

MEETING THE CHALLENGE OF SUPERVISION IN SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK

Introduction

School social workers face a multitude of challenges in their work. One main challenge is access to ongoing, consistent supervision. Supervision is defined as the overseeing of another's work with sanctioned authority to monitor and direct performance, to ensure satisfactory performance (which includes client safety) (Caspi & Reed, 2002).

School social workers often have high referrals and caseloads, limiting their time. This limited time, accompanied by the many obstacles to receiving consistent supervision, such as, multiple locations, limited funding and complex schedules, promotes an environment where regular supervision may fall by the wayside. Creativity and flexibility are two key factors that may help social workers reposition supervision as an important part of their professional development.

The School Social Work Context

Many school social workers work independently, often being the only mental health or support professionals at their school. In many instances, school social workers enter the workforce directly after completing graduate school. This may be one of the first times the social worker is working autonomously. School social workers often do not have contact with their supervisor or other social workers to gain alternative perspectives or even simply debrief a case with them. This

isolation creates situations where social workers are making decisions on their own without peer or supervisory consultation. Some of these decisions have the potential to have a major impact on the student, family and/or school and are often made during crisis situations.

In addition, employers are facing increasing difficulty in funding worker attendance at workshops, institutes, and national meetings. As a consequence, supervision becomes increasingly more important as a source of training and often is the only resource available to help workers enhance their skill (Harkness & Kadushin, 2002). School social workers may also be working toward obtaining certification or licensure that requires a minimum of supervision hours. This supervision often needs to be provided in a regulated manner by a pre-qualified supervisor.

There are many benefits to receiving ongoing, consistent supervision. Supervision helps guide and shape the work a social worker provides. Professional practice supervision includes support and evaluation of school social work services for individuals and groups, consulting skills and practices, and instructional presentations to school and community groups (North Carolina State University, 2010). Supervision can also address ethical and legal concerns regarding a social worker's practice. It also provides insight and experience to enhance a social worker's expertise, in addition to

providing prioritization to a supervisee's expansive caseload. Supervision can also support the new worker in providing structure, clarification and guidance in creating the building blocks to being an effective, experienced professional.

Challenges

Social workers can face numerous challenges in acquiring adequate supervision to support their practice or meet regulatory guidelines in many service provision settings. Working within school systems creates unique obstacles. According to the NASW Standards for School Social Work, the administrative structure established by the local education agency shall provide for appropriate school social work supervision (NASW, 2002). This standard is often unmet.

One of the main challenges to receiving adequate supervision in the school setting is the lack of time provided for supervision and professional development within a school social worker's schedule. School social workers often have sizeable caseloads. Ironically, caseload size and their demands push supervision down the list of a worker's priorities, despite the simultaneous need for increased supervision resulting from the workload.

Another challenge is that school social workers are often assigned to more than one school. This multi-site work creates a barrier to receiving supervision because the supervisor is often located at a different location from the supervisee, adding transportation time to the meeting time.

Funding constraints also affect the number of social workers a supervisor may supervise. The number of supervisees can be high and can lead to scheduling difficulties due to working at different geographical locations.

What Social Workers Can Do

Attend continuing education trainings and conferences. School social workers can gain new tools and support to enhance their work with students and their families through attending trainings and conferences. Continuing education is a requirement for many certifications and licenses. Though acquiring time off

from daily duties and financial constraints can be a barrier to participation in continuing education workshops, many programs recognize the benefits of professional development and provide either financial support or time off.

Group Supervision. Group supervision is often employed in school social work settings. The supervisor meets with more than one supervisee at a time to explore and discuss issues. This type of supervision can be helpful in getting a variety of input from more than one person. It also helps to create a sense of camaraderie. This mode of supervision is also time-effective because the supervisor meets with a number of social workers during one meeting at one location.

Phone or email supervision. An effective mode of supervision can be done through phone or email contact. This form of communication may require a different level of confidentiality compared to face-to-face supervision. Contact by phone or email can often be a support during unexpected situations requiring supervisory input or guidance and crisis situations, and can be conducted with more frequency. The use of technology such as email and mobile phones can provide necessary links to supervision during hectic schedules.

Peer consultation. School social workers can help support peers on a regular basis. This type of support can be offered in person, over the phone or through email. It can be helpful to discuss a situation with another colleague to get their perspective in order to help guide an intervention. Social work peers may have more contact with each other than with their supervisors, providing more support during the work day.

Conclusion

There are many factors that impede school social workers from receiving the support and guidance they need through conventional supervision. The use of technology, such as mobile phones and email can help overcome some of the barriers created by differing locations, limited time and crowded schedules. Finding creative ways to receive supervision may be just as important to carving out dedicated time for the supervisee and supervisor to meet.

Resources

NASW Standards for School Social Work Services.

This document outlines standards for professional practice, professional preparation and development, and administrative structure and support.

References

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