strengthened and utilized to improve the learning experience of students and the well-being of the educators and social workers who serve them.

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