



International Network for School Social Work

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School Social Work in the Republic of Korea (South Korea)

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On the 18th August, about 30 people gathered to celebrate the 15th anniversary of the Korea Association of School Social Workers (KASSW, <http://www.kassw.or.kr>). Members shared memories from the last 15 years and unchanged friendship. What made us happy was that we were still brimming with energy and hopeful. The sad thing was that our hope to institutionalize school social work in Korea has not been fulfilled, and our voice has found only little echoes, in both the education and the welfare field. The founding members owe feelings of debt to the many school social workers who have committed themselves as pioneers.



Members of KASSW celebrate anniversary

Brief History of School Social Work in Korea

Korea is known for its rapid economic development after the devastation of the Korean War in the early 1950's. Korea has since become a member of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development to give help to the economy of developing nations. Korea's high aspiration for education is often referred to as the most powerful driving force behind the 'Miracle on the Han River.'

To help ensure that all students benefit from education, social work educators and practitioners have been working to find ways to support students who need help. The first school social work pilot project was implemented by the Seoul Metropolitan Office of Education from 1996 to 1997, followed by the Ministry of Education's small-scale pilot program from 1997 to 1998. The Korea Society of School Social Work (KSSSW, <http://www.schoolsocialwork.org>), formed by academicians from colleges and universities, started in 1997, and KASSW, an association of practitioners who work in schools, was established in 2000. KSSSW and KASSW have been collaborating to establish school social work systems ever since. However, the path forward has not been smooth.

Education Welfare Programs and Social Workers

There is no government policy or legal regulation for school social work per se. However, there exist two approaches relevant to school social work: the Education Welfare Project of local offices of education regulated by the Ministry of Education, in which one education welfare worker is placed at each selected school, and the other approach is social services carried out in schools and regulated by local governments.

Currently, among 9,120 elementary and middle schools, only about 1,800 personnel are working as education welfare workers, and only about a quarter of schools are served. The position is usually called 'education welfare worker' or 'community education expert' and is open to not only social workers, but youth guidance counselors or lifelong education counselors who are selected by district officers of education or school principals. These are temporary positions with low salaries and no career path leading to promotion. They serve only a small group of students from poor families.

The second, more recent approach, is closer to school social work. About 80 schools in the Metropolitan area have hired social workers either as a complement to education welfare or as an independent school social work project.

Social workers in the field of education do not get full recognition from the Ministry of Education. Social workers often end up being tossed back and forth between education and welfare, belonging to neither. Teachers and education authorities are reluctant to create job opportunities for social workers, preferring to hire more teachers, while the Ministry of Health & Welfare lacks interest in finding place for social workers in the school system, and provides little support for social workers.

What School Social Workers Do

Students are mostly referred by their teachers and occasionally by parents or peers. The main issues presented by the students are child abuse, family violence, bullying, emotional problems, peer problems, low achievement and dropping out. Korea's excessive educational aspiration causes much stress to the students, parents, and teachers, which may lead to school violence and bullying, and maladjustment. So the education welfare workers do home visits, and meet the parents to explain about the children and their school life and to understand the family's strengths and needs. They try to find various resources in the school and the community and introduce them to the student and family, while consulting with teachers and school counselors. However, in reality, most of education welfare workers' activities are concentrated on case management and a lot of administrative work, while lacking social work supervision and appropriate support for a wider range of services. The budget for education welfare project is decreasing and some observers view the current situation as an opportunity to shift from education welfare to school social work, which is expected to produce maximum effect with minimum cost.

Vision and Future Tasks

There are about 1,100 qualified school social workers trained and certified by KSSSW and KASSW (with a school social work practicum and examination). It is hoped that the national government will recognize that school social work is an effective measure to address problems of educational inequity, to enhance holistic development of young students, and to build a supportive home-school-community ecological system. This requires a new set-up of school social work with legal regulation, permanent positions and government recognition of the school social work professional identity and expertise to serve not only select, poorer students but all students, parents, and teachers.