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# SOCIAL SERVICE WORKERS IN SCHOOLS: THEIR ROLE IN ADDRESSING VIOLENCE AND OTHER CHILD PROTECTION CONCERNS

**S**ocial service workers in schools can play a key role in addressing child protection concerns among students. They work directly in schools and with the wider community in which the school is situated. Social service workers in educational settings are mandated to identify and assess the personal and relationship challenges faced by children. They assist young people as well as their families in resolving such problems and in developing resilience. Their role includes identifying signs of harm and violence faced by children, and referring them to appropriate services.<sup>1</sup>

The Policy Brief is based upon a Technical Note, “[Social Service Workers in Schools: Their Role in Addressing Violence and other Child Protection Concerns](#)” developed by UNICEF and the Global Social Service Workforce Alliance

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**Violence in and around schools impacts negatively on students' test scores. It also leads to higher rates of absenteeism and drop-out from schools. Globally, its cost on lost lifetime earnings for the labour force is estimated to be of the order of US\$ 11 trillion.<sup>12</sup>**

## 1 Why address violence and other child protection concerns in the school environment?

Addressing violence and other child protection concerns in schools is imperative from both education and child protection perspectives.

The education sector focuses on equitable access, learning and skills for every child.<sup>2</sup> But children's learning, attendance and school completion is compromised when they experience challenges in the home and family environments, in their peer relationships, or with their own mental health. The goals of the education system, therefore, cannot be met without an understanding of how a child's social environment impacts on their academic achievement.

The child protection sector aims to support State accountabilities under the Convention for the Rights of the Child "...to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse". Usually operating under the remit of the ministry of education, but also working in collaboration with other ministries and sectors, the school has a formal role to play in the national child protection system. It also serves as a site for intervention to provide necessary support for the child and for those who provide care for the child.



### Cambodia

Teachers and school directors are provided training on positive discipline and effective classroom management, while a new credit-based blended online training course on positive discipline and classroom management is being integrated into in-service teacher training and the curriculum of teacher training institutions. Both methods of capacity building include integrated material on mental health, gender equality and the child protection referral pathway, ensuring teachers have the skills to identify children in need of specialized support and the knowledge to refer them to receive this support from well-trained and professionally qualified social workers.

UNICEF Cambodia Country Office Report.



### Cote d'Ivoire

Adolescent girls are experiencing increased rates of drop out in the context of COVID-19 school closures. The closures accentuated factors that have historically disadvantaged girls – household poverty, early marriage, and gender-based violence. In response, the Departments of Education and Social Protection partnered to deploy social workers to support high risk girls and their families. While linking out-of-school girls and their families to social services and professional training, social workers worked closely with school staff to monitor and support at-risk girls.

Case study from UNICEF Cote d'Ivoire country office

## 2 How do violence and other child protection concerns intersect with the school environment?

Conduct problems, underachievement and poor attendance/drop-outs in school settings typically have antecedents in the child's social environment.

There are a range of child protection issues, and student welfare issues linked to child protection, that schools could help prevent or respond to with appropriate, well-planned and resourced workforce capacity. These challenges are frequently interlinked and overlapping.

- Challenges in the home and family environment, including child abuse and neglect; and other adverse childhood experiences such as the death or illness of a caregiver, parental separation, mental health or substance abuse issues or domestic violence.
- Challenges in the community, such as child labour, child marriage, and adolescent pregnancy, which may all lead to early school drop-out. In certain regions, children are impacted by armed violence and criminal gang activity.
- Challenges in the child's peer relationships, such as bullying, harassment and intimate partner violence. These challenges may disproportionately affect children facing discrimination due to race, gender, disability,

sexual orientation and gender identity or personal history.<sup>3</sup> They frequently have both online dimensions.

- Challenges with the child’s mental health and well-being, which may manifest in developmental and behavioral problems, substance abuse, self-harm and suicide. Worldwide 10-20% of children and adolescents experience mental disorders, and suicide is one of the major causes of death amongst adolescents.<sup>4</sup>

3

### Who makes up the social service workforce in schools?

For the purposes of this policy brief, the “social service workforce” is used as a generic term to refer to individuals who play a key role to support child protection for students in schools, working both directly in schools and with the wider community in which the school is situated. Based on geographic and developmental contexts, the shape of the social service workforce and its presence in schools can vary greatly. Workers may operate under several titles, including but not limited to: School Social Worker, Education Welfare Officer, Child Care Worker, Child Welfare Officer. The social service workforce, when present in schools, often works directly with school-specific roles like school counsellors, psychologists, school nurses, teachers and principals. In areas where discrete social service workforce roles are non-existent, these school-specific positions often step in to serve as the main sources of child protection in schools.



### United Arab Emirates

All public schools have assigned social workers, at two levels: a social worker handles promotive and preventative work and manages ‘low-risk’ issues, while ‘high-risk’ issues are referred to a Child Protection Specialist who has the legal authority to visit homes and intervene to protect a child from imminent danger. In 2020, UAE introduced case management procedures for social workers affiliated with schools and is now harmonizing those procedures with the health sector, which also has a child protection unit and social workers. During the COVID-19 pandemic, UNICEF worked very closely with social workers to reach out to and monitor children’s safety online and raise awareness of parents

UNICEF, Action to End Violence against Children in Schools. Review of Programme Interventions Illustrating Actions to Address Violence against Children in and around Schools, 2021, page 59. <https://www.unicef.org/documents/action-end-violence-against-children-schools>



### Ecuador

Created in 2016, “Departamentos de Consejería Estudiantil” (DECE) work within educational institutions to ensure the protection and well-being of students. It consists of a multidisciplinary team of professionals with experience and training in social sciences, psychology, and social work. DECEs are composed of interdisciplinary teams that include psychologists and social workers with an average ratio of one staff person for every 450 students. DECE staff responsibilities include referrals and follow-up for students affected by violence within the school and/or community.

Excerpted and adapted from Ministerio de Educacion de Ecuador. *Protocolos y rutas de actuacion frente a situaciones de violencia detectadas o cometidas en el Sistema educativo. Tercera Edicion. 2020* <https://educacion.gob.ec/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2020/04/Protocolos-situaciones-de-violencia.pdf>  
See also: <https://www.unicef.org/documents/mental-health-and-psychosocial-well-being-services-are-integrated-education-system>

**Teachers** are at the foundation of the social service system in schools. They are typically the most significant adults in children’s lives outside of the family. They may be well-attuned to the challenges that children face and the impact of such challenges on children’s learning. Teachers should be equipped to create safe and supportive learning environments, to provide psychological first aid, and to report and refer child protection concerns.

**School counselors** are well-established in education systems in at least 62 countries and mandatory in 39.<sup>5</sup> While the school-based counselor role in many countries was initially intended to support students’ academic and career development, there is now increasing focus on supporting students’ mental health and well-being as well. Counselling is typically delivered by experienced teachers with an additional postgraduate qualification, and sometimes by specialist social workers or psychologists. Meeting the full continuum of student needs also requires collaboration between school counselors, community mental health and psychosocial support services, and social workers.

**School social work** is a growing specialty around the world. There are school social workers practising in over 50 countries.<sup>6</sup> A variety of models for school social work are used. In some countries, social work services are part of the school system, while in others, social work is provided through a collaboration with family and child welfare agencies, both governmental and non-governmental. The School Social Work Association





## Mongolia

In Mongolia, a provision specifically for school social work was included in the Law on Child Protection when it was amended in 2003. The Ministry of Education has produced the job description for school social workers, assigning them a range of duties that include policy development; provision of parenting education; assessment and referrals; counselling; response to domestic violence allegations; as well as more general family welfare tasks. School social workers are appointed by school directors, who are responsible for their day-to-day duties.

Huxtable, Marion, Cynthia A. Sottie, and Khuajin Ulzitungalag, 'Social Work and Education,' ch. 14 in *The Sage Handbook of International Social Work*, edited by Karen Lyons et al., eds., Sage Publications, London, 2012, pp. 232-248  
Genesis-AOM <http://genesis-aom.org.mn/school-social-worker-professional-development>

of America defines school social workers as “trained mental health professionals who can assist with mental health concerns, behavioral concerns, positive behavioral support, academic, and classroom support, consultation with teachers, parents, and administrators as well as provide individual and group counseling/therapy”.<sup>7</sup> The institutionalization of social work in schools requires professional standards and accreditation and, ideally, legislation that validates its role of social work in schools.

**School (or Educational) psychologists** have emerged as a specialization focused on providing individual help for a child that is having difficulty learning at the same pace as their peers. In addition to supporting academic achievement, the field has evolved to include the promotion of social and emotional skills and, more broadly, mental health and psychosocial well-being; supporting diverse learners; creating safe and supportive school environments; and strengthening family-school partnerships.<sup>8</sup> Data on the number of school psychologists globally is incomplete, but there is evidence that it forms part of the education system in at least 43 countries.<sup>9</sup>

**Para-professional workers**, whose role is to work alongside and complement the work of professionals, are deployed in some contexts where there are few if any formal professional development programs for the social service workforce (as in the case in most low- and middle-income countries). Thus para-professional training is one option to capacitate some level of social work practice in schools, when there are not enough professional social workers to work in or link with each school.

## 4

## How can social service workers in schools address violence and other child protection concerns?

**Provide services directly to students**, such as programmes to develop life skills, teaching children about safe behaviour, and promoting positive social and gender norms and equal relationships; crisis counselling; assisting with conflict resolution and anger management; and referral to specialised services.

**Provide services to caregivers and families** through improving knowledge and skills for positive parenting, self-awareness and self-care; awareness raising on child protection concerns such as bullying, child sexual abuse, child labour, safe dating, mental health and suicide prevention, and online safety; and assisting parents to access community services available to students with special needs.

**Provide services to communities and school systems**, including supporting whole-of-school approaches to violence prevention; supporting the development and implementation of school-based child protection/safeguarding policies; providing training to school staff on positive discipline and behaviour management, on non-discrimination and inclusion, on supporting students’ mental health and psychosocial wellbeing, and on prevention, identification and response to child abuse and neglect; and developing multisectoral referral networks to service providers in the community.

In alignment with the pyramid of intervention of the [Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Technical Note](#), social service workers provide services through a multi-tiered response system, as follows.<sup>10</sup>



## Bhutan

The Ministry of Education builds the capacity of school counsellors that are present in central schools and high schools by equipping them with knowledge and skills to prevent, recognize and respond to violence against children. Efforts are also being made to integrate child protection in residential schools, monasteries and nunneries where children live and learn, to ensure that children who are particularly vulnerable because they are living outside of parental care are not overlooked.

UNICEF, Action to End Violence against Children in Schools. Review of Programme Interventions Illustrating Actions to Address Violence against Children in and around Schools, 2021, page 31. <https://www.unicef.org/documents/action-end-violence-against-children-schools>

## Response and support interventions

Response and support interventions where a child is in crisis or is experiencing violence, abuse or neglect, to prevent recurrence and provide care, support and access to justice. This may include referral to statutory child protection services or specialized clinical care.

4

## Indicated interventions

Indicated interventions for high-risk individuals and families. This includes individualized support for children experiencing, for example, challenges linked to bullying, harassment, or intimate partner violence; children who are pregnant or parenting; children showing chronic absenteeism or at-risk of dropping out; or who have other behavioral and mental health challenges. It also includes children who are facing adversities or potentially traumatic events in the home environment.

3

## Selective interventions

Selective interventions for students with additional needs or at risk. This means working with, for example, migrant/immigrant children and families; children with disabilities; with children who identify as LGBTQI+; children in the alternative care or justice system.

2

## Universal interventions

Universal interventions and services for the school staff, student population and their families. This includes awareness raising, providing information and programmes on key child protection concerns, such as anti-bullying initiatives, child sexual abuse awareness, prevention and awareness raising on child labour, safe dating, mental health and suicide prevention, and online safety.

1

## 5 How can policy makers support the development of social service work in schools?

**Implement child protection policies for schools and ensure their integration in multisectoral child protection systems.** Schools need a documented set of policies and procedures to keep children safe from violence and to respond to child protection concerns. These measures should be set out in a child protection policy that provides clear guidance to school staff on the rationale for protecting children, the responsibilities and roles of staff members, particularly in terms of incident response, codes of conduct, and reporting, referral, monitoring and accountability. The policy should set out the roles and responsibilities of schools in response and referral in cases of violence and other child protection concerns within the framework of multisectoral child protection systems.

**Train and support teachers and other school staff in child protection and the whole school approach.** Since teachers are on the frontlines for observing and responding to the impact of violence against children and other child protection concerns at school, ministries of education need to effectively recruit, train, monitor and support teachers to carry out their child protection roles and responsibilities. This should include training on positive discipline and classroom management to ensure teachers no longer resort to corporal punishment; and on recognizing the signs and symptoms of abuse, neglect and mental distress.

At minimum, schools need a designated child protection focal point who can respond where children are experiencing violence, abuse or neglect; help identify children with mental health or behavioral concerns; and oversee school-wide prevention initiatives. This role can be played by experienced teachers with additional training, or by other existing school staff such as the school counsellor, psychologist or nurse. Ideally this role would be undertaken by a specialist social service worker, assigned to the school. However, whole school approaches have proven most effective in prevention and response to violence, and such approaches require both school leadership and all staff to be trained and support to apply this model.<sup>11</sup>



### Jordan

The role of the school counsellor in Jordan includes running mental health programs for children, and follow-up for cases of children found to be particularly at risk. Training programs for school counsellors include topics related to psychosocial support, improving school welfare, school violence, and other specialized topics. If the school is without a counsellor, technical support is provided by the educational counselling department to address cases of children that need intervention programs.

Safe to Learn, *Diagnostic Study of National Efforts to Prevent and Respond to Violence in Schools in Jordan*, Safe to Learn: New York, 2021.



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**Integrate specialist social service workers for child protection into the education system.** Teachers play an essential role in the prevention and early identification of child protection concerns but integrating specialist social service workers into school structures ensures that child protection concerns can be addressed more effectively and with the appropriate follow-up, referral and coordination in the community. This kind of follow-up and coordination with external agencies is more challenging for teachers and school administrators to do alone, as in many countries they lack the resources, time and capacity to do so. Education and social welfare departments therefore need to work together to ensure the integration of the social service workforce in the educational system.

**Consider the most appropriate institutional arrangements for integration.** Depending on context and resources, social service workers can be school-based, or

community-based. They can be linked to either one school or a small cluster of schools, with regular visits to each. In some countries, these specialists are employed by schools, and primarily accountable to education authorities. In others, these specialists are employed by social service agencies, which may arguably be in a better position to work independently to safeguard the welfare of children and families. However, whichever approach or model is taken, it is important not to overstretch the social service workforce to the point where interventions become less effective.

**Integrate into job descriptions and standard operating procedures for school social service workers responsibility for the full range of promotive, preventative and response services.** A full continuum of services is essential to effectively address school safety and student mental health and psychosocial well-being,



### Georgia

In June 2018, the Parliament of Georgia adopted a new ‘Law on Social Work’ which created opportunities to improve social work and the numbers of social workers across Georgia, including their introduction in schools. The “Social Work Concept and Standards in the Education system” have been approved by a Ministerial Order, and the roles and responsibilities of the social workers in the education system have been approved and adopted. Social work is thus being progressively institutionalized in the education system and professionals are being supported via individual and group supervision and capacity building.

UNICEF, Action to End Violence against Children in Schools. Review of Programme Interventions Illustrating Actions to Address Violence against Children in and around Schools, 2021, page 22. <https://www.unicef.org/documents/action-end-violence-against-children-schools>



### India

A comprehensive School Health Programme was launched in 2018, to promote mental health, nutrition and prevention of violence in schools for more than 220 million children in 2.6 million secondary schools in India. This has included the design of a teacher training curriculum which integrates elements of personal safety education to prevent sexual abuse, peer-to-peer violence as well as corporal punishment in schools. Under the programme, a cadre of school counsellors was developed to provide psychosocial support to children, facilitated by the National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences.

UNICEF, Action to End Violence against Children in Schools. Review of Programme Interventions Illustrating Actions to Address Violence against Children in and around Schools, 2021, page 32. <https://www.unicef.org/documents/action-end-violence-against-children-schools>

ranging from overall preventive supports for all students to more selective and indicated responses for at-risk and directly affected students. The social service workforce in schools also needs to promote the work they do at a wider level, raising awareness of the issues they address in the community, and building partnerships with children and families, schools, community groups and formal structures.

**Ensure functioning mechanisms for referral to external agencies and engagement with families and communities.** In order to best serve children experiencing violence or other child protection concerns, social service workers should facilitate links between the school and local service providers that are able to support the child and his or her family. This includes referral to statutory child protection

services or specialized clinicians when necessary. Social service workers also play a key role at the nexus of school-home liaison policies, engaging families and communities as meaningful partners.

**Support the effective development and professionalization of the social service workforce in schools.** The integration of the social service workforce in schools should be accompanied by provision for appropriate training, professional standards, licensing and certification, supported by legislation that defines and mandates the role of the social service workforce in schools. It would also benefit from support by professional associations who can define and promote standards and professional values for this workforce.

## Promoting mental health through schools

UNICEF's Global Advocacy Strategy 2021-2025 calls on governments to scale up school-based mental health and psychosocial interventions to ensure schools and other education settings support mental health through quality services, supports and positive relationships.

For children living in violent, chaotic or neglectful homes, schools are often the only hope of establishing the type of healthy connections and conversations that can help a child feel safe, soothed and seen. This

can be a gamechanger in helping children build the resilience to manage and survive trauma and to break intergenerational cycles of violence. Ensuring all children have healthy relationships with teachers and peers should be seen as a child protection imperative for every school.

For children at risk of poor mental health, early intervention through schools can provide crucial support, especially for those from marginalized communities who

may not readily access mainstream mental health support.

When embedded within educational systems, mental health services create a continuum of integrative care that can promote health, mental health, and educational attainment. By investing in teachers and the school social service workforce, and improving their own well-being and ability to build strong, meaningful relationships with children, we can ensure that every child feels a sense of safety and belonging.

### ENDNOTES

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- 2 Every child learns. UNICEF Education Strategy 2019-2030
- 3 On my Mind: The State of the World's Children 2021. UNICEF, p. 43
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Harris, Belinda. 2013. International School-Based Counselling: A scoping report. Lutterworth, UK: British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy.
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- 9 Shane Jimerson, Kaitlyn Stewart, Mary Skokut, Santiago Cardenas, Heather Malone. How Many School Psychologists are There in Each Country of the World?: International Estimates of School Psychologists and School Psychologist-to-Student Ratios. School Psychology International. January, 2010.
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- 12 Ending Violence in Schools: An Investment Case. The Global Partnership to End Violence against Children and the World Bank, 2021