

Using Data to Document the Benefit of School Social Work Services

Nic Dibble, CSSW, CISW

Consultant, School Social Work Services

Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

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Overview

As school districts' budgets become tighter, accountability of educational programs and services has become even more imperative. Pupil services professionals have traditionally been able to provide adequate process or formative evaluation data, e.g., how many students were seen, how many evaluations and support groups were conducted, how many home visits were made, but little is generally done to measure the impact of these services. This is in large part due to the difficulty, time and resources involved in traditional outcome evaluation of prevention and early intervention services.

Newspapers commonly report the results of state-mandated, standardized tests of area school districts, often in ways that facilitate comparison with each other. Consequently, academic achievement and performance on these tests may become communities' primary "yard sticks" for their respective school districts. School boards may in turn place greater value on instruction and services that directly enhance academic achievement when considering staff reductions or additions.

As a result, school social workers need to document positive outcomes related to the provision of their work. The challenge is to locally design a simple, valid evaluation system that addresses the priorities of the school district while not consuming inordinate amounts of time and resources.

This paper 1) provides suggestions to help guide local evaluation, 2) outlines a process to develop an outcome evaluation plan using readily available data commonly gathered by school districts that reflects progress on school districts' priorities and is indicative of the positive impact of school social work services, and 3) provides a template that can be used to record outcome evaluation plans.

Guidelines for Local Evaluation Design

- 1. Determine what the priorities of your school district are and design an outcome evaluation system that will demonstrate how your services contribute to at least one of those priorities.**

Most school districts have established plans with goals that have been endorsed by their respective school boards. Some of these goals may match well with school social work services, e.g., increased parent involvement, improved linkages and collaboration with the greater community, increased school attendance. Invariably, at least one of these goals addresses academic achievement and, more typically now with the demands of the federal No Child Left Behind law, stresses the importance of *all* students reaching high academic standards.

School social workers have traditionally worked with the most disenfranchised students who, for circumstances often beyond their control, have had difficulty achieving academically. School social workers have an ideal opportunity to show how their services are a critical part of the school-community if indeed *all* students are to reach high academic standards.

School board members may differ on what priorities they value most. For instance, some may see schools as having the sole purpose of teaching “the basics.” On the other end of the spectrum, others may feel it is critical for schools to educate the “whole child.” To the extent school social workers know these individual preferences, they can be more strategic in selecting which priorities or goals they will emphasize in their evaluation.

2. Identify what state or federal mandates your services meet.

School boards inherently resent state and federal mandates, as they are viewed as oppressive and an erosion of local control of the school district. However, school boards do, albeit grudgingly, accept mandates and recognize they must be met in order to comply with the law. School social workers who identify the services they provide that meet these mandates can document to their school board the importance of their services to the school district. For instance, the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act requires school districts to enroll and provide educational services to homeless students. Because of the kinds of challenges homeless families face, school social workers are clearly the ideal educators to help school districts meet this federal requirement.

3. Calculate the revenues your services generate for your school district.

Public education is a human resource-intensive endeavor. Approximately 85% of a school district’s budget is devoted to paying the salaries and fringe benefits of its employees and can be even higher when contracted services are included, as well. However, many, if not most, school social workers actually generate revenues for their school districts. For instance, most states base their financial aid to school districts on student enrollment or attendance, i.e., the higher the student enrollment or attendance, the greater the state financial aid. Helping homeless students enroll in school increases student enrollment. Working to increase school attendance of truant students increases average daily attendance. School social workers can use available state aid formulas (a school district business office will have this information) to actually calculate how much revenue they are generating for a school district.

Other ways school social workers generate revenue for school districts include Medicaid reimbursement for school-based services, grants, enrollment of income-eligible students in free and reduced lunch and breakfast programs, and (in some states) categorical aid.

The concept that employees actually generate revenues for school districts is generally foreign to school boards, but this knowledge will have a profound impact on its members if the documenting data is shared with them. Be sure to help them “connect the dots,” i.e., hiring more school social workers will generate more revenues for the school district, while cutting school social work services may also reduce revenues.

4. Determine what data is already collected and available. Use that whenever possible.

Schools collect a great deal of student information that can be accessed in either individual or aggregate forms without the administration of additional tests, checklists, etc. Examining existing school records before and after interventions to determine if changes occurred in any of these factors is a simple and straightforward method of outcome evaluation.

5. Design your outcome evaluation system to match the scope of your school social work services.

If your services target individual students, the data you choose to collect and use should be related to those same students. If your services involve a school-wide intervention, then your chosen data should reflect school-wide changes, e.g., aggregate student data.

6. When designing your outcome evaluation system, be sure to involve others in the school-community who will be involved in providing and gathering the data.

This means talking to teachers, other pupil services providers, secretaries, teacher aides, police liaison officers, anyone who either will be asked to provide new information, e.g., through a checklist, or to provide help with accessing existing data, e.g., attendance or discipline records. Be sure to have the support of the people you will have to depend upon to implement your outcome evaluation system. Ideally, activities of all pupil service providers within the school district (or at least the school building) are designed, implemented and evaluated on a collaborative basis.

7. Make sure the variables you decide to evaluate are the correct ones, i.e., the variables will accurately reflect changes in the behaviors, knowledge, and/or skills the school social work service is designed to impact.

Clearly, if you are trying to reduce truancy, the primary variable is school attendance. Other times, it may be harder to determine what variable(s) will be affected by the intervention. For instance, family interventions may not initially yield readily apparent changes in school performance. In situations like that, look for variables that have consistently been shown over time through research to significantly impact student achievement, e.g., increased parental involvement, students eating breakfast prior to school on a regular basis. Use of evidence-based practices will give more credibility to the intervention and your audience will be more likely to attribute positive changes in data to your school social work services.

Another method is to simply use a “common sense” approach, e.g., a student who reduces the amount of time he/she falls asleep in class is better able to pay attention to classroom instruction. If classroom performance improves over the time frame when the student sleeps less in class, the average person will conclude that the improvement is (at least) substantially due to the intervention that reduced the sleeping time in class.

Ultimately, the variables chosen to evaluate should have a clear link to students’ improved school performance. The easier it is for your audience to see how these variables were

affected by your school social work services, the more likely they will attribute the changes to your work.

8. Whenever possible, gather data on multiple variables from multiple sources.

There is an old saying, “Don’t put all of your eggs in one basket.” It holds true for evaluation, as well. You have a much better chance of demonstrating the impact of your school social work services if you are looking for changes in more than one variable and are gathering this information from more than one person or source.

9. Do not try to evaluate everything you do. Rather, select at least one program or service to evaluate and do it well.

You are better off having solid outcome data on a single aspect of your school social work services that clearly demonstrates a benefit valued by your school board than to have evaluation data “a mile wide and an inch deep” that can be easily dismissed or ignored.

10. Keep the KIS rule in mind: Keep It Simple. Your outcome evaluation system should be simple, easy to implement, and based upon common sense evident to people outside pupil services and education.

Your audience is not a group of university professors or the editors of a professional journal. If your outcome evaluation system can only be understood by someone trained in evaluation, then you may have trouble communicating what data you collected and how you did it to school board members. In addition, you may have difficulty gaining the support of fellow school and community colleagues to carry out the evaluation, if they think it is too complicated. It is not necessary to design an outcome evaluation system with treatment and comparison groups. Simply looking at pre and post data, where it is reasonable to believe your school social work intervention had a significant and tangible impact, can be sufficient.

11. Make sure your evaluation does not treat groups differently.

Evaluation processes and measures should be culturally sensitive and data should not be collected in a way that would treat students differently or bias the data based upon gender, race, socioeconomic status or any other factors that could be discriminatory.

12. Make sure the instrument(s) used, if any, will accurately measure the targeted behaviors, knowledge, and/or skills.

As noted above, use of instruments can be avoided by using existing data that is already collected by the school or the greater community. If it is necessary to use an instrument, try to select an existing one that, if not formally evaluated, has at least been field-tested in some type of systematic manner, and can be administered over time with reliability. However, if nothing is available, do not hesitate to design your own instrument, especially if your evaluation outcome system is simple and straightforward.

13. Share your evaluation results with administration, the school board, and the community at least annually.

Do not wait until school social work services are proposed to be cut or eliminated to let people know about the effectiveness of school social work services. At that point, it will appear to be self-serving, i.e., done only to protect your job, and your information may be dismissed by school board members who may have no choice but to somehow reduce the operating budget of the school district.

You should be proactive and present your information at least once each year to the critical decision-makers in your school district. Be sure to present your evaluation data in a manner that best reflects the positive outcomes of your work. That will require examining different ways to analyze and summarize your data.

Mark Twain is attributed with quipping, “There are three kinds of lies: lies, damn lies, and then there’s statistics.” Clearly, it would be unethical to mislead anyone with a less-than-honest analysis of your data. Worse yet, if your audience learns that your presentation was misleading, your credibility will be lost indefinitely. However, be sure that your data analysis and presentation makes it easy for the audience to perceive the real impact that can and should be credited to your school social work services.

School board presentations should be relatively brief, i.e., 15 minutes or less, and to-the-point. Be prepared for questions but do not continue to talk to “fill the silence” if there are none. Likewise, handouts should be short and easy-to-understand. Using bullet points and simple graphs is an excellent format. More detailed information may be requested, so be ready to respond accordingly.

14. Use the evaluation data to improve your school social work services.

While outcome evaluation can help document the critical value of particular services and instruction, it should also be used to help improve your school social work practice. If the data is telling you that your services are not having the desired impact, e.g., student attendance is not increasing, rather than becoming defensive or simply continuing to do what you have always done, e.g., small group counseling, you need to take a serious look at your interventions and consider how you can become more effective.

Are you implementing a strategy in an ineffective manner? Should you stop doing one strategy and start another? Would efforts targeting systemic change yield more benefit? Use the data to help inform these questions. Study the literature to learn what strategies have the most empirical support for their efficacy. Social workers have an ethical responsibility to their clients and their employers to ensure that they are being as effective as they can be.

How to Develop your Local Evaluation Plan

Development of outcome evaluation plans for pupil services traditionally has followed these basic steps:

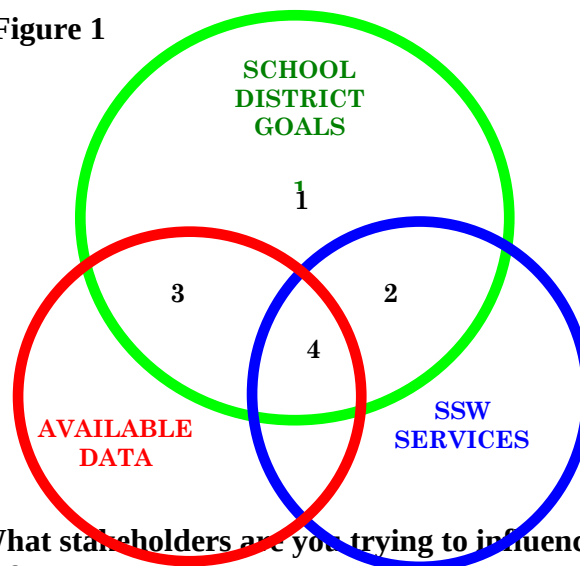
1. operationally define the services provided,
2. identify the desired outcome(s) of those services that will be measured,
3. identify and select (or develop) empirically sound method(s) to measure the accomplishment of the desired outcome(s), and
4. gather and analyze the data to assess the level of success following implementation of the intervention.

It is the last two steps that can be most daunting and resource-consuming. Even if the expertise, funding and time is available to implement all four steps, there is no guarantee that a school board will value the outcomes of these services, because they may not match board members' priorities.

What follows is a step-by-step process which includes some of the steps above, but is still fundamentally different from traditional outcome evaluation. Rather than starting with and focusing on the school social work services provided and the desired outcomes, this process seeks to identify the congruity between the school district's goals, the readily available data collected by the school district, and the school social work services. This helps increase the likelihood the identified outcomes will be valued by the school board and reduces the time and resources necessary to implement the outcome evaluation plan.

The process that follows is limited to the planning necessary to identify 1) critical data indicators, which are readily available or easily obtainable, and are of value to the important decision-makers in school districts, and 2) how this data can be used to support the effectiveness of school social work services. The first four narrative steps of this process described below are represented by the corresponding numbers in Figure 1. The intersection of all three circles identifies the *data collected by a school district that represents progress on one or more of the school district's goals, and reflects the positive impact of at least some portion of school social work services.*

Figure 1



1. **Who is your audience? What stakeholders are you trying to influence? To whom will you present the findings of your outcome evaluation? What does your audience value? What established priorities or goals does your audience have?**

Your audience should be the people to whom you are accountable at the highest level. With few exceptions, this will be your higher-level school administration and school board. Building principals and directors of pupil services generally understand and value the contributions of school social workers, because they see the impact of these services in their daily work. However, these are not the people who ultimately determine staffing levels in school districts.

The demonstrated positive outcomes of your school social work services need to be consistent with what your audience thinks is important for your school district to accomplish. Almost all school districts have written goals that they use as benchmarks to determine if they are making progress in identified priority areas, e.g., academic achievement, graduation rates, attendance rates, parent involvement.

Social workers use a variety of strategies to engage their clients. If a client believes your services will not benefit her/him, the client is much less likely to commit to the helping relationship. Similarly, you must engage your audience by showing that your school social work services positively impact something that they value.

Your audience and its goals are represented visually by the School District Goals circle in Figure 1.

2. Which one or more of your audience's established priorities or goals do your school social work services tangibly and significantly impact?

Outcome evaluation is not about counting how many home visits were made, support groups were facilitated, or developmental histories were completed, although this kind of data is relatively easy to collect and is useful in documenting what you do. Data collection can help you document what tangible, positive changes have occurred that are to a substantial degree due to the provision of your school social work services.

Another way to look at this is to ask yourself, if my school social work services were not provided, would less progress be made on any of the school district's priorities or goals? Once again, this question should be asked consistent with the scope of your intervention, i.e., individual students vs. a school-wide program.

This is a critical step in the process and you need to set a high standard for which one or more of the school district goals you believe are *tangibly and significantly* impacted by your school social work services. The greater the impact of your school social work services on any given goal, the more power and influence your results will have on your audience.

The school social work services that tangibly and significantly impact one or more school district goals are represented by the intersection of the School District Goals and School Social Work Services circles in Figure 1. The more of your school district's goals your school social work services tangibly and significantly impact, the greater the extent of the overlap between these two circles. It is important to note the degree of overlap of these two circles may vary significantly from Figure 1. Ideally, the entire School Social Work Services

circle would be within the School District Goals circle. If you find that your school social work services do not impact any of the school district's goals or priorities, i.e., circles 1 and 2 do not intersect at all, you should ask yourself: Am I truly providing *school* social work services, or am I providing social work services that a community-based social worker might provide if assigned to my school(s)?

3. What data does your school system presently collect that can help document progress on your audience's priorities and goals? What data is available to you? What data is easily obtainable?

School districts collect a great deal of data and much of it is longitudinal, allowing retroactive analysis to evaluate progress. Examples are grades and grade point averages, attendance, tardies, suspensions, expulsions, retentions, a variety of demographic information, at risk students, passing/failing students, academic credits, students receiving awards, results of attitude surveys, abuse and neglect referrals, extracurricular violations, detentions, graduates/dropouts, school age parents, student mobility, disciplinary and law enforcement referrals, 504 students, special education referrals/placed/dismissed, use of student assistance program groups, test scores, parents attending conferences and meetings, students receiving free and reduced hot lunch, students involved in extracurricular activities, and conduct grades and classroom work habits from report cards.

It is important to take the time to make an exhaustive list of available and easily obtainable data from which you can choose in Step #4. Working with a small group of people (rather than individually) will probably generate a longer list. This will give you more data to choose from in Step #4.

This data is represented by the intersections of the School District Goals and Available Data circles in Figure 1.

4. Which of the identified data are appropriate indicators of the success or progress of one or more of your school social work services?

Of the data you have listed in Step #3, which are *significantly and tangibly* impacted by your services? The more reasonable it is for your audience to believe that your services impact the data you are presenting to them, the more likely it is they will conclude the positive changes in the data are (at least, in part) attributable to your services.

This data is represented by the intersection of all three circles in Figure 1.

5. Which of the identified data indicators from Step #4 that a) address one or more of your audience's priorities and b) are significantly and tangibly impacted by one or more of your services, will you use and analyze?

At this point in the process, you should have a manageable list of data from which to choose. Which are easiest to access? Which will be most compelling to your audience? On face value to your audience, which data are most impacted by the provision of your school social work

services? These are the questions that should guide your final decisions in the development of your outcome evaluation plan for your school social work services. Be sure you are able to describe the rationale you will use to link each type of data to your school social work services.

Example

What follows is a simple example of how school social workers in a school district might follow this process. It is recommended that initial attempts to implement this process be modest and used to help identify critical data that are most indicative of the positive impact of school social work services. Once this is determined, more ambitious evaluation plans can be undertaken.

Step #1 - Like many school districts, the Anywhere School District is experiencing financial challenges. While building principals and the pupil services director are very supportive of school social work services, the school board and upper administration appear to see these services as being peripheral to the school district's goal of raising academic achievement levels of all students, especially those scoring lower on state-mandated, standardized tests. The school social workers decide to attempt to document positive outcomes of their school social work services that are strongly related to one or more of the school district's long-range goals.

Step #2 - The school board annually reviews data related to each of the district's long range goals to assess progress. One of the priority goals of the school district is to increase student attendance. The school social workers decide to focus their evaluation efforts on this goal.

Step #3 - The school social workers make an exhaustive list of data that their schools collect related to attendance.

Step #4 - From all of the data sets that the school social workers brainstormed, the primary data the school social workers decide to collect is attendance, tardiness, and chronic truancy. However, they also hypothesize that if the attendance of the students they serve improves, their academic achievement is likely to improve, as well.

Step #5 - As a way of "field testing" their evaluation plan, the school social workers decide to initially limit their data gathering to one of the middle schools. Data will be analyzed for each student receiving significant school social work interventions for the school quarters prior to, during, and following the services. Attendance and tardiness figures are stored on a computer in the school's office; the school social workers obtain administrative permission to access this information periodically. They already monitor all chronic truancy referrals and can easily include this data in their evaluation plan. The school has an established system where all middle school teachers enter the academic achievement data, i.e., scores on homework assignments, quizzes and tests, of each of their students in a computerized database. Teachers agree to periodically print out this information for each identified student and share it with the school social workers in exchange for receiving a summary of the analyzed data.

Closing Comments

Please note and remember that this evaluation system will work regardless of what kind of school social work services are provided. In the example just given, the intervention could be home visits, small groups for truant, neighborhood “sweeps” by law enforcement, tangible incentives for improved attendance, or any other strategies. For the purposes of the evaluation, the focus is on the data identification, collection and analysis, not on the school social work services.

Increased accountability, especially related to academic achievement, is becoming the norm in education. State-mandated, standardized tests and fiscal limits on school districts are combining to focus the attention of school boards on instruction and services that they perceive as directly impacting academic achievement, sometimes at the expense of other services which may consequently be perceived as more peripheral and less important.

School social workers need to document positive, academic-related outcomes for students that are due, at least in part, to the provision of their work. These outcomes need to be valued by the school board and administration if these people are to believe school work services are core and fundamental to what schools do to help students be successful.

Efforts to demonstrate how school social work services meet state and federal mandates and generate revenues for local school districts can also elevate the critical importance of school social work services in the eyes of school board members and higher-level school administrators.

School social workers are encouraged to consider the suggestions and process outlined in this paper to develop their own outcome evaluation plan using readily available data gathered by their respective school districts that reflects progress on their school districts’ goals and is indicative of the significant and positive impact of their services.

Attached is an Outcome Evaluation Plan template that can be used to identify and record each of these steps in a simple, straightforward manner. Having a written plan may help engage needed partners and enhance commitment to the plan.

This paper is a revision of another article by the same author entitled *Outcome Evaluation of School Social Work Services* (September, 1999) published by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction as part of the Wisconsin School Social Work Practice Guide. (2005, 2006) Portions of another paper by the author, *Revenues Generated by School Social Work Services*, and published in the same Guide are also used. Earlier versions of both articles were published in different volumes of the National Association of Social Workers’ (NASW) School Social Work Section Connection. The Wisconsin School Social Work Practice Guide can be found at www.dpi.wi.gov/sspw/socialwork.html.

In addition to working as the State Consultant for School Social Work Services since 1997, the author is in his fifth year serving on the Stoughton Area School District Board of Education and his fourth year as the President of the Board. This experience has given him a profoundly different and helpful perspective regarding how school social workers can and should share information with these important, local school district officials.

Questions can be directed to the author at (608) 266-0963 or nic.dibble@dpi.state.wi.us.

OUTCOME EVALUATION PLAN

Selected Goal/Priority _____ Date _____

Data Collection: What? Where? When? How often? How long? Who will help? Is some type of data collection instrument needed? If so, what? Do I/we need to create one?

Data Analysis: When? Who? How?

Presentation of Analyzed Data: To Whom? How? Who? When?

Data Source #1

Data Source #2

Data Source #3