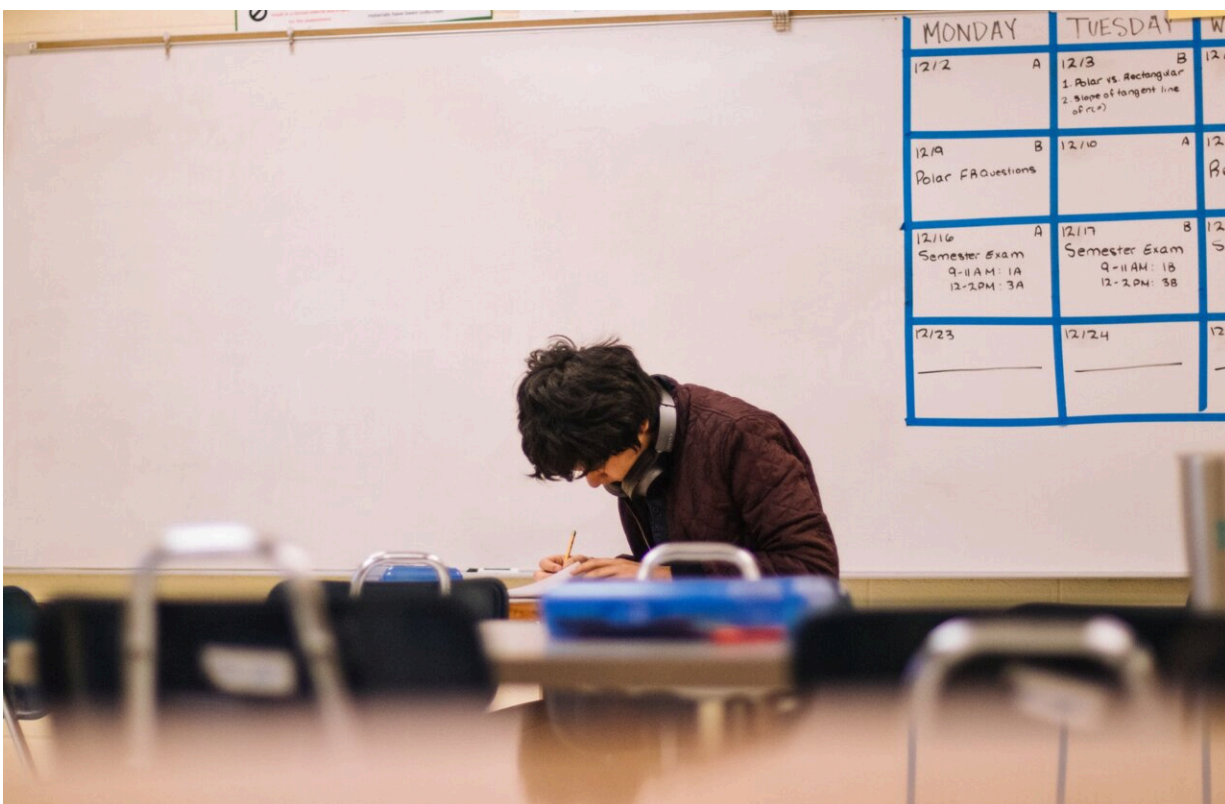


# Kids' return to classrooms brings unique challenges for school social workers

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As children and adolescents go back to school across the country this month, they face escalating mental health challenges. Clinical anxiety and depression among youth has doubled during the pandemic. Gun violence in the U.S. has reached an unprecedented level, and according

to a June 2022 report by the National Center for Education Statistics, school shootings during the 2020–21 school year reached the highest number in two decades. The rights of LGBTQ+ youth and their families are diminishing in many states, including alarming restrictions in Texas and Florida, eroding school safety and creating chronic stress that has long-term consequences.

Students are also struggling to catch up from learning lags and social delays due to distance learning, with [students of color and lower-income students hardest hit](#) due to lack of access to technology. Only 55% of U.S. [public schools](#) provide evaluation for student mental health disorders, and high [school](#) students in 37 states are [more likely to attend a school with a police officer on site than a social worker](#).

There has never been a greater need for school [social workers](#), yet many people—even some educators and administrators—do not know what a school social worker is or how they can help address large- and small-scale challenges of student life. For over a decade, the USC Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work has been a pioneer in providing education for a specialization in school [social work](#).

A more serious focus on training social workers in school settings and trauma-informed care for students was initiated by Marleen Wong, clinical professor emerita, when she joined the USC Social Work faculty. An international expert in crisis management who had led crisis response and recovery for the Los Angeles Unified School District, Wong brought first-hand experience of how trauma impacted student success in school and the overall learning environment. Her development of school social work-specific curriculum and field placements, as well as mentorship of faculty in training Master of Social Work (MSW) students in this specialization, generated the transformative program that is providing highly skilled social workers to schools around the country.

"School social workers understand trauma and how that impacts a student," says Steve Hydon, clinical professor of field education and director of social work in schools. "When a student is drifting off into space in the classroom, that may be because something else is happening in that student's life. Maybe they haven't had a nutritious meal in the morning, or they just witnessed somebody being murdered on the street, or their parents are in a custody battle. They're not thinking about who discovered America or what's two plus two, they're thinking 'What's my home going to look like later on this afternoon?' Social workers help teachers and administrators to understand this."

## **A holistic, systems approach to student wellness**

Social workers have been in school settings for over 115 years, with the advent of social work itself, beginning in 1906 with "visiting teachers" in Boston, New York City and Hartford, Connecticut. The practice has always been grounded in social justice issues and leveling access to education across the socioeconomic spectrum. Visiting teachers tried to bridge the gap between home and school life and help students to overcome barriers experienced at home.

"The public school system was meant to be this great equalizer when it was put into place. Yet, here we are today, and it really is not that," said Assistant Teaching Professor Aimee Odette, who is part of the core team of faculty who teach the practice of social work in schools.

Schools are the one common experience in children's lives across the board and the greatest opportunity to affect core social disparities. They are also microcosms of their wider communities and a gateway to creating real and lasting change for the next generations.

"Some kids today are living with [post-traumatic stress disorder](#), anxiety and depression," said Maria Hu, adjunct professor in the school social

work specialization who worked as a psychiatric social worker in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) for almost decade. "Schools are the best places for them to access services because it's a place where they spend most of their time. Also, it removes transportation barriers, reduces stigma and just makes treatment more feasible."

Unlike school counselors or school psychologists, school social workers are trained to address trauma within systems as well as with individual youth. Social workers have a deep understanding of the context around various types of trauma, including personal chronic or acute trauma, historical, racial and other population-level traumas. In a school setting, their clients are the students, but also the environments or systems that contribute to or disrupt a child or adolescent's ability to learn.

"Our focus is very strongly on the mental wellness of our students but also the mental wellness of our educators and our systems, because systems can be traumatized, not just individuals," said Odette. "I see us as the center of the spoke that connects all of the pieces of the school system—the students, the parents, the families, the caregivers, the teachers, the administrators."

This means that on any given day a school social worker may work one-on-one with an at-risk student experiencing mental health issues, address secondary traumatic stress among teachers, lead school-wide interventions on a particular issue, and work with the school board or local agencies on policy and resources. Hu recalls that during her first assignment at LAUSD she was the only social worker for over 3,000 students and every day was a crisis, with suicide and targeted violence threat assessments nearly daily occurrences.

School social workers bring extensive knowledge of the social determinants of health into the classroom, as well as a deep understanding of the environmental, cultural and socioeconomic factors

among at-risk populations. All of this can impact student performance and mental and behavioral health. Social workers function not only as mental health practitioners, but also social justice advocates. A [2013 study in Children and Schools](#) suggests that the number of school social workers available in the 100 largest school districts in the United States was a significant predictor of the number of students who completed high school during the 2008–2009 academic year.

"There is trauma research which indicates that a positive relationship with a trusted adult can enhance resiliency in children," said Kerry Doyle, associate professor of field education. "I feel that school social workers have an opportunity to make those positive connections with students."

## **Preparing for the unthinkable**

Mass targeted shootings on school campuses are on the rise again. When they occur, it is catastrophic for those communities, and the ripple effects can be felt across the country on school campuses. Preparing for the potential of such events, and training in threat recognition, de-escalation and addressing trauma, is a key responsibility for school social workers in practice today.

For Lisa Wobbe-Veit, associate professor of field education, the opportunity to put these skills into practice came unexpectedly close to home. A member of the school's Virtual Academic Center faculty, Wobbe-Veit lives in Parkland, Florida, has three children in its school system and over a decade of experience as a school [social worker](#). When the mass shooting occurred at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in February 2018, Wobbe-Veit's training kicked in. As she was waiting for her son to be released from lockdown at another Parkland school, Wobbe-Veit provided resources to local school principals and guidance on what to say to the families most affected as well as the other children

in the school system.

"I was doing the what social workers do—we spring into action," Wobbe-Veit said. "I didn't know how familiar the district was with large scale crisis response in the aftermath of a school shooting. I provided resources that could be of assistance. Social workers are incredibly attuned to the needs of others and knowledgeable of how to put concepts into action."

Wobbe-Veit's role quickly evolved within the community. She became the recovery consultant and school district liaison supporting the most impacted families from the tragedy. She provided trauma-responsive guidance outlining a menu of therapeutic services including everything from scheduling separate times for impacted students to pick up their textbooks to supporting accommodation plans that reflect every aspect of their interaction with school counseling, social work, administrators and teachers. Four years later, and with the trial for the Parkland shooter currently underway, Wobbe-Veit is still actively involved in providing trauma-responsive assistance to families.

"Trauma support is not linear and doesn't have a definitive ending, support is ongoing. Four years later, the needs are as high as they have always been," Wobbe-Veit said.

Hu is currently serving as a clinical consultant to the Uvalde School District in Texas, where the deadliest school shooting in the U.S. in more than a decade happened in May 2022 and the community faces an extremely traumatic period of returning their children to the classroom. She has been assigned to assist a team of social workers and counselors to implement [Bounce Back](#), a trauma-informed intervention specifically designed for children in grades K-5 experiencing post traumatic stress disorder.



A focus on trauma, whether chronic or acute, sets the school social work program at USC apart, and the school is expanding opportunities for specialization with the launch of a graduate certificate in Trauma and Trauma-Informed Interventions in Educational Settings in fall 2022, providing students with a comprehensive, trauma-responsive curriculum. The graduate certificate program is the only one in the country to offer comprehensive training in two key trauma-informed, school-based interventions: [Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools](#) (CBITS) and Bounce Back, both designed to reduce symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, behavioral problems and anxiety, and create a supportive environment for improved academic performance. Additionally, the certificate is available to MSW alumni as an opportunity to enhance their degree with a specialization in school social work.

School social workers go back into their respective schools this month with a tall order of challenges to tackle—from school violence to epidemic-level student anxiety to historic racial trauma and tension. Their hope is for school systems and administrators to appreciate the full range of their specialized training to recognize behavioral patterns caused by trauma, and to implement prevention and early intervention measures.

"There are warning signs and there are pathways that we want to disrupt before we get to a violent incident or failing student," Hydon said. "School social workers are key to identifying [students](#) in need of additional resources before they reach the extremes."

Provided by University of Southern California

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