



International Network for School Social Work

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A Role for School Social Workers in International Schools

International schools were originally set up to accommodate children from families living and working away from their home country (such as diplomats or staff of international businesses and organizations). These parents wanted their children to be educated in a system and with a curriculum similar to that in their home country in order to be ready to transfer to schools back home or to an international school at their next work assignment. In recent years the demand for international schools has grown, and much of the growth is coming, not from these “ex-pats”, but from families in the host country. The number of international schools worldwide has climbed to more than 9,549 serving 5 million students as of May 2018, according to ISC Research’s new report on English language international schools (<https://www.iscresearch.com/data>). Some families who enroll their children in an international school in their own country may be dissatisfied with the education offered by their country, others want their children to acquire an international outlook and be prepared for living and working globally. Acquiring English language skills by studying an American or other English language curriculum is often another goal of families who send their children to an international school in their home country.

Special needs of students at international schools

Children of “ex-pats” and children from the host country bring the same concerns and problems to international schools as children anywhere. Problems in learning, emotional adjustment, social adjustment, health problems, abuse, neglect and family problems are common in all school systems. Schools must help children overcome these problems so that they can succeed in their education and learn to cope with life in a complex and fast-changing world.

Child protection policies

Every teacher encounters children who are abused or neglected. Sometimes the abuse or neglect is plain to see or the student speaks up to a teacher about being abused. In other instances the teacher suspects abuse, based on various indications and behaviors and is uncertain what to do. Many countries have a clear legal obligation for schools to report abuse. In some places requirements for the role of the school are unclear. Many international schools all over the world have set up policies and procedures (based on the host country’s laws and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child) to provide guidance for staff, training for teachers, students and families, in-school child protection teams and community partnerships to assist

schools with referrals and reporting child abuse.

Support services at international schools

International schools need to provide support for students who show academic problems or who exhibit various emotional, behavioral or social problems. Specialized teachers for learning support, for English as an additional language and for school counseling seem to be the most common support services provided. Although school social work could provide crucial help for the personal needs of children and for helping staff with numerous issues including child protection, it is rare to find a social worker at an international school. The American International School in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam (<http://www.ais.edu.vn>) is the exception, with Nguyễn Thị Ánh Nguyệt providing social work services at the school. In a future newsletter we will have a report from Ánh Nguyệt about her work at the American International School in Ho Chi Minh City.

Why do schools employ school social workers?

The increased demand for international schools provides an opportunity for school social workers to demonstrate their broad skills with an international group of students in a challenging and interesting educational environment. It is worth considering why administrators would hire a social worker and the special needs that students in an international school might bring to school.

One focus for school social workers in international schools is child protection. The Council of International Schools (<https://www.cois.org/page.cfm?p=3842>) has committed to help international schools to educate their communities in how they can combat child abuse in all its forms including neglect, emotional, physical and sexual abuse and exploitation. An International Task Force on Child Protection was formed in 2014 specifically for international schools to provide resources for training staff, writing policies, safe recruitment practices and responding to child abuse. Since then international schools in every continent are much more likely to have written policies and procedures for child protection. International school child protection handbooks typically provide guidance for school staff regarding in-school procedures and for reporting mandates in the host country. The International Center for Missing and Exploited Children lists national legislation regarding child abuse in about 40 countries (<https://www.icmec.org/education-portal/international-national-law/>).

In the case of the American International School in Ho Chi Minh City, the school's deep concern for protecting children was one motivating factor that led Executive Director Vân Trần to hire Ánh Nguyệt to train the staff in child protection and help implement the school's policies.

School social workers in international schools could also anticipate varied challenges related to student life in an international school, such as frequent relocation, transitioning to a new school, cultural and linguistic differences, academic stress due to high expectations, varied attitudes toward family involvement, political instability and diverse attitudes toward teenage issues such as sexuality. Consequently a social worker who wants to branch out into international schools needs to develop a wide variety of skills, knowledge and readiness to handle the complex emotional, developmental and academic needs of students in a challenging cultural environment. Interpreting the social work role and social work skills to administrators who may be unfamiliar with school social work is crucial.