



International Network for School Social Work

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Mission Accomplished: The Establishment of the “National School Social Work License System” in South Korea Jin-Hyung Bae, President of the Korean Society of School Social Work; So-Youn Park, Committee Chair of International Exchange of the Korean Society of School Social Work

School social workers in South Korea will never forget that historic day, the 23th of November 2018, when the revised bill of Social Welfare Work Act was passed by the National Assembly plenary session, finally establishing the national license system for school social workers. It took almost 30 years for the social welfare system to endow a rightful and legitimate qualification to the field of school social work. This December, the national license qualification system will be officially launched. In this newsletter, after presenting the development of school social work system in South Korea, there will be a brief discussion of the development of the national license system.

School Social Work in Korea

The initial development of school social work in Korea began with the initiative of the private sector, as with other sectors of the social welfare system in Korea. Although the concept of school social work was first introduced in the 1970s, school social work was not actually applied to practice settings until 1990. The very first official school social work in the early 1990s was conducted by Eunpyong Community Center in Seoul in connection with the local elementary school which provided programs for special education students. Since then, school-based social work and pilot projects have been launched. Seoul Metropolitan of Education, Samsung Foundation, the Ministry of Health and Welfare, Education Welfare Priority Support Project, School Social Work programs of local governments, We-Start (similar to Head-Start in the U.S and Sure-Start in England), and Wee-Project were set up to provide comprehensive service to students. During this period in the 1990's, Koreans as a nation were experiencing a social and economic crisis, and problems with adolescents emerged as one of the major social issues of the time. In lieu of this national societal uncertainty, school social work became a very positive and practical solution to help students with problems at school.

Currently in Korea, school social work can be categorized into three types based on the providers of the programs: 1) Education Welfare Priority Support Project by the Office of Education, 2) school

social work by local government, and 3) school social work by the private sector¹. First, the Education Welfare Priority Support Project aims to improve school performance by providing comprehensive programs including education, cultural activities, and social welfare services targeted towards children from low-income families in urban areas. The school social workers working for those projects are given tasks by the Education Welfare Priority Support Project and have a specific title, 'Education Welfare Worker' which is intended to carry the weight of the school social worker's supportive role in education. These education welfare workers are employed under the Office of Education or individual schools. Among current education welfare workers, most of them have a social work major. Thus, work by education welfare workers is in line with current established social work practice. As of 2019, 1,567 education welfare workers were deployed to 3,044 schools, which may indicate how wide-spread and common it has become to have education welfare workers at schools in Korea. Secondly, the school social work programs supported by local government are provided based on an established control by law of local government. To date, a total number of 122 school social workers are deployed to 125 schools including elementary, junior-high, and high schools in nine cities. Thirdly, school social work programs by the private sector, were launched in 2010 in the isolated area in the east side of Korea in order to establish a safety net for the connection of teacher-students-community. As of 2019, six schools have benefitted from implementation of school social work programs. The school social work programs by the private sector have a significant role to cover the blind spot in the school social work system for a certain disadvantaged group.

The Case for Licensing School Social Work

During the early 2000s, with the rising numbers of school social work projects, the educational field raised concerns and doubts about whether or not school social work qualifies as an actual licensed professional occupation. Although school teachers generally enjoy societal confidence in their professionalism or expertise in education, school social workers are still subject to scrutiny for their legitimacy and qualifications. For this reason, the necessity for issuing private licensing for school social work came into place. In order to guarantee the professionalism of school social workers, the Korean Society of School Social Work and the Korean Association of School Social Workers together established a system for a qualification examination in 2005. As of 2020, the school social worker qualification exam has been conducted 16 times, managed by the Korean Association of School Social Workers. Since 2005, 1,598 social workers have obtained their private licenses as a school social worker.

School Social Work License

The Ministry of Health and Welfare said it will announce the details of the requirement for national school social worker licensing in the middle of December. By the time this newsletter is issued, the requirement details should already be public, and the social school workers in Korea will have a clear and concrete career path ahead of them. At this moment, we really wish to express our utmost appreciation and gratitude to those who put their endless and sincere efforts into realizing this historical milestone and we are hopeful that this license system for training professional school social workers will ultimately make the schools a truly great environment for students to learn and grow. We wish all members of International Network for School Social Work would share this good news in this blessed season of the year. Thank you.

¹ K. Choi, H. Chou, & S. Kim (2019). A study about guidelines for school social work practice. 2019 Spring Conference, the Korean Society of School Social Work, Seoul, Korea