



International Network for School Social Work

<http://internationalnetwork-schoolsocialwork.htmlplanet.com>

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Thirty-five Years of School Social Work in a Multicultural School Craig Wunderlich, MSW, LCSW

I have been a school social worker for 35 years in Tucson, Arizona in the southwestern US.

Cholla High School

Cholla High School is named after one of our beautiful Sonoran Desert cacti and is located in the Tucson Mountain range on the southwest side of town. Around 80% of our students are of Mexican descent. Tucson is only 60 miles from the Mexican border, and many of our families have emigrated from Mexico. Many of these students live with relatives here in hopes of getting a US education. Some come here with limited English and struggle with this disadvantage. We have almost 2000 students, with a significant population of Yaqui Native Americans and African American students. Our Anglo students are largely from low income neighborhoods and do not enjoy the wealth of much of our majority culture. We also have students with various learning disabilities, emotional handicaps, and physical challenges.

In our school we have a program called “International Bacchalaureate” where we encourage a global vision of learning. “International Bacchalaureate” is an academically challenging program that prepares students for college and promotes intercultural understanding across the world. (<https://chollahs.tusd1.org/IB1>). Many of our students have never been outside of Tucson and this opens doors to a world of opportunity and focuses on the skills they need to explore these global possibilities.

Support groups

With 2000 students I struggle to find time to adequately meet all their needs so I rely a lot on support groups where I can meet with 10 to 15 students together. This not only allows them to benefit from my support but they learn to support each other. We have used our groups to combat racism, substance abuse, and sexual misconduct as well as provide comfort for those suffering from anxiety and depression. We use our groups to teach life skills such as problem-solving, assertiveness, and anger management. During the COVID pandemic we were forced to educate remotely for 1½ years and this was very difficult for the mental health of our students, many of whom lost relatives during this time.

Youth On Their Own

We also have a program called Youth on Their Own where we provide extra support for students forced to leave their parents due to poverty, abuse, or parental illness or death. With cooperation of a community agency we are able to offer these students financial assistance, food, clothing, and school supplies to keep them in school and encourage their success.

The systems approach is key

As social workers, we champion a systems approach where we try to impact the culture of our community. We provide in-service training for our faculty in order to sensitize them to student challenges, and to advocate for those who are alienated from the school bureaucracy.

Current challenge

Although students in Arizona are blessed with the support of school social workers and many supportive educators, our state as well as many others in our country have been haunted recently by a terrible resurgence of white supremacy, racism, and anti-immigration fervor. Now more than ever we need social workers to be loud voices of tolerance and diversity appreciation. We had two years in a row where our Cholla valedictorian (best senior student) was an immigrant from Mexico. The parents of one of these students were not allowed to come to our country to hear her graduation speech because of our immigration policies. I say this knowing that other countries have similar challenges.

What keeps me going after 35 years in school social work

In closing I must say that I have been blessed to have 35 years of witnessing the incredible achievements of high school students who can reach great heights with just a little help from educators, including school social workers. Our school has been involved with two community service clubs, Kiwanis and Exchange, to honor students who have overcome obstacles to be successful in the classroom. As School Social Worker I have been the main contact person as I have been fortunate enough to witness many of these achievements. The service clubs have provided breakfast and luncheon ceremonies where the students could bring their families to share in their success. Students not only get recognition but in many cases they are awarded money and scholarships. These are always filled with tears of joy for families who have not experienced many of these achievements.

School social workers are blessed to be able to prioritize mental health assistance over having to teach math and English or maintain discipline. I am glad there are others who can focus on these efforts but never lose appreciation for a role where I can focus on student strengths and hopefully make the lives of our teachers and disciplinarians a little easier.



What I do to wind down after a busy day of school social work