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# A Qualitative Study of School Social Workers' Roles and Challenges in Dropout Prevention

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High school dropout remains a persistent educational and social problem in the United States, despite promising declines in dropout rates. Social workers are uniquely positioned to identify and address numerous factors influencing students' likelihood of graduating. The purpose of this small qualitative study was to describe social workers' engagement in dropout prevention efforts and the context in which this work occurs. Through interviews with school social workers, school counselors, and district-level administrators, three focal practice areas were identified: (1) supporting student attendance, (2) providing intensive support for selected at-risk students, and (3) encouraging dropouts to return to a diploma-granting program. Respondents also identified common barriers and ethical dilemmas that hindered their practice, including challenges in defining the scope and boundaries of the social work profession, and tensions between the needs of the school and the needs of students. Suggestions for future research are provided, and implications for policy, practice, and the education of future school social work practitioners are discussed.

KEY WORDS: *dropout prevention; high school; occupational roles; qualitative research; school social work*

High school dropout remains a persistent educational and social problem in the United States, despite promising declines in dropout rates. In 2016, the National Center for Education Statistics estimated that approximately 7 percent—roughly 2.6 million—of the nation's 16- to 24-year-olds were not enrolled in high school and did not have a high school credential (McFarland, Stark, & Cui, 2016). Dropout rates tend to be higher among students of racial or ethnic minority groups, students from lower-income homes, and students with a history of academic or discipline problems (Jimerson et al., 2006; McFarland et al., 2016). Despite a substantial reduction of dropout rates over the past four decades (from 14 percent in 1973), the concentration of dropouts in certain schools (for example, high-poverty, rural, urban) and the ongoing overrepresentation of minority students among dropouts remain critical areas of concern (McFarland et al., 2016).

Individuals who drop out of school are at higher risk of negative developmental outcomes such as poor peer relations, delinquency and crime, incarceration, violence, teenage pregnancy, homelessness, poorer physical and mental health, alcohol or drug abuse, unemployment, and lower annual and lifetime

earning potential (Jimerson et al., 2006; McFarland et al., 2016). Dropping out of school also affects the overall society through lost tax revenues (McFarland et al., 2016), increased welfare dependence and use of health and mental health services (Rumberger & Lim, 2008), and higher rates of imprisonment (Western, Schiraldi, & Ziedenberg, 2003). Taken together, these findings suggest that addressing the issue of school dropout not only affects the education system, but may also serve as a prevention effort for the welfare, mental health, and corrections systems.

Within a context of mounting demands for accountability, educators and other school professionals are challenged with meeting the needs of an increasingly diverse student body to stem the loss of students to dropout. This challenge is compounded by the fact that the cause of school dropout cannot be isolated to a single risk factor or cluster of factors. Rather, empirical studies implicate a diverse array of school, economic, community, family, and individual factors as being associated with, or predictive of, leaving school before graduation (see Rumberger & Lim, 2008, for comprehensive review; also, McFarland et al., 2016; Wood, Kiperman, Esch, Leroux, & Truscott, 2017). These factors span multiple domains of a student's life and often

manifest over time and in unique combinations (Rumberger & Lim, 2008).

Social work's ecological lens is responsive to the complex and interactive nature of the dropout problem because it "directs attention to all of the significant systems and individuals rather to any one part, system, or aspect of a pupil's situation" (Allen-Meares, 1996, p. 204). The person-in-environment perspective of social workers, combined with their knowledge of family and community conditions that contribute to the dropout problem, places school social workers in a unique position to address the multifaceted nature of the dropout issue.

### ROLE OF THE SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKER

Although the roles school social workers perform can vary notably across schools, contemporary social workers' time and energies are primarily devoted to individual or small-group work, often focusing on students' mental health needs or students receiving special education services (Bye, Shepard, Partridge, & Alvarez, 2009; Kelly et al., 2015). For example, school social workers historically report case management, crisis intervention, and individual and small-group counseling as among the most frequent of their daily tasks (Allen-Meares, 1996; Kelly et al., 2010).

Frey and Dupper (2005) suggested that the individual and small-group focus of school social work is the result of several factors, including (a) the profession's historic commitment to addressing the immediate, sometimes crisis, needs of students and (b) the narrow understanding of social work held by many school administrators. There have been calls for school social workers to assume a leadership role in dropout prevention efforts (Jozefowicz-Simbeni, 2008) and to reduce their focus on individuals as targets for change in favor of prevention and intervention efforts that affect larger groups or systems (Dupper, Rocha, Jackson, & Lodato, 2014; Frey & Dupper, 2005; Kelly et al., 2015). Therefore it is critical to better understand how school social workers contribute to the promotion of student persistence in school.

Toward this goal, the current study used an exploratory, qualitative approach to gain an understanding of social workers' engagement in dropout prevention efforts and the context in which this work occurs. Part of our purpose was to better understand these topics from multiple perspectives and positions within a school district. Two broad

overarching questions guided our study: (1) What do social workers perceive as students' needs (as related to school completion) and to what extent do they feel these needs are being met? (2) What roles do school social workers play in dropout prevention efforts and what policies affect this work?

### METHOD

#### Setting and Participants

The study took place in a primarily urban school district in the southeastern United States. The district was selected because of its use of school social workers in dropout prevention efforts and its recent success in decreasing its dropout rate to below the state average. The student body of approximately 33,000 is 51 percent African American, 22 percent Hispanic, 21 percent white, 2.8 percent multiracial, and 2.4 percent Asian. Approximately 60 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. On state end-of-year tests, 56 percent of students were at or above grade level in reading, and 70 percent were at or above grade level in math. At the time of this study, approximately 30 school social workers were employed by the district's student services department, which houses counselors, school social workers, student assistance programs, behavior support programs, wellness centers, and homeless services. Each middle and high school in the district is assigned a social worker, with larger high schools having two.

Purposive snowball sampling was used to recruit (a) school social workers and counselors from across grade levels and (b) district-based professionals knowledgeable of school social workers' roles within the district. Participants included eight school social workers, two school counselors, the district-level coordinator for homeless student services, and the director of the district's student support department. The two school counselors were recruited based on their involvement in dropout prevention efforts and close collaboration with the social workers in their respective schools. All participants were female, with 42 percent identifying as white, 42 percent identifying as black or African American, and 17 percent identifying as Latina. Participants varied in their work experience, ranging from one to 10 years in their current position and from one to 12 years of experience in their profession. Six of the 10 school-based participants worked in either traditional or alternative high schools; the remaining four worked

in middle school settings. The two administrators supported schools districtwide.

### Data Collection

Each participant took part in semistructured interviews that ranged from 30 to 90 minutes (one hour average). When possible, multiple interviews were held with each participant to allow for follow-up, clarification, and checking the accuracy of the researcher's interpretations (Padgett, 1998). When multiple face-to-face interviews were not possible, additional conversations occurred by e-mail or phone. Interviews with school-based staff focused on eliciting their lived experiences with dropout prevention efforts—to hear in their own words how they describe their work, situate themselves within the school setting, perceive student needs, and respond to social and political contexts in which their work takes place. Interviews with district administrators focused on how the role of school social workers is perceived and described at the district level as well as the district policies and decisions that influence social workers' roles. Initial interview questions were developed to guide the conversations, and an iterative approach was used to refine interview questions based on emerging data (Glesne, 2006). Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. During transcription, reflexive notes regarding non-verbal communication and interviewer–interviewee interactions were added.

### Data Analysis

Throughout the data collection process, interview transcripts were analyzed for emerging themes and areas for further examination using inductive analysis, which allows concepts and relationships among ideas to emerge throughout the research process (Glesne, 2006). Once all interviews were transcribed, transcripts were read line-by-line and coded in ATLAS.ti (2013) using an inductive, constant comparative process (Padgett, 1998). As new codes emerged from later interviews, previously coded transcripts were reread and recoded. Once all transcripts were coded, they were compiled into one document and sorted by code to identify emerging themes across respondents. Next, the ATLAS.ti network tool was used to visually display all codes simultaneously to explore possible relationships between codes and to refine themes. Finally, all transcripts were reread in their entirety for both confirming examples and counter examples of the emerging conceptual

framework (Padgett, 1998). Debriefings with a senior qualitative researcher were used to guard against researcher bias and to solicit feedback on coding, interpretation, and communication of findings.

### RESULTS

Three overarching themes emerged from the analysis: (1) barriers to graduation, (2) prevention and intervention strategies, and (3) role conflict and struggles. These overarching themes and their related sub-themes are further elaborated in the sections that follow.

#### Barriers to Graduation

Consistent with the dropout literature, participants identified a variety of individual, family, school, community, and economic factors as barriers to students staying in and completing school. For example, school social workers mentioned transportation problems, poor grades, teenage pregnancy, multiple family risks (for example, parent drug use combined with involvement of Child Protective Services or the Department of Social Services), and challenges with transitions (for example, to middle school or high school) as common barriers to graduation. Participants emphasized two barriers as being particularly important: (1) school policies and procedures and (2) economic demands. Because these two barriers have received less attention in the dropout literature than some others, they were selected for a more detailed discussion here.

**School Policies and Practices.** Each participant stressed the difficulty students and parents encounter in understanding school policies and practices. For example, many ninth graders are unfamiliar with the concept of *seat time*, whereby receiving credit for a course depends not only on the grades earned, but also on being physically present in class for a minimum number of hours:

A lot of students drop out because of credits . . . they just get in a position where they don't have any credits, or enough credits to move to the next grade. They don't seem to connect credits to their attendance.

Confusion and misunderstanding of policies can result in students becoming frustrated and giving up. One school social worker illustrated her point by pulling out a large three-ring binder containing

nearly 200 pages. “This is our manual with all the policies . . . do you think I have read it?”

The impact of language and cultural diversity on home-school communications is a related aspect of this issue. In this district with a growing immigrant population, resources for translation services and bilingual staff have not kept pace with demand. Efforts to communicate with families in their native languages are critical to fostering an active home-school collaboration that supports student success.

The parents don’t know their student isn’t coming to school and they’re getting these calls and these letters, but they are in English. Everything is in English . . . this is a huge thing we need to overcome. . . . How are they supposed to understand this process when everything is in English, all the guidance counselors only speak English?

**Economic Demands.** Interview participants who work primarily at the high school level noted that it is becoming increasingly common for students to leave school to go to work. “Whether they have their own kid to support or just helping out the family, we definitely see that a lot.” One participant drew the distinction between students’ futures and families’ present situations, thus highlighting a conflict she faces in her role as a school social worker:

When I go out to these homes, how can I convince that family that the student needs to be in school instead of working? Yes, it may be the difference for that child in the long run, but these families are concerned with today . . . it is about survival. I get that. I can’t be responsible for a family losing their home.

### **Prevention and Intervention Strategies**

In the study district, the role of school social workers in dropout prevention was described as “intervention implementer.” School social workers assume primary responsibility for implementing three distinct dropout prevention and intervention efforts, each of which is discussed in the following section.

**Attendance and Truancy.** The primary role of school social workers in the study district is described as “ensuring that students who have excessive unexcused absences receive the support and follow-up that they need in order to come to school every

day.” At the middle and high school level, this priority is manifest in social workers’ coordination of Truancy Court, a school-based intervention for students who have accumulated six or more absences. Truancy Court brings students and their parents before a team of school staff and either a judge or a school resource officer to determine the reasons behind students’ absences, to remind parents of compulsory attendance laws and associated consequences for noncompliance, and to connect students and families to school and community resources as needed.

Each of the district administrators and school social workers described examples of Truancy Court’s effectiveness in improving student attendance: “[Truancy Court] is definitely having an effect on kids who are starting to skip or who have absences but don’t really have a reason.” However, the social workers also expressed mixed feelings about having attendance and truancy as their district-designated focus.

It is important, but I wish we didn’t focus on it so much . . . we are so focused on this, it pulls us away from seeing other things. Like, if a student doesn’t miss a lot of school, they don’t get noticed as much. . . . But, it does get us into other areas. It’s helpful in discovering if other issues are going on with the family.

Reasons for student absences range dramatically: “Sometimes it’s as simple as an alarm clock, but sometimes there’s a real problem—like drugs in the home.” One district administrator explained that although issues requiring social work intervention are occasionally discovered through Truancy Court, “most of the time, the home is fine. The parents just don’t know their child isn’t coming to school and the child doesn’t see the importance of coming.” In these situations, social workers try to encourage a future orientation by having students “look at where they want to be and what they need to do to get there. At this age, they can’t see past their own eyelashes, let alone past their own nose.”

**Intensive Support for Select At-Risk Students.** Criteria such as attendance, agency involvement (for example, social services), court involvement, homeless or foster status, and student behavior are used to identify approximately 15 to 20 students considered at-risk of academic failure or dropping out. Social workers are expected to provide more

intensive and frequent support for these students (for example, weekly sessions, parent meetings, goal planning, home visits) and submit a quarterly report to the district office. Although respondents described the positive impact the intensive services have made with several students, they lamented that “our focus on other duties keeps us from working this way with more than just a few students.”

**Redeeming Dropouts.** The final strategy involving school social workers is reclaiming dropouts, which involves locating students who have already dropped out and attempting to reengage them with the school. Because the majority of the district’s dropouts occur during high school, dropout recovery is a smaller portion of middle school social workers’ role. School social workers submit monthly reports of their efforts to locate students, including how many students from the list of dropouts from the previous and current school year have returned to school. One district administrator described this effort as an “intensive yearlong process to get students to come back.” Summers are especially busy for the few school social workers who are employed year-round, because district administrators expect them to “work intently to get students back in August before the dropout numbers are due to the state in October.”

Participants indicated that getting these students to return is often “a difficult sell because they have already been talked through the mill before they drop out.” Many former students have moved on to other endeavors, such as working or getting their GED. One social worker elaborated on the difficulty of convincing dropouts to return to their previous high schools.

I hate to say it, but it’s a lot of time for such a small return. Why would they come back? What do we have that is different than when they left? Sometimes I’ll get them to come back, but most of them end up on the dropout list again. They start having the same problems, so they leave again. I spend all my time chasing students rather than fixing what made them leave in the first place.

## **Role Conflicts and Struggles in School Social Work**

This study’s original research questions included an exploration of the policies that affect school social workers’ dropout prevention work. Although some specific formal policies were mentioned by the

interview participants, the overriding theme dealt with unofficial policies and practices regarding the role of social workers in schools. These policies and practices were seen by participants as contributing to three specific types of role conflicts and struggles.

**Administrator Discretion.** Although the district defines overall priorities and job descriptions, school administrators generally have substantial discretion in determining the daily duties performed by school staff. Application of this discretion can create scenarios in which the roles of social workers vary from year to year and from school to school. There is a sense that “it has taken a long time for schools to define school social work, and they still aren’t sure what to do with us.” Respondents expressed the desire for more consistency:

Even just comparing across high schools in this district, there’s a huge difference in the work social workers are asked to do, especially by the principals. It makes it hard to justify our importance—what we do that is different than everybody else—and it makes it hard to collaborate across schools.

Social workers described how lack of clear and consistent expectations can elicit duties and requests outside their area of expertise and prescribed or desired roles. Tasks such as daily bus and lunch duty “interfere with being able to get out in the community and do home visits . . . because you’re always worried about getting back here in time for duty.” As one social worker elaborated,

The core of what we do is decided by the district, but majority of what we do is up to our administrator. Depending on the administrator, we get lots of other random jobs. Here, the priorities are discipline and diffusing conflict. We do a lot of babysitting. They drop students off here and say “talk to them,” and leave them here for hours. When things happen that folks don’t know how to deal with, they come to the social worker . . . we’re supposed to be everything to everybody, but there’s no respect for what we are actually trained to do.

**School Social Work versus Real Social Work.** Without exception, each of the social workers made a distinction between their current role and

what they termed “real social work.” One participant introduced the concept of real social work while describing her recent transition from a department of social services to the field of school social work.

When I first started [this position] and learned about this attendance stuff, I was like, this isn’t social work! What am I doing? This isn’t what I felt like I had signed up for, and I wasn’t very happy with it.

Other social workers mentioned they “sometimes get to do real social work.” When asked to define what “real social work” meant to them, one participant stated, “True social work is helping connect families to community resources.” In a similar vein, another social worker responded,

If we find out something at home is prohibiting students’ progress, we get to do *real* social work then. Like, if we manage to get out there for a home visit and find out there is no food in the home, we can connect them to community resources, make referrals, get them on food stamps or something.

These respondents seem to be describing social casework with individual children and families, consistent with previous studies in which social workers report case management as one of the most important tasks of their daily work (Allen-Meares, 1996). Social work participants’ expressed desire for a casework focus seemed to be at odds with both the district’s priorities and ongoing calls for school social workers to move beyond a case management model.

**Who Is the Client?** A fundamental conflict for the school social workers arises when the individual needs of students depart from the organizational needs of the school. In these cases, social workers face the question, “Who is my client—the school or the student?” a source of tension and strain for many school social workers (Phillippo, Kelly, Shayman, & Frey, 2017). This tension is apparent in respondents’ earlier comments regarding students who leave school to help support their families. It is reflected again in their discussions of trying to reclaim dropouts.

The district has to send the state [department of education] a dropout report, and they want the numbers low. So we work to get [the

students who didn’t come back after the summer] back in school and keep them here for when the dropout report is due in October. That way they aren’t counted as a dropout. But we have nothing better to give them than we had before, so they leave again, and it starts all over. It helps our numbers look good, but how does that help the student?

Tension also occurs when the best educational fit for a particular student is not a diploma-granting program operated by the school district. In these cases, the needs of the students are in direct conflict with accountability goals placed on schools and districts. This conflict was corroborated by district administrators, who acknowledged that “sometimes what is best for the school is not best for the student.” School social workers describe these situations as “true ethical dilemmas” and express frustration at attempting to resolve the conflict:

It’s a catch-22. What is our goal? If we link the student to a program that works for them, it can still be considered a failure for the system if it’s not the *right* kind of program. It has to be a program that when a student goes to it, they don’t count against the district as a dropout. There’s never gonna be no dropouts. For me as a social worker, the key is to get students somewhere that works for them. That’s my duty to them. But overall, for my job, the concern is the numbers. It’s frustrating.

These pressures can be buffered or exacerbated by the school’s administrator.

Thankfully, my current principal is concerned with the individual student, so regardless of the numbers, I have support from my principal to do what is right by the student. But social workers do face pressures to get the [dropout] numbers down.

## DISCUSSION

Social workers are uniquely positioned to identify and address numerous factors influencing students’ likelihood of graduating. This article fills a gap in the literature by reporting on a qualitative study that identified how social workers in one district contribute to dropout prevention efforts and the

aspects of the school context that shape their work. The current study used interviews with a small sample of school social workers, school counselors, and district administrators in an urban southeastern district to explore these questions.

In regard to school social workers' role in dropout prevention, three focal areas were identified: (1) supporting student attendance, (2) providing intensive support for selected at-risk students, and (3) encouraging dropouts to return to a diploma-granting program. Study participants, regardless of their role (that is, school social workers, school counselors, or district-level administrators), unanimously agreed that dropout prevention is a critically important topic and is an appropriate issue for social worker involvement. However, school-based and district-level participants varied in their personal endorsement of the current district-determined priorities of the social work position.

This study found that the experience of social workers in schools and the contributions these individuals make to dropout prevention are heavily shaped by three key concepts: (1) administrator discretion regarding job tasks and purpose, (2) challenges in defining the scope and boundaries of the social work profession, and (3) tensions between the needs of the school and the needs of students. School-based respondents identified these aspects of the school context as stressors and impediments to the daily functioning of school social workers. For example, school social workers' collaborations with school counselors were idiosyncratic—because the roles of school social workers are heavily influenced by the views of individual school administrators, it was often difficult to develop lasting partnerships or to develop similar partnerships across schools. These impediments are consistent with the barriers to school social work practice identified in previous studies (see, for example, [Phillippo et al., 2017](#); [Teasley, Canfield, Archuleta, Crutchfield, & Chavis, 2012](#)).

Findings from this study have implications for both practice and policy. Although clearly within the domain of school social work ([Kim & Streeter, 2008](#)), the study district's explicit focus on attendance and truancy is somewhat unusual. Not all school districts use their school social workers to focus on attendance to this extent. As such, one suggestion for district-level administrators is to compare the roles and responsibilities of social workers across schools within their district as well as with those of social workers in other districts. Analysis of these

positions and the associated policies should include not only comparisons of the dropout prevention efforts that school social workers use, but also a broader assessment of how these positions are deployed. As made clear by many of the respondents, variation in social workers' roles across schools and districts hinders collaboration and clarity regarding the purpose of the profession in the school setting ([Phillippo et al., 2017](#)). If the field of school social work is to evolve and mature, however, defining the profession's role in schools cannot be left solely to the proclivities of individual school administrators. Rather, school social organizations and other leaders in the field of school social work must work in partnership with schools and education leaders to cocreate a social work practice framework that is both consistent with evidence-based practice and the needs of the school context.

In addition, the current era of accountability is affecting not only principals and teachers, but school social workers as well. Interview participants identified several areas of role conflict, including addressing the needs of students within high-stakes, accountability contexts of schools. Given the “revolving door” of dropouts described by participants, it is imperative to identify new options for students who have been reclaimed. Furthermore, reconsideration of educational policies regarding which programs result in a student being considered a dropout, rather than reclaimed, is warranted.

There have been ongoing calls for school social workers to reduce their practice focus on individuals as targets for change in favor of prevention and intervention efforts that affect larger groups or systems ([Dupper et al., 2014](#); [Frey & Dupper, 2005](#); [Kelly et al., 2015](#)). In some ways, this call is being answered by social workers in the study district. Their coordination of the Truancy Court program places social workers at the helm of a multidisciplinary school team tasked with identifying and reducing common barriers to school attendance. In many ways, however, the roles described by interview participants still heavily focus on individuals as targets for change. For example, the three identified intervention efforts primarily target the student and family level rather than large group or systems levels. This individual focus contributes to the ongoing frustrations of being unable to reach everyone and the inability to make large-scale changes in the issues affecting large groups of students.

Perhaps one of the most provocative findings from the current study is the apparent tension

between how school social workers view their role in contrast to what they perceive as “real social work.” Despite a policy-level shift toward multi-level systems of intervention and recommendations for social workers to engage in leadership roles within schools (Jozefowicz-Simbeni, 2008; Peckover, Vasquez, Van Housen, Saunders, & Allen, 2013), social workers in the present study seem to express an ongoing preference and desire for more traditional clinical modes of social casework. If efforts to establish new models of practice are to take hold, it will be critical for the profession to better understand school social workers’ perspectives and preferences regarding real social work. For example, what are the origins of these perspectives and what are the experiences that serve to shape, reinforce, or challenge these views? How are our current social work education programs reinforcing or challenging the traditional casework model? Although the idea of “real social work” did not emerge from the comments of school counselors or district administrators in the present study, other professions’ divergent perceptions regarding what social work is (and is not) clearly emerge as an important consideration. The manner in which all future school-based practitioners and administrators are socialized about the purpose of school social work potentially shapes the profession’s development.

The present study also has implications for future research related to school social work. First, as described earlier, further investigation of school social workers’ definition and perception of their roles as related to the idea of “real social work” is warranted. Second, additional investigation of how social workers’ perspectives of their roles compare with those of their school administrators is needed. Such studies could illuminate school administrators’ perceptions and decision making regarding the primary value of a school social worker as compared with those of other support staff such as school counselors and mental health specialists. A related area in need of further exploration is the supervision of social workers by non-social work professionals in schools (Phillippo et al., 2017). Several participants indicated in their comments that supervision by non-social work professionals seems to contribute to a lack of understanding of the social workers’ potential contribution to the educational setting, and consequently the emergence of role conflicts and underutilization of school social workers’ unique perspective and skill set. Finally,

it is important to understand the strategies school social workers use to resolve role conflicts and ethical dilemmas in their work. For example, how do they resolve the pressure to keep dropout numbers low while also supporting students’ individual learning and social-emotional needs?

The findings of this study should be interpreted in light of several limitations. One limitation of the study relates to the need for prolonged engagement in qualitative studies. Despite collecting data over the span of three months, engagement in the field was limited. With additional interviews, new information and new findings would likely emerge. At minimum, findings would become more refined and nuanced. A second limitation relates to the size and characteristics of the current sample. The current sample was limited to 12 participants who each identified as female. Future studies could expand our understanding by recruiting a larger, more diverse sample, with specific efforts to recruit male school social workers, respondents of various social and ethnic backgrounds, and social workers representing a wider range of schools. It is also important to recognize that our sample included two school counselors who collaborated closely with their respective school social workers on dropout prevention efforts. These respondents offer a unique vantage point of the role of school social workers; however, a larger sample size would be beneficial and would allow for greater depth of analysis and stronger comparisons with the perspectives of the school social workers themselves.

## CONCLUSION

School dropout prevention continues to be a challenging and complex educational and social issue. Among school-based professionals, social workers are in a unique position to effectively intervene as a result of the profession’s placement at the intersection of the individual, home, school, and community. School social workers may assume a variety of roles in dropout prevention efforts, from individual counseling and group work to schoolwide prevention and intervention delivery. However, school social workers increasingly face pressure to focus on mandated accountability goals that are not necessarily congruent with the needs of individual students. Nonetheless, findings from this study reaffirm the value of the social work perspective in identifying and understanding barriers that affect students’ chances of graduating. 

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## PRACTICE HIGHLIGHTS

Share your practice experience providing exemplary services to individuals and families in school settings, especially involving interdisciplinary collaboration. Provide a brief review of the literature and tell how what you did builds on it, describe your program, and indicate what you learned from your experience. Articles should be typed double-spaced and no longer than six pages. Send your Practice Highlights column as a Word document through the online portal at <http://cs.msubmit.net> (initial, one-time registration is required).