



School Social Workers as Advocates for Social Justice

It is the position of the American Council for School Social Work that all school social workers engage in the practice of advocating for social justice in ways that are most impactful to their milieu. ACSSW believes that education is the central social justice issue of our time and any school social worker must view education as a basic civil right for youth.

Rationale

Social justice is a foundational principle of the social work profession. Our own code of ethics describes the core value of “challenging social injustice” as something social workers should work toward (NASW, 2017). One of the sectors in which social work clients often experience injustice is in education, thus making education a social justice issue. As such, school social workers encounter issues of social justice in their daily practice within schools and must be prepared to serve as advocates for social justice.

Social justice issues that have manifested in education mirror those issues faced in other sectors in society and often fall within the categories of discrimination and inequality. Often discrimination in education is based on race, gender, class, ability, national origin, sexual orientation, and religion; and inequality is based on lack of opportunity, access, and resources.

Discrimination

Several specific examples of discrimination within schools have been documented in the literature as follows:

- Disproportionate rates of harsh discipline practices between whites and minorities. Minorities are disproportionately given discipline referrals, assigned to special education, and referred to the juvenile justice system when compared with Caucasians (Annamma et. al, 2014).
- In addition to bullying and bigotry from classmates and staff, immigrants and undocumented students also face lower academic expectations from teachers and disdain or impatience due to linguistic differences (Carnock, 2015).
- Anti-muslim bullying is an example of discrimination experienced by students based on religion.
- Students with disabilities may be prevented from participating in school activities or field trips (NOLO, n.d.).

Inequality

Several examples of inequality that students may face in schools include the following:

- There currently exists a persistent spending gap between the wealthy and poor districts. It is reported that there is a 30% difference between graduation rates in wealthy school districts versus poor school districts (NYSUT, 2015).
- Minority students have less access to highly skilled teachers, quality curriculum. Although separate and unequal facilities have been outlawed, minority students are in de facto segregated and unequal schools. Even in integrated schools, minority students are in lower tracks, with less qualified teachers.
- Likewise, immigrant children and undocumented students face inequality from being placed in largely segregated schools with limited access to high quality teachers and resources (Carnock, 2015).
- Students with disabilities often find their access to medication, aides, or service animals restricted. (NOLO, n.d.).

Call to Action

The National Association of Social Workers (2017) calls for social workers to “promote sensitivity to and knowledge about oppression and cultural and ethnic diversity” (p.). ACSSW echoes this call and urges school social workers to accomplish this through several actions. School social workers can work to:

- increase awareness of oppressive practices and appreciation for cultural diversity within their school leadership and staff. Research demonstrates that when resources and quality of teaching are equal inequality in outcomes narrows considerably (Dreeben, 1986).
- Increasing awareness of medication or assistance needs for students with disabilities through 504 writing, educating teachers, and school leaders.
- School social workers can advocate for increased cultural and linguistic diversity in school staff and curriculum and assist in developing professional development for cultural sensitivity among school staff that work with these many populations.

References

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