

International Network for School Social Work

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Social Work Interns in Schools:

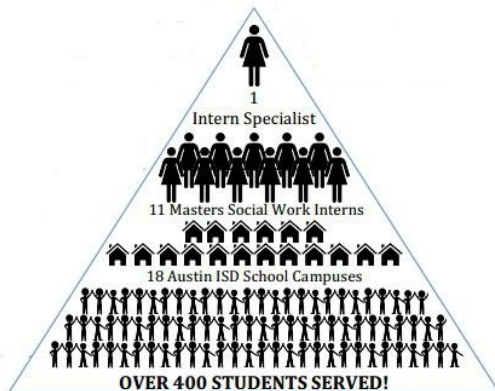
Increase Services, Build Awareness, Get Inspired!

by Kate Amerson, LCSW, Social Work Intern Specialist for CapCityKids, with Austin ISD

Bringing social work interns into the school setting is a creative way to increase support to students and families while building awareness among educators about what social workers can provide, plus it helps us train the next generation of professionals. What a winning idea!

My name is Kate Amerson and I've been a school-based social worker with *Austin Independent School District (AISD)*, in Texas, USA, for over 20 years. For most of this time, I supervised interns from *The Steve Hicks School of Social Work* at the University of Texas, Austin while providing counseling and social services to students and families at multiple schools. Currently, I coordinate AISD's program *CapCityKids Social Work Internship*. In this model, interns work with the campus counselor to increase counseling and social work services to students and families while I handle the supervision and documentation required by the University of Austin. I have been amazed at how the energy, enthusiasm and creativity of interns helps to spread the message of what social workers can do.

Austin ISD is a large urban school district with over 83,000 students at 130 schools. Like many of your students, our students struggle with issues like homelessness, poverty, exposure to violence, fear of deportation (for themselves or family members), incarceration of loved ones, depression and anxiety, and self-harming behaviors. The counselors and social workers can feel overwhelmed with the number of students needing support and limited resources to provide it.



Initially, I began to supervise social work interns because I saw counselors struggling alone at campuses and I wanted to provide more services to students and families at the 5 schools where I worked. What I was delighted to see is that the benefits of supervising interns extended to my colleagues. It's like bringing them a gift, this intern with fresh ideas and excitement for our challenging work! For example, interns help them try out new techniques in counseling like eco-therapy or sand tray therapy, they lead book studies for

teachers about helping traumatized children in the classroom, research children's books to use with refugee students, and survey homeless families to determine their needs.

Teachers are often not aware of the ways a social worker could support schools, so when they watch the work an intern does, it increases their understanding. Many times after a campus had a social work intern, administrators and counselors ask me how they could get a social worker at their school. This has happened so often that now I am convinced that one of the ways to "grow" our profession is to bring interns into our practice.

AISD's *CapCityKids* program also expands our reach by collaborating with other community agencies that use interns. For example, a local agency that provides grief counseling wanted to reach more children and youth. Their Director (a social worker) now teaches the interns from both our programs on how to lead grief groups for youth and we place these interns at schools that need this service. The agency's Director and I share the supervision of the interns co-leading the groups. Interns also assist programs that work with homeless students, students in special education, and refugee families. They do this by researching topics for them, conducting surveys, working with parents, and putting together resource guides.

Considerations:

Successful internships meet the needs of all stakeholders: the intern, the host agency (your school), and the university. Internships that fail are often overlooking the needs of one of these entities. Take time to think about the internship from each perspective and what your role would be. Talk with university faculty about their requirements and any resources they have to support you, and talk with colleagues who have supervised interns in their agencies. Some questions to think about are below.

- Is this the right time for you to take on an extra task? Supervising interns is exciting and rewarding, and also has challenges. Be sure you have the time & energy
- Can your school support an intern? Is there space for an intern, what permission would interns need to work with students, is the school going through organizational changes that would be confusing or difficult for an intern?
- What is your comfort level with mistakes? Interns are learners, and an important part of learning is making mistakes. Would you be okay with this?
- Who would be your support? Questions and ethical concerns come up when supervising interns, so you need colleagues to consult with.

Final Thoughts:

If you are not ready to supervise interns full-time but want to try it in a smaller way, reach out to social workers in other agencies that use social work interns. Perhaps they need opportunities for their interns that you could provide, such as co-leading a group at a school or working on a special project. Many universities require the completion of an internship for a social work degree. However, if your university does not require an internship, ask if they have social work students who would like to learn through volunteering with you. These thoughts are shared with the hope of starting a dialogue about how to further the profession of school-based social work. I welcome your reaching out to ask me questions or to continue the dialogue!

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