

106

Linda Henriquez

Testimonial
January 29, 2013

Linda Henriquez

I am the only school social worker in in a Hartford pre-K to 8 school that has an enrollment of about 600 students. I service 31 IDEA mandated students. That number reflects , an increase of 12 students since the beginning of this school year. I am involved in the process for identifying special education students and assist in developing their individualized education plans. I also service any and all other regular education at-risk students who are referred to me; an additional caseload of about 25-30 students at any given time. The issues and diagnoses of all these students range from poor social skills to cognitive/developmental delays, physical and sexual abuse to mood, anxiety, thought, trauma, explosive, and psychotic disorders (many of which have not been formally diagnosed or treated outside of school). Homicidal and suicidal ideation, depression, withdrawal, and serious physical aggression is not that uncommon among even first or second graders. All the students on my caseload participate in individual and/or group counseling that addresses social skills development, bullying, harassment, self-esteem/confidence building, anger management, and character education.

The role of school social worker is not limited to what I have just described. We social workers provide case management which requires on-going corroboration with school staff, parents, and outside agencies. We refer families to community based organizations which also requires developing and maintaining an on-going working relationship for the benefit of the child who, after all, spends most of his/her waking day in the school environment. We try to get to know our students and their families and can and do contribute much support and information to others who also provide services. But all too often we provide the only counseling and support the child will receive.

In addition, we are important and key members of various teams such as: prevention teams which attempt to identify students who are at risk and provide appropriate and early intervention; support personnel teams that collaborate with other school staff to service and advocate for children and families; positive behavior support teams that develop incentives for positive behaviors; and crisis teams which address issues by creating policies and procedures for school safety, mass trauma events, grief and loss.

What I, as the only full time social worker in my building, have just described is often a challenge for me to maintain, given the high numbers and intensity and complexity of the issues presented. But my school has the luxury of at least one full time social worker, many schools have only a .30 or .5 per week social worker. The needs are great but the workers are very few.

We live in a time in which adults as well as children are exposed to many traumatic events such as 9/11 and the Newtown tragedy. But trauma is also experienced due to conditions such as poverty, unemployment, homelessness, exposure to violence which often contribute to substance abuse, domestic violence, physical/sexual abuse, and limited parenting skills, all of which can have a significantly negative impact on the

social and emotional development and well-being of children. The developmental history and chronically manifested behaviors of many children are symptomatic for serious mental health disorders that require a formal diagnosis, interventions and treatment but often these do not occur. Issues of payment, waiting lists, limited or non-existent programs, insurance company mandates regarding treatment as well as the stigma affiliated with mental illness prevent many families from seeking or acquiring any consistent intervention. Children's mental health issues impact attendance, motivation, attentiveness, grades, compliance with school/societal rules, self-esteem, meaningful interactions with others, and the ability to have a positive, hopeful outlook on life; in short, to be able to trust adults to care for them. All children deserve that. All children deserve to fulfill their potential to be productive, well-adjusted, safe, and happy. Today's children will become adults and tomorrow's caretakers. We owe it to our children and their children to make this state and nation an emotionally safer place now in which to live and grow.