

# Scope of Social Work Practice School Social Work



**AASW**

Australian Association  
of Social Workers

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# Introduction

The Australian Association of Social Workers' (AASW) Scope of Social Work Practice – School Social Work provides an overview of the scope and contribution of social work practice in schools. 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 clients and employers can expect.

## The social work profession

The social work profession is committed to maximising the wellbeing of individuals, families, groups, communities and society. We consider that individual and societal wellbeing is underpinned by socially inclusive communities that emphasise principles of social justice and respect for human dignity and human rights.

Drawing on theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and Indigenous knowledges, social workers focus on the interface between the individual and the environment and recognise the impact of social, political, 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 addressing any external and structural issues that may be negatively affecting it, such as inequality, injustice and discrimination.

Social work is a tertiary-qualified profession recognised nationally and internationally. The 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 accredited by the AASW include: 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 the 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 registration with the AASW.

### **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 the wellbeing of students as their focus, school social workers provide support to all members of the school community, including principals, staff, students and their families so that they can best meet the developmental, educational, 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
- Discrimination based on gender identity, gender expression and sexual attraction
- 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
- Exclusion of students on the basis of perceived cultural, linguistic or other difference
- 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. Co-ordination of supports for students with multiple and complex needs, including liaison with external organisations, Advocacy on behalf of students to outside organisations.
- 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. Supporting students to advocate for appropriate resources and procedures.
- **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; collaboration with external community service providers. Participation in local and community specific service planning, and implementation.
- **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 leading the school's response to 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.



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