



## **International Network for School Social Work**

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### **School Social Work Associations: Why we need them**

In 1994, school social workers in several states around the United States decided that a professional association advocating for school social work at the national level should be considered. A meeting was held that summer in the state of Illinois with school social workers representing 22 states. After much discussion it was decided to establish a national professional association for the sole purpose of serving the needs of school social workers. The School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA) was formed. Prior to 1994, there had been school social work professional associations organized in states and regions, and these organizations provided leadership to develop the framework for a national association.

The 11 Midwestern states had pioneered state-level associations and a regional council for school social workers since the 1960's. The example of successful advocacy and annual conferences of the Midwest School Social Work Council encouraged a group of school social workers in 13 western states to set up a Western Alliance of School Social Work in 1991. The Alliance helped these states to develop their state associations and provided joint regional activity such as conferences.

#### **The School Social Work Association of Arizona**

In 1990 a school social worker in the State of Arizona gathered data about the extent of school social work in the state to share with the Western states. Until then there had been little contact between school social workers from different school districts. A call went out for a statewide meeting and soon a state association, the School Social Work Association of Arizona (SSWAA), was formed. When the School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA) was founded in 1994, the Arizona association changed its initials to SSWAAz. The SSWAAz grew and remains a strong voice for school social work in Arizona. It was supported by collaboration with the Western Alliance of School Social Work and contact with the School Social Work Association of America.

Early activities conducted by the SSWAAz included a newsletter, annual conferences and regular meetings where school social workers could conduct Association business, share ideas and work on actions supporting school social work, such as efforts for certification. The professional growth that each of these activities provided was beneficial as there had been no such interactions or leadership prior to forming the SSWAAz. In 1996 we developed a manual for conducting the annual conferences to provide guidance to all who helped organize them. The annual conferences charged a

modest fee, but made sufficient profit to allow state association leaders to attend regional or national conferences and meetings. They also provided sufficient income to fund small grants for school social workers' school programs. The conferences had many benefits including encouraging school social workers to share their skills and develop their leadership capacity. Pupil personnel other than social workers attended these conferences, as they often included topics of importance to school psychologists, nurses and counselors.

With school social work associations available at state, regional and national levels, it was easy to see that school social workers were more likely to participate in professional activities locally, rather than by travelling across the country. The School Social Work Association of Arizona (<http://sswaaz.org>) shows how effective a local association can be. Now more than 30 years after its beginning, the SSWAAz is thriving. The website is a source for much useful information. The newsletter goes out regularly carrying information about State issues, professional development events, mini-grants, job openings and various feature articles. School social work, from being a small, struggling field in the State of Arizona, is flourishing and now has many more employment possibilities and much more recognition as a profession that is valued in the education world.

In countries that have a federal system of government, such as the United States, Australia, Germany and Canada, schools and education policies are typically managed at a State or local level, even though there may be some federal laws that affect schools. However a national association for school social work does have benefits as it brings the power of a much larger group to deal with issues affecting the field. A national association can advocate at the federal level of government for school social work services. Connecting with peers from around the country also provides a sense of community that inspires school social workers in their professional growth and gives them opportunities to participate as leaders in their profession.

**The School Social Work Association of America** (<https://www.sswaa.org>) is one example of what a national association can provide. The SSWAA website shows the following services:

-  Newsletter
-  Malpractice liability insurance
-  Legislative action alerts
-  Advocacy at the federal level
-  Participation in research
-  Conferences and other professional development
-  Resources for practice including resource library
-  Links to state and regional associations

The website provides easy access to resources on many useful topics for practitioners and social work students, such as evidence-based practice. There is a calendar of professional development opportunities such as conferences and webinars and how to obtain credit from participating. SSWAA has over two decades of experience organizing professional conferences and so the annual conference provides a valuable opportunity to learn new skills. It is available online for those who cannot travel.

One useful resource on the SSWAA website shows how to start a state school social work association. It is a basic guide to starting an association in any location. A dedicated school social work association is an important step in developing a profession and helping it to become recognized by the school system in any country as a vital partner in schools.