



International Network for School Social Work

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School Social Work is Essential

The recent **World Conference of IFSW** (International Federation of Social Workers) concluded by announcing a new Global Agenda for Social Work. One theme that emerged is that social work is an *essential service* that works with others to build sustainable communities. As the Covid pandemic forces frequent and drastic changes on schools, school social workers are essential partners with the school community of school-children, teachers, parents and support staff, working as a team to sustain education. School social work bridges the gaps that interfere with children, often the most needy ones, being educated. The pandemic has made that gap wider.

Schools in much of the Northern hemisphere are currently considering how to provide instruction in the upcoming new school year. Depending on how well the spread of the virus is controlled, the members of school communities face resuming school with a range of emotions. Some countries, such as Finland, have hardly any new cases as of July. Teachers and parents there can approach the new school year calmly, with confidence that children, teachers and families will not be exposed to Covid19 in face-to-face instruction. In other countries the virus is spreading faster than ever. In the United States for example, the month of July saw 1.7 million new cases with increasing daily rates. Teachers and parents are rightly frustrated, conflicted and worried about the prospect of children returning to face-to-face instruction in the 20-21 School Year. Members of the school community with health concerns, whether adults or school-children, are anxious and conflicted about returning to school and risking exposure to the virus.

Guidelines for re-opening Schools

National education ministries and health agencies are scrambling to put together guidelines for re-opening schools during the pandemic, a situation that they have never had to consider before.

International agencies such as WHO and UNESCO are also giving advice. The international agencies are helping to focus attention on making education better and healthier than before by viewing this as an opportunity to not return to normal. They urge instead that school systems should expand education and make it more flexible to meet all needs including previously out-of-school children, displaced and migrant children, minorities and excluded groups such as young mothers.

Advocates for change in schools are also urging schools to incorporate comprehensive support for students' personal and social growth, focusing on well-being for both students and staff. They suggest using this crisis to transform schools. Howard Adelman of the UCLA Center for Mental Health in Schools argues that students' commonplace responses to crisis not be interpreted as a need for more psychological testing and diagnosis, but as a sign that schools should provide support.

Meanwhile, national education and health agencies may miss this opportunity to see the crisis as a way to improve schools. For example the Guidelines issued by the CDC (Centers for Disease Control in the US) are focused almost exclusively on extensive instructions for maintaining hygiene and detecting illness. For example, this involves distancing, with students spaced well apart and separated by plastic barriers. Supporting resilience and coping skills seems to be an afterthought.

Obsessive focus on cleaning, distancing and stricter behavioral rules than school children have ever had before will require school personnel to be creative in developing a nurturing environment where excitement, fun, play and joy in learning thrive. Children enjoy learning the most when huddled together in groups working on joint projects. The challenge for school social workers is discovering what to substitute for this close contact that children love, but that will be prohibited to prevent spread of the virus. Children need to feel connected, they need to work as partners, they need to share. School social workers can find ways to provide human contact within the new guidelines.

Social and Emotional Well-being is Essential. School Social Work is Essential



Nurturing social and emotional well-being has always been a responsibility of schools. Now infection control is the top priority and social and emotional well-being appears to be pushed aside. Children's simple emotional needs will be harder to provide in classrooms where teachers must focus on monitoring for infection control.

It is up to school social workers to keep schools focused on children's social and emotional well-being, by ensuring that there are many activities such as games, outdoor time, play and groups that nurture the children's emotional needs. As leaders in child advocacy, school social workers can also resist efforts to rush to labeling large numbers of children and adults with labels such as OCD, ADD, LD, PTSD.

Now is the time to plan innovative ways to keep the whole school community focused on the well-being of children, staff and families. As the IFSW conference made clear, social workers are leaders in protecting well-being. Here are some ideas for well-being in schools from Kaiser Permanente https://thrivingschools.kaiserpermanente.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/PNN-for-School-Playbook-COVID_SCM_EW_2020_Plybk_ChecklistsOnly.pdf

The IFSW Conference <https://www.ifsw.org/2020-conference/programme/>

The IFSW 2020 conference provided a model for free online social work conferences. It was easy to register and participate at any time both by listening to talks and by sending comments in response to speakers. While most international conferences are for the elite who can afford the expense and time to travel, this IFSW conference was free, as appropriate for a profession that believes in social justice. It is an approach that school social workers and their professional associations can consider as a way of bringing together school social workers from many countries for support and learning.