



International Network for School Social Work

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Electronic Newsletter June 2015

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School Social Work In France: *le service social en faveur des élèves*

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France has a population of 66 million people (*Institut National de la Statistique et des Études Économiques, INSEE, 2014*). The fertility rate of 1.99 and the percentage of children and youth are high compared with other European countries. Youth unemployment is 23.8%, considerably above the total unemployment rate of 10.4%, and, along with growing unemployment, the poverty rate is increasing. Each year 160,000 youths drop out of school and without a high school diploma, they find it especially hard to find employment. Preparing these young people for a successful future is a challenge for the schools.

The Education System

School attendance is required from 6 to 16 years old. France is well-known for the *ecole maternelle*, an optional but well attended free pre-school program for 3 to 5 year-olds. At age 6 children are required to enter primary school for 5 years, followed by the lower secondary school for 4 years, at the end of which time they take an exam, *le brevet des collèges*. The options (*lycée général, lycée classique* or the *lycée technique*) for the final 3 years of school depend partly on the exam results. At the end of high school, they all have to pass a *baccalauréat* in order to obtain their high school diploma. There are 3 types of *baccalauréat*: *baccalauréat general* that prepares the student for further education, *baccalauréat technologique* with specialized curricular options and *baccalauréat professionnel* that prepares students to enter the workforce directly.

The history of school social services:

Social workers have been employed in schools in France since 1910, but at first had a different name and mission. The *auxiliaire d'hygiène de vie* was supervised by and assisted the school doctor who performed medical check-ups on the school children. Starting in 1945 the role changed to intervening in social issues and linking with other services. In 1969 the paramedical mission disappeared in order to respond better to social problems. From 1970 to 1982 the mission was defined as providing financial aid and making referrals to different programs that could help with social problems, reduce inequality and facilitate student adaptation at school. In 1985 the social service separated from the medical service and school social workers, now called *assistants social en faveur des élèves*, were moved to the Ministry of Education.

The organization of social work within the education system

At the national level, school social service is under the authority of the Education Minister who defines the policies and the priorities. Social workers who work in schools are required to have the *diplôme national d'assistant de service social*. This requires 3 years of studying in a school of social services after graduating from high school. They also have to pass a Ministry of Education exam. At the Regional and Departmental levels officials of the Ministry of Education coordinate and supervise Ministry directives for the social workers.

The mission for school social work

A 1991 circular from the education minister laid out the mission for school social work to work for the success and well-being of pupils: *“Le Service Social en Faveur des Elèves est un service de prévention au sein de la communauté scolaire; Sa mission est d’œuvrer par une aide individualisée et collective, à la réussite et au bien être des élèves”*, *Circulaire Ministère de l’Éducation Nationale du 11.09.1991*). The school social workers intervene to prevent drop out, truancy, behavior problems, bullying and family problems. They link families with other social and community services if needed. They evaluate child abuse and neglect and inform the authorities as needed. They can collaborate with the school nurse or with other agencies in prevention efforts such as conducting drug abuse prevention, health and citizenship education in the classroom.

School social work services

The school community refers a student to the school social worker for family or personal issues, truancy, abuse, neglect, and misbehavior in school. Families and students can contact the service directly. The social workers will proceed to do a social evaluation. They are able to do home visits if needed. After the evaluation, they can refer to community services, to career guidance, to the nurse for medical issues, or the school doctor for psychological, psychiatric issues and learning disabilities. They do not provide direct services, but they evaluate, provide their expertise to the administration and the school team school and refer to other services.

School social workers have an important role in child abuse and neglect prevention. They investigate suspected child abuse, write a report to the authorities and request child protection services. School social workers sometimes have difficulties working with the child protection services. Cases are complex and require good coordination and communication between services.

The issues for school social work

With the exception of schools in Paris, school social work services exist only in middle school (*collège*) and vocational training senior high schools. There are no social workers in regular high schools or in elementary schools. Each school social worker covers two to three schools with around 1000 students. According to the Union that represents social workers (*Syndicat National Unitaire des Assistants Sociaux de la Fonction Publique, SNUASFP*) there were 2991 school social workers in 2012. Since this level of coverage does not allow for the services that are needed, the service and the Union have been requesting more school social workers in order to cover primary schools and all middle schools and to provide services directly to students.

The Education Minister and school principals are conscious that they need more school social workers to deal with students’ social, family and behavioral problems and to work with the administration and teachers. They are also aware of the need for service in elementary school in order to respond early to children’s school problems. The Education Ministry is reviewing the missions of school social workers and considering extending the service to primary schools.