

# Certification standards, education critical for social workers in school safety efforts

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Tragedies at schools have become far too common and schools, community leaders and parents all are focused on finding ways to ensure schools are safe. Aaron Thompson, associate professor of social work at the University of Missouri and a former school social worker and principal, says that school social workers play a key role in helping at-risk children. In a new study, he found that high-performing school social workers were more likely to have graduate degrees and work in a state with certification standards. The findings provide guidance to policy makers and school administrators hoping to improve outcomes for students and school safety.

"To improve school safety we need policies that support minimum—if not lofty—competencies and state or national certification standards for school social work professionals," Thompson said. "In 36 states, standards are in place for what is expected of school [social workers](#), such as using data-based decision making; yet, 14 states have no set expectations. This means not all schools are equipped with social workers who have the necessary training and tools."

School social workers are trained professionals who provide key services related to a [student](#)'s well-being across multiple systems. While counselors work one-on-one with students, social workers also work with teachers, family members and community groups to help at-risk students be more successful. They also know how to research interventions that can decrease problematic behaviors and can choose the best intervention for the student. Social workers often can help children with the most

severe issues by acting as their advocate. In typical settings, school social workers can provide intensive support for 25-30 at-risk youth at a time.

Thompson looked at nearly 4,000 profiles of school social workers from all 50 states to determine the quality of their work in the schools. Three profiles emerged from the analysis— high, medium and low levels of ecological [practice](#), or engaging with all facets of a student's life. High-performing social workers were more likely to use school, family and community support practices. He also found that those with graduate degrees in social work were more likely to engage in these practices. However, timing of the education mattered, as social workers who had more recent education, within 10 years, were more likely to be trained in the best evidence-based practices.

"Without knowing what's behind behavior problems, we won't be able to reduce them," Thompson said. "In engaging with the student, the teacher, the family and various community agencies, school social workers can play a significant role in improving outcomes for at-risk youth, leading to healthier children and safer schools."

"Factors influencing [school](#) social work practice: a latent profile analysis," recently was published in *School Mental Health*.

**More information:** Aaron M. Thompson et al, Factors Influencing School Social Work Practice: A Latent Profile Analysis, *School Mental Health* (2018). [DOI: 10.1007/s12310-018-9279-y](https://doi.org/10.1007/s12310-018-9279-y)

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