



## Recommended School Social Worker to Student Ratios

The School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA) recommends a maximum ratio of 1 Master of Social Work (MSW) level school social worker to 250 general education students or 1 school social worker per building serving 250 general education students or fewer. When intensive services are needed, one school social worker for every 50 students is the recommended ratio. School social workers support students and their families with behavioral, academic, social, and emotional concerns. School social workers collaborate and support educators and school administrators through consultation, training, and advocating for student needs. The school social work role also connects services between the school, home, and community. This statement will discuss school social workers' caseload and workload ratios within the context of increasing behavioral, social, emotional, academic, and mental health demands. It will also examine regional differences and the impact of the *SSWAA National School Social Work Practice Model 2.0* (Tan & SSWAA, 2024) to continue supporting an equitable workload while optimizing the social worker-to-student ratio.

### Hiring and Staffing Consideration

When considering a school social worker-to-student ratio that best supports students and social workers, it is essential to consider what encompasses the full scope of responsibilities and tasks a social worker manages. This list includes but isn't limited to administrative duties, collaboration with teachers and parents, participation in school-wide initiatives, and providing tier-one services to the general student body. While caseload focuses on the count of students receiving Tier 2 or Tier 3 services, workload reflects the overall demand and time required for a school social worker to fulfill all professional obligations, often highlighting the intensity and complexity of the social worker's role. The school social worker-to-student ratio (1:250) should apply to school social worker hiring or staffing, knowing more intensive services should be considered when determining caseload. Similarly, the 1:50 ratio should be considered to meet the needs of students requiring more intensive services.

### Funding and Hiring Sustainability

Federal, state, and private funding sources often focus on increasing the school social work workforce including grants, Title I funding, local district funding, or community and university partnerships. When accessing these funding sources, school districts should always plan to sustain these essential school resources. Sustainable hiring includes demonstrating the essential need for social workers, supportive practices, and diversified funding to ensure that these services are part of the educational services. The guidelines in this document should be applied when securing funding.

### Mental Health

The increasing prevalence of mental health, social-emotional, behavior, and academic challenges among youth necessitates a comprehensive response within the school environment (Hertz & Barrios, 2021; U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Research indicates that almost 40% of students experience poor mental health issues, and 20% seriously contemplated suicide, yet only a fraction receive the necessary services (Jones et al., 2021). This disparity is particularly concerning for diverse and vulnerable populations, including students with disabilities, students of color, LGBTQ+ youth, and those from low-income families (Trevor Project, 2022; Whitaker et al., 2018). These youth face heightened risks but often lack access to adequate support. Untreated mental health and well-being challenges can escalate into more severe problems, hindering academic progress and potentially leading to school dropout.

The role of school social workers is vital in addressing these student challenges and the gaps in services. They are often the first to identify mental health concerns in students and can provide crucial early intervention services. School-based mental health services can be more effective than community-based interventions, with higher treatment completion rates (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). However, the shortage of school social workers and school mental health support and resulting shortages in staffing ratios, especially for marginalized students, can pose a significant challenge (Shelton & Owens, 2021; Whitaker et al., 2019). The sustainability of these essential services must be considered amidst an ongoing youth mental health crisis exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the growing concerns about social media's impact on student's mental well-being (U.S. Surgeon General, 2023).

### **Impact of Region/Location on Role**

Student and district needs vary by region and community. As such, staffing decisions differ, resulting in school social workers covering vast areas with diverse needs. Factors to consider include the number of students receiving special education services and the intensity of special education services being provided, student mental health needs, specific student needs, and community needs, including the availability of support outside of the school system (Pearson & Hyde, 2020; U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2021), and the school setting (Borg, 2021; Shaw, 2022). In specialized school settings, such as day treatment programs, the recommended ratio would be lower than 1:250, as all students in these programs receive high-intensity services. Consideration should also be given to the consistency of staffing for student benefit (Subramaniam & Wuest, 2022), specific to rapport and relationship-building.

### **Using the National Model to Drive the Work of SSW**

The SSWAA National School Social Work Practice Model 2.0 must buttress an equitable workload and optimize the school social worker-to-student ratio. The model offers guidance for an ethical foundation, enhanced linkages between the home, school, and community, increased support for youth mental health and well-being, and school-wide action toward equity (Tan & SSWAA, 2024). These pursuits can be strengthened by an optimized employment presence, equitable ratios, and reduced caseloads to give practitioners the autonomy and capability to achieve these goals of youth-centered school-wide care.

### **Conclusion**

The current climate of our education system is marked by growing concerns about youth's mental health, increased needs of families, and school staff well-being within schools. These present realities necessitate a critical evaluation of our current social work-to-student ratio of 1 Master of Social Work (MSW) level school social worker to 250 general education students or 1 school social worker per building serving 250 general education students or fewer. Action is needed on multiple fronts, including school social workers to track and document student ratios and researchers investigating the impact of current social work-to-student ratios. By addressing this research need, we can ensure school social workers practice and support schools most efficiently and effectively.

### **Recommended Ratio**

The School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA) recommends a ratio of Master of Social Work (MSW) level school social workers to students of:

- 1:250 general education students.
- 1 per building that serves 250 general education students or fewer.
- 1:50 students when intensive services are needed.

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