

International Network for School Social Work

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Riding the Waves during the Pandemic

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During home visits over one month, the hardest thing to do was to take care of the safety of first-year students! Children I've never met before, and their parents. Before visiting them at home, I kept talking on the phone or through text messages before visiting their home, 'this School has a school social worker. I'll be with you so that the children can grow up healthy and happy, so please feel free to contact me anytime.' A week after I met the father with two young, worried boys at their semi-basement house flat, he carefully opened his heart.

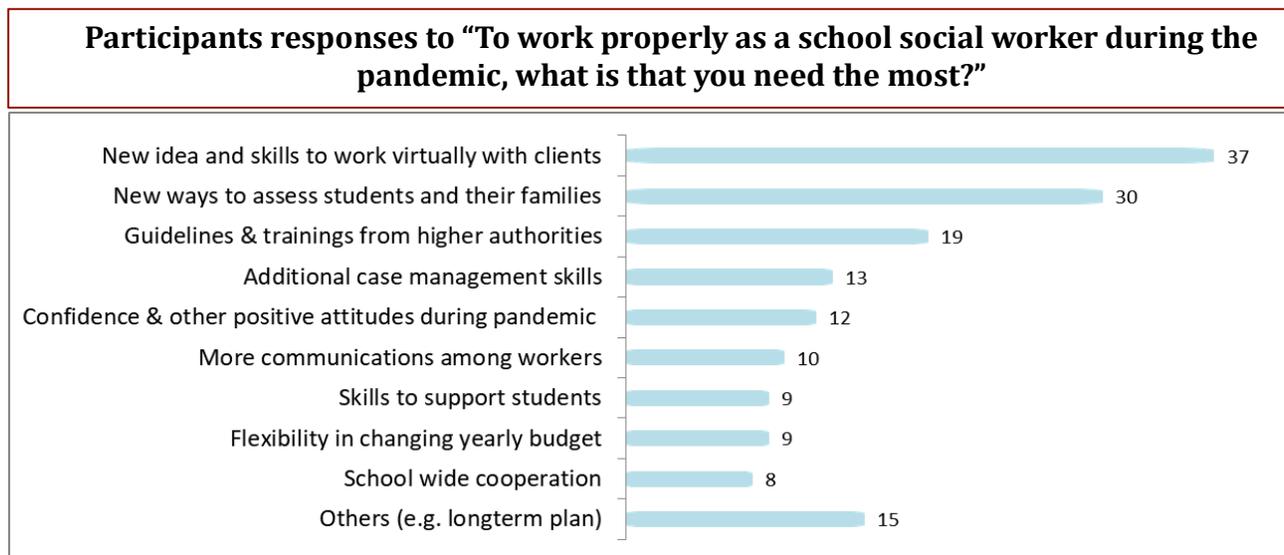
- **A school social worker at a middle school in Wolsan**

Schools and children around the world are hard hit by the waves of covid-19. Students spend most of their time on digital devices at home. Compared to parents of high socioeconomic status, those of low SES find it more difficult to guide and to care for their children during virtual learning. With their hands tied, teachers worry that the existing gap in educational attainment between high and low SES students might grow even bigger. They are also concerned that the proper social development is jeopardized due to dramatic drop of opportunities for students to socialize. As this near-lockdown prolongs, the need for checking in with students with regard to their wellbeing at home and their learning and the need for supporting families and schools in this strenuous times became more and more obvious. Among the frontline workers helping these children, families and schools are school social workers who play various roles and tasks.

As school social workers in South Korea gradually comprehend and adjust to this unprecedented situation, we attempt to assess the scope of changes in the roles and tasks of school social workers during the pandemic and to understand the challenges they have been facing. To do so, we (Kyunghyun Park, Soim Lee, Taein Lee, Sena Choi, Hyeshin Hwang, Education and Society) first analyzed 36 covid-19 relevant cases managed by school social workers, then conducted an online-survey (N=472), followed by in-depth, individual interviews of seven current workers. The quantitative and qualitative data we collected throughout the process was rich and informative which can be summarized as follows.

Upon the outbreak, school social workers functioned as brokers who connect resources to where they are needed, assessment experts who check upon students and their families in quarantine, case managers who help families address their imminent needs, collaborators who work with teachers and other school staff in assisting students to participate in online learning and to abide by social distancing guidelines, and communicators who liaise between school, students, guardians, and community members. We found that while the roles of a school social worker remain constant regardless of the pandemic, the tasks have been modified to a large extent mainly because 1) most activities involving face-to-face contact have been halted, 2) the methods of service delivery have changed (e.g., more phone calls, Social Network Services), and 3) they have been involved in implementing the safety and precaution measures when students are on campus and in disseminating survival kits or covid-19 care packages for families. It is this versatility and flexibility of these school social workers that characterizes the profession’s role. With an eco-systemic point of view in mind, school social workers adapt to the situation like a chameleon and evolve as needed.

There were challenges as well including lack of creative ideas about how to safely contact students, lack of knowledge and skills to implement online social work services, sense of helplessness and being isolated, confusion and anxiety, and frequent changes of plan for school social work programs for the school year. As the top three current needs, the participants ranked 1) learning new technologies in order to serve their clients without risking anyone’s health and safety, 2) assessing how students are doing when they are not on school campus, and 3) clear guidelines and protocols from government authorities for school social workers to refer to when they provide services during a pandemic.



Some workers could only wait, especially in the early months of the pandemic, not being able to fully grasp the magnitude of the situation. However, it seems that this waiting period was not wasted. Instead, the wait enabled them to ponder, to plan, and to reorient themselves. It appears that covid-19 pandemic affects us in waves and as wise school social workers, rather than being overwhelmed by the size of the wave, they wait and surf, turning a crisis into an opportunity that makes the workers truly get to know their students and their families who ride the waves together.

KASSW (Korea Association of School Social Workers, www.kassw.or.kr) is working to support school social workers. In times of crisis, we need more communication and unity.