



School Social Work Association of America  
**Position Paper**

**Definition of a Highly Qualified School Social Worker**

The School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA) recommends a “highly qualified school social worker,” whose function is to assist children to overcome barriers to academic success, be defined as follows. A school social worker in every school is one of the foundational requirements for helping schools achieve academic success.

SSWAA recommends that highly qualified social workers demonstrate the following key elements:

1. Education;
2. Competence; and
3. State Certification/License

**Education**

School social workers should hold a Master of Social Work (MSW) degree from a CSWE accredited social work program. Graduate-level social work coursework and supervised internship provide the foundational and theoretical knowledge needed to effectively and competently work at the interface of education and supportive services within the school setting to maximize children’s educational experience. School social workers understand the systemic interplay among students, the school, and the community.

**Competence**

School social workers should demonstrate proficiency in the essential elements of school social work. School social work knowledge and skills should focus on helping students improve social-emotional, behavioral, and mental health outcomes. It is essential that school social workers address equity, social justice, and access to quality education to ensure all students have the opportunity to succeed.

School social workers' specialized content knowledge and skills lead to service delivery which demonstrates leadership in engaging stakeholders in collaborative and consultative relationships, creating an environment conducive to student success, following professional values and ethical guidelines, implementing educational policies, advocating for students and the school social work profession, and using current data-based decision making, assessment, evaluation and research to guide their practice.

School social workers should continue to develop awareness and knowledge of current trends, student barriers, and challenges that impact student learning. School social workers are called



School Social Work Association of America  
**Position Paper**

**Definition of a Highly Qualified School Social Worker**

to engage in personal and professional reflection, participate in ongoing professional development related to the school environment, promote the value and expertise of school social workers, develop ways to strengthen and elevate the SSW profession and build capacity of others through facilitating education of stakeholders.

School social workers demonstrate competence through:

*Providing evidence-based education, behavior, and mental health services*

- Implementing multi-tiered programs and practices
- Monitoring progress, and
- Evaluating service effectiveness

*Promoting a school climate and culture conducive to student learning and teaching excellence*

- Promoting effective school policies and administrative procedures
- Enhancing the professional capacity of school personnel, and
- Facilitating engagement between student, family, school, and community

*Maximizing access to school-based and community-based resources*

- Promoting a continuum of services
- Mobilizing resources and promoting assets, and
- Providing innovative leadership, interdisciplinary collaboration, systems coordination, and professional consultation

**State Certification/License**

To ensure highly qualified and trained school social workers, all states should strive to implement the following standards around school social work certification and licensure:

1. State endorsement as a school social worker by their State Board/Department of Education;
2. Master-level licensure through their state licensing board; and
3. National school social work certification

**Conclusion**

School social work requires a specialized set of knowledge and skills. Through education, demonstration of competence, and state certification/licensure, school social workers are able to



School Social Work Association of America  
**Position Paper**

**Definition of a Highly Qualified School Social Worker**

fully comprehend the developing child, their educational, social, and emotional learning needs, as well as educational policies and pedagogies that impact best practices for teaching and learning and students' overall academic achievement and functional performance.

SSWAA is proud to offer a network of professionals and tools to support your practice, such as the above recommendations. Continue to access the SSWAA website, SSWAA professional development opportunities, and SSWAA Board to meet your needs.

**References:**

Frey, A.J., Alvarez, M.E., Dupper, D.R., Sabatino, C.A., Lindsey, B.C., Raines, J.C., Streeck, F., McInerney, A., Norris, M.A. (2013). *School Social Work Practice Model*. School Social Work Association of America. <https://www.sswaa.org/ssw-model>

Illinois State Board of Education & Illinois Association of School Social Workers. (2020). *School Social Work Best Practice Guide* (3rd ed.). Illinois Association of School Social Workers.

National Association of Social Workers. (2012). *NASW Standards for School Social Work Services*. NASW

**Approved by the Board of Directors, August 11, 2021**

Suggested citation: Lucio, R., Souhrada, E., Nelson, T., Shayman, E., Gilmore, N., & Scott, N. (2021). *Definition of a Highly Qualified School Social Worker*. School Social Work Association of America.