Analysis of School Social Work Practice in Wisconsin: School Social Worker Survey 2022

Description

The Wisconsin School Social Work Survey was developed to create a statewide picture of the school social worker profession in Wisconsin. Questions on the survey address work environment, other social work experience school social workers bring to the school setting, and the types of support they deliver to impact student success and improve their schools.

Since 1998, the survey has been administered triennially by the Department of Public Instruction (DPI). For the current administration in 2022, significant changes were made to align the content and presentation of the survey to current DPI guidance on the roles and responsibilities of school social workers. In previous years, respondents were asked to indicate their involvement with between 70 and 82 activities presented as two grouped categories: Areas of Responsibility (e.g., Behavior management) and Professional Strategies or Programs (e.g., Screening students). During the current administration, items were grouped into three categories based on the loci for which the activity is directed: individuals, groups, or systems. In addition to this structural change, the set of items changed significantly, with items being adapted, re-worded, or deleted to better reflect current practice. As in previous administrations of the survey, respondents were asked to estimate the amount of time they spent on each activity using the following scale:

- High - indicating involvement at least a few times weekly
- Medium - indicating involvement at least once weekly
- Low - indicating involvement at least once monthly
- Infrequent - indicating involvement less than monthly
- Not at all

Survey Highlights

Wisconsin school social workers reported focusing the most time on individual-level supports, with average scores of six activities indicating at least weekly involvement:

- Mental health challenges.
- Attendance/Truancy.
- Impacts of trauma.
- Social and emotional learning (skill development and practice).
- Referral for services.
- Homelessness, poverty, or basic needs.

Conversely, Wisconsin school social workers reported focusing less time on these areas of individual support:

- Transition support (for students ages 18-22).
- Special education case management.
- Gang involvement.

Compared to individual-level activities, school social workers reported spending much less time working at the group or systems levels. Of the 16 group-level activities, only participation on attendance/truancy teams received an average score suggesting weekly involvement. Overall, the group-level activities school social workers engaged in the most involved teaming, especially teaming, to support or address issues with individual students (e.g., participating in attendance/truancy or student problem-solving teams).

Although zero system-level activities were engaged in weekly, efforts to bring systemic change to a school or school community tend to be lower frequency by nature (e.g., grant writing). Overall, the areas of system-level activities with the most involvement were:

- coalition building (ex: multi-system teaming or workgroups);
- involvement in creating and improving procedures and practices; and
- culturally responsive, equity, and social justice leader, trainer, or advocate.

Response Rates

Efforts were made to administer the survey to the census of Wisconsin school social workers. It was available in electronic format only, with prospective respondents learning of the surveys through email correspondence on profession-focused listservs. Respondents accessed the survey through an embedded link in the message.

The estimated response rate for the 2022 survey administration is 54%. This percentage is somewhat lower than what was achieved during the last administration (61%) but consistent with electronic administrations before 2019 (50-58%). The distribution of responses by CESA are included in Table 1. The distribution of CESA in the respondent pool suggests data that generally matches the geographic distribution of school social workers in the state, although school social workers from CESA 2 and 7 schools are moderately underrepresented, and school social workers from CESA 1 schools are somewhat overrepresented in the sample.

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Table 1. Distribution of School Social Workers by CESA

CESA	Sample Num	Sample Pct	Response Rate	Est Pop Pct	Est Bias	Rel Bias
01	209	47.6	61.3	41.8	5.8	0.1
02	83	18.9	41.7	24.4	-5.5	-0.3
03	4	0.9	100.0	0.4	0.5	0.6
04	7	1.6	50.0	1.7	-0.1	-0.1
05	25	5.7	75.8	4.0	1.7	0.3
06	27	6.2	45.8	7.2	-1.0	-0.2
07	30	6.8	36.1	10.2	-3.4	-0.5
08	4	0.9	26.7	1.8	-0.9	-1.0
09	20	4.6	60.6	4.0	0.6	0.1
10	11	2.5	64.7	2.1	0.4	0.2
11	8	1.8	53.3	1.8	0.0	0.0
12	2	0.5	50.0	0.5	0.0	0.0
Unknown	9	2.1	(-)	(-)	(-)	(-)

Note.—Est Pop Pct = Estimated percentage of state school social workers located in a given CESA; Est Bias = Estimated bias. The difference between the achieved sample percentage and the estimated population percentage; Rel Bias = Relative bias. For a given CESA, an indicator of how large the estimated bias is relative to the subgroup size within the sample. For bias estimates, positive values indicate a subgroup is overrepresented in the sample data, and negative values indicate the subgroup is underrepresented. To the extent estimated bias is greater than 1 (or less than -1) or relative bias is greater than 0.3 (or less than -0.3), results should be interpreted with caution.

Analysis

As mentioned, the survey's primary purpose is to assess the areas in which Wisconsin school social workers spend their time and the frequency in which they engage in specific professional development and student-support strategies. To achieve this, the following steps were used to create weighted aggregate scores:

1. Convert the number of responses to a weighted number by multiplying:
   a. the number of "high" responses by four,
   b. the number of "medium" responses by three,
   c. the number of "low" responses by two,
   d. the number of "infrequent" responses by one,
   e. the number of "not at all" responses by zero.

2. By item, add the weighted numbers created in step (1) and divide by the number of valid responses.

For each survey item, this process yields a number between 0.00 and 4.00, with lower values indicating less involvement in an area or strategy and higher values indicating more involvement. At the extremes, if every respondent indicated "high" involvement, the

weighted aggregate score for that item would be 4.00, and if every respondent answered "not at all," the score would be 0.00.

Results

At what grade levels do school social workers work?

As shown in Table 2, more social workers indicated working in the elementary grades than in the middle and high school grade bands. This pattern has existed since 2001 when grade level was first included in the item. Apart from the high school grade band (i.e., 9-12), 2022 percentages were larger than in 2019. This is a result of more respondents working across multiple grade bands. In 2022, 68% of respondents worked at more than one grade band, up from 63% in 2019.

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Table 2. Grade Levels at Which Survey Respondents Work

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Year	PreK-2 Num	PreK-2 Pct	Grades 3-5 Num	Grades 3-5 Pct	Grades 6-8 Num	Grades 6-8 Pct	Grades 9-12 Num	Grades 9-12 Pct
2001	139	61.5	149	65.9	100	44.2	92	40.7
2004	174	63.0	189	68.5	131	47.5	116	42.0
2007	166	61.0	188	69.1	126	46.3	96	35.3
2010	182	59.3	182	59.3	123	40.1	128	41.7
2013	170	56.3	179	59.3	131	43.4	122	40.4
2016	181	58.4	191	61.6	131	42.3	124	40.0
2019	246	56.9	253	58.6	183	42.4	182	42.1
2022	267	60.8	279	63.6	218	49.7	178	40.5

How many school buildings are social workers assigned to?

As shown in Table 3, over half of school social workers work only in one school building, and over 80 percent work in two or fewer buildings. Since this question was first introduced in 2010, the number of buildings to which school social workers have been assigned has steadily declined, with the number of personnel assigned to one school increasing 18 percent and the number of personnel assigned to two or fewer schools increasing by 15 percent.

Table 3. Number of Assigned School Buildings

School Buildings	Sample Num	Sample Pct	Cumulative Pct
0	14	3.2	3.2
1	238	55.0	58.2
2	104	24.0	82.2
3	32	7.4	89.6
4	12	2.8	92.4
5	7	1.6	94.0
6	3	0.7	94.7
7 or more	23	5.3	100.0

Note.— Cumulative Pct = The summed sample percentage starting from the top of the table.

How much time do school social workers devote to special education?

According to Table 4, in 2022, the largest percentage of social workers spent between 0 and 10 percent of their time on special education-related activities (30 percent). In addition, half of the responding social workers reported spending 20 percent or less of their time on special education, while nine of ten respondents stated that they spent 50 percent or less. As in previous years, a small percentage of 2022 respondents reported that they worked exclusively on special education.

Table 4. Percent of Time Spent on Special Education

Percentage of Time	Sample Num	Sample Pct	Valid Pct	Cumulative Pct
0-10	128	29.2	30.2	30.2
11-20	84	19.1	19.8	50.0
21-30	88	20.0	20.8	70.8
31-40	44	10.0	10.4	81.1
41-50	34	7.7	8.0	89.2
51-60	15	3.4	3.5	92.7
61-70	9	2.1	2.1	94.8
71-80	10	2.3	2.4	97.2
81-90	1	0.2	0.2	97.4
91-100	11	2.5	2.6	100.0
No Response	15	3.4	NA	NA

Note.— Valid Pct = The percentage of respondents selecting a percentage of time category without including the number of item non-responders in the calculation. Cumulative Pct = The summed valid percentage starting from the top of the table. NA = Not applicable.

What social work experiences do school social workers bring to the school setting?

Since 2013, the Wisconsin School Social Work Survey has asked respondents to indicate their certifications, licensure, and experience (other than school social work) to assess the skills and qualifications they bring to their roles. In 2022, 92 percent of respondents possessed a DPI School Social Work (DPI SWW) license. It is a requirement in Wisconsin for any professional working in the role of a school social worker to hold a DPI SSW license. It was most common for respondents to report one license or certification (54 percent). Of respondents indicating more than one license/certification, possession of a DPI SSW and Advanced Practice Social Work license was the most common (54 percent). Only four respondents did not possess any of the listed licenses and certifications.

Respondents were also asked to indicate their experiences outside of school-based social work. Responses are reported in Table 5 in descending order. As shown, a significant number of school social workers in Wisconsin have outside experience in child welfare systems, out-of-home care, and mental health/clinical practice.

Table 5. Other Areas of Social Work Experience

Area	Sample Num	Sample Pct
Child Welfare	126	32.3
Mental Health/Clinical or Mental Health Crisis Response	109	27.9
Group Home, Shelter, Residential, or Congregate Care	88	22.6
Early Childhood, Parenting Support, Birth-3	47	12.1
Housing and Homelessness	46	11.8
Justice and Corrections	41	10.5
Advocacy and Community Organizing	39	10
Aging, Older Adult Care, Hospice	37	9.5
Other[1]	37	9.5
Public Welfare, Social Programs, Benefit Programs	33	8.5
Administration and Management	30	7.7
Research or Higher Education	22	5.6
Domestic Violence	21	5.4
Occupational, Workforce, or Employee Assistance	11	2.8
Trafficking and Sexual Violence	8	2.1
Policy or Politics	7	1.8
International Social Work	3	0.8

Note.—Sample percent will not equal 100% because respondents were able to select multiple areas of experience.

[1] The most common other non-specified areas of expertise provided were related to medical/health care and addiction treatment.

What types of support are school social workers providing?

Individual-Level Support

Included in Table 6 are the top fifteen areas of individual support. For each area, the table lists the rank from the current survey and the aggregate weighted score. Overall, top topics fell into several general categories: Social and interpersonal support (ranks 4, 6, 9, 10, 11); mental health (ranks 1, 3, 11, 11); behavioral issues (ranks 2, 8, 15); and access to services (ranks 5, 6, 13). Rankings and weighted scores for all areas of individual student support are included in Appendix A.

Table 6. Top Areas of Individual Support

Area of Support	Rank	Weighted Score
Mental health challenges	1	3.52
Attendance/Truancy	2	3.45
Impacts of trauma	3	3.33
Social and emotional learning (skill development and practice)	4	3.20
Referral for services	5	3.19
Homelessness, poverty, or basic needs	6	3.03
Family conflict and interpersonal relations	7	2.97
Behavior or discipline issues	8	2.93
Relational aggression and interpersonal peer-conflict	9	2.55
Restorative practices and conflict resolution	10	2.54
Grief and loss	11	2.45
Student conflict with teacher or school staff	12	2.42
Access to health care or social benefit/welfare programs	13	2.39
Suicidal ideation or non-suicidal self-injury	13	2.39
Bullying or harassment	15	2.25

Group-Level Support

Of the 16 areas of group support, school social workers reported spending the most time working in attendance or truancy teams (see Table 7), with 82 percent of respondents participating on attendance teams at least once per week and 91 percent at least once per month. Results suggest that school social workers are most often brought into teams to support individual student needs (ranks 1, 2, 5), followed by school-wide support initiatives (ranks 3, 4). Instructional and supervisory activities were participated in with less frequency (ranks 8, 9, 12, 13). Rankings and weighted scores for all areas of group-level support are included in Appendix B.

Table 7. Top Areas of Group Support

Area of Support	Rank	Weighted Score
Participation on attendance/truancy teams	1	3.15
Participation on student problem-solving teams	2	2.86
Participation on school mental health teams	3	2.43
Participation on the PBIS team or other activities related to positive school climate	4	2.31
Participation on IEP teams	5	2.29
Student support groups (ex: mental health, substance, parent conflict, grief, etc.)	6	2.25
Participation on leadership teams	7	2.12
Assigned duty as hallway, lunchroom, or area supervisor	8	1.89
Participation on threat assessment teams	9	1.65
Facilitating school staff training	10	1.46

System-Level Support

Since many efforts designed to bring systemic change to a school or school-community tend to include low-frequency activities (e.g., grant or policy writing), it is descriptive to share how many Wisconsin school social workers are involved in the activity at any level rather than simply how much time is devoted to them. Table 8 includes these systemic support areas and provides, for each, the percentage of respondents indicating any involvement (i.e., the response of "Infrequent" or higher). As shown, coalition building was the area engaged in most frequently, with over 80 percent of respondents indicating some level of involvement. Interestingly, although 78 percent of school social workers spent time creating or improving procedures and practices, less than half reported being involved in district strategic planning or policy writing.Rankings and weighted scores for all areas of system-level support are included in Appendix C.

Table 8. Top Areas of System Support

Area of Support	Rank	Weighted Score	Pct Any
Coalition building (ex: multi-system teaming or workgroups)	1	1.68	81.5
Involvement in creating and improving procedures and practices	2	1.59	78.4
Culturally responsive, equity, and social justice leader, trainer, or advocate	3	1.56	70.5
Trauma sensitive schools leader, trainer, or advocate	4	1.40	66.7
Community organizing or other community resource building	5	1.31	74.1
Membership or leadership in professional associations	6	1.30	63.8
Advocacy for changes to local, state, or federal policies	7	1.11	69.3

Research to inform policy or practice	8	0.86	50.0
Involvement in district strategic planning	9	0.79	48.2
Facilitate presentations to school board or community groups	10	0.71	49.4

Note.— Pct Any = Percentage of respondents indicating "Infrequent", "Low", "Medium", or "High" involvement.

How are survey results utilized?

School social workers possess diverse knowledge and skills to improve educational outcomes for students. Additionally, school districts typically focus school social work services towards the greatest challenges students face in their respective communities. Results of the Wisconsin School Social Worker Survey are used to help describe school social work practice in Wisconsin. This information can be helpful for district officials who wish to compare their school social work services to those in other Wisconsin school districts or are considering adding school social work services to better support students.

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Appendix A – Areas of Individual Support

Area of Support	Rank	Weighted Score	Pct Weekly	Pct Monthly	Pct Any
Mental health challenges	1	3.52	88.9	96.5	98.9
Attendance/Truancy	2	3.45	88.3	94.0	97.0
Impacts of trauma	3	3.33	86.4	95.6	98.9
Social and emotional learning (skill development and practice)	4	3.20	79.7	92.4	97.0
Referral for services	5	3.19	80.3	95.9	99.2
Homelessness, poverty, or basic needs	6	3.03	71.9	92.7	98.9
Family conflict and interpersonal relations	7	2.97	72.8	91.0	97.5
Behavior or discipline issues	8	2.93	71.3	87.8	95.4
Relational aggression and interpersonal peer-conflict	9	2.55	57.9	81.8	92.9
Restorative practices and conflict resolution	10	2.54	58.4	81.5	93.5
Grief and loss	11	2.45	53.3	83.7	96.7
Student conflict with teacher or school staff	12	2.42	49.1	78.9	94.6
Access to health care or social benefit/welfare programs	13	2.39	49.1	79.4	97.3
Suicidal ideation or non-suicidal self-injury	13	2.39	50.0	79.3	95.1
Bullying or harassment	15	2.25	43.2	75.7	95.4
Parental mental health challenges	16	2.24	42.0	74.8	96.2
Racism or impact of structural inequalities (race and cultural)	17	2.16	40.4	71.3	95.1
Child abuse and neglect	18	2.12	29.3	77.8	96.7
Executive functioning skills	19	2.10	39.0	66.7	91.3
Sexual orientation or gender identity	20	2.03	38.2	64.5	90.2
Special education participation on an IEP team	21	2.01	27.0	73.0	93.5
School staff wellness support	22	1.97	35.5	64.8	87.8
Marginalization of identity	23	1.93	34.9	62.9	89.1
Issues relating to out-of-home care	24	1.90	31.0	61.4	92.7
Special education as a related service	24	1.90	39.3	59.6	76.0
Academic support	26	1.88	31.4	59.3	88.1

Re-entry support following extended absences	26	1.88	31.5	60.3	86.1
Special education evaluation	28	1.79	27.4	59.3	83.7
Parental substance abuse	29	1.71	24.4	53.7	88.9

Note.— Pct Weekly = Percentage of respondents indicating "High" or "Medium" involvement. Pct Monthly = Percentage of respondents indicating "Low", "Medium", or "High" involvement. Pct Any = Percentage of respondents indicating "Infrequent", "Low", "Medium", or "High" involvement.

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Appendix A – Areas of Individual Support (Continued)

Area of Support	Rank	Weighted Score	Pct Weekly	Pct Monthly	Pct Any
Creating behavior intervention plans or functional behavior assessments	30	1.60	19.7	53.5	81.6
Staff mentoring (school social work or other pupil services)	31	1.51	26.3	45.5	70.5
Online safety, issues related to social media or internet	32	1.47	19.6	44.1	79.3
School staff coaching	33	1.46	24.4	46.1	70.5
Ableism or issues related to oppression related to ability	34	1.45	17.9	43.8	79.9
Youth justice involvement	35	1.42	19.3	44.8	73.9
Alcohol and other drug use	36	1.39	19.8	45.3	68.8
Eating disorders or body image	37	1.37	15.7	40.1	78.9
Long-term medical condition	38	1.33	15.2	37.5	75.5
Issues related to migrant, refugee, or English learner status	38	1.32	10.3	37.9	82.4
Sexual violence, trafficking, teen dating violence	40	1.30	13.3	38.2	76.2
Teaching and support to paraprofessionals or special education aides	41	1.14	14.1	35.8	62.3
Parenting as a school-age parent or pregnancy	42	0.89	11.9	26.8	46.9
Career counseling	43	0.80	6.8	19.2	52.0
Gang involvement	44	0.65	4.6	15.4	44.2
Special education case management	45	0.64	8.9	20.3	31.7
Transition support (for students ages 18-22)	46	0.57	7.3	17.9	30.4

Note.— Pct Weekly = Percentage of respondents indicating "High" or "Medium" involvement. Pct Monthly = Percentage of respondents indicating "Low", "Medium", or "High" involvement. Pct Any = Percentage of respondents indicating "Infrequent", "Low", "Medium", or "High" involvement.

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Appendix B – Areas of Group Support

Area of Support	Rank	Weighted Score	Pct Weekly	Pct Monthly	Pct Any
Participation on attendance/truancy teams	1	3.15	81.9	90.5	94.0
Participation on student problem solving teams	2	2.86	73.5	87.6	92.8
Participation on school mental health teams	3	2.43	54.7	82.5	88.5
Participation on PBIS team or other activities related to positive school climate	4	2.31	50.9	78.2	85.9
Participation on IEP teams	5	2.29	44.1	77.1	93.1
Student support groups (ex: mental health, substance, parent conflict, grief, etc.)	6	2.25	48.7	70.8	88.8
Participation on leadership teams	7	2.12	43.6	70.8	84.8
Assigned duty as hallway, lunchroom, or area supervisor	8	1.89	40.5	50.6	67.5
Participation on threat assessment teams	9	1.65	23.6	52.6	82.5
Facilitating school staff training	10	1.46	13.1	40.3	89.1
Parent/caregiver learning or engagement events	11	1.37	12.9	41.1	79.0
Facilitate student club (ex: GSA, union, leadership, peer-peer suicide prevention, etc.)	12	1.30	22.9	41.8	56.7
Classroom teacher (ex: substitute, in-school suspension room, suicide prevention lessons)	13	1.08	14.0	31.5	57.9
Alternative Education program support	14	0.90	15.8	25.5	41.8
Involvement in standardized testing process	15	0.54	5.4	12.0	36.1
Support to GED, HSED program	15	0.54	9.2	16.0	26.6

Note.— Pct Weekly = Percentage of respondents indicating "High" or "Medium" involvement. Pct Monthly = Percentage of respondents indicating "Low", "Medium", or "High" involvement. Pct Any = Percentage of respondents indicating "Infrequent", "Low", "Medium", or "High" involvement.

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Appendix C – Areas of System Support

Area of Support	Rank	Weighted Score	Pct Weekly	Pct Monthly	Pct Any
Coalition building (ex: multi-system teaming or workgroups)	1	1.68	25.9	54.1	81.5
Involvement in creating and improving procedures and practices	2	1.59	23.6	52.3	78.4
Culturally responsive, equity, and social justice leader, trainer, or advocate	3	1.56	27.6	48.9	70.5
Trauma sensitive schools leader, trainer, or advocate	4	1.40	23.6	42.7	66.7
Community organizing or other community resource building	5	1.31	17.3	36.1	74.1
Membership or leadership in professional associations	6	1.30	18.8	40.7	63.8
Advocacy for changes to local, state, or federal policies	7	1.11	11.4	27.8	69.3
Research to inform policy or practice	8	0.86	9.1	25.0	50.0
Involvement in district strategic planning	9	0.79	7.7	22.8	48.2
Facilitate presentations to school board or community groups	10	0.71	5.4	15.3	49.4
Involvement in policy writing	11	0.60	4.0	13.1	42.9
Grant writing	12	0.58	3.7	11.9	41.2
School social work supervisor or manager	13	0.50	8.3	14.0	25.1
Leadership of parent/caregiver groups	14	0.48	3.7	13.4	30.4
Member of school board, city council, DPI committee, or other governmental committees	15	0.30	2.8	8.2	18.5

Note.— Pct Weekly = Percentage of respondents indicating "High" or "Medium" involvement. Pct Monthly = Percentage of respondents indicating "Low", "Medium", or "High" involvement. Pct Any = Percentage of respondents indicating "Infrequent", "Low", "Medium", or "High" involvement.