

May 2022

## Assessing Texas School Social Work Practice: Findings from the First Statewide Conference Survey

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### Recommended Citation

Ding, Xiao; Faulkner, Monica; Franklin, Cynthia; Gerlach, Beth; Beer, Mary; Calbow, Eboni; and Nulu, Swetha (2022) "Assessing Texas School Social Work Practice: Findings from the First Statewide Conference Survey," *International Journal of School Social Work*: Vol. 8: Iss. 1. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2161-4148.1088>

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# Assessing Texas School Social Work Practice: Findings from the First Statewide Conference Survey

## Abstract

### Abstract

**Aims:** To examine the characteristics, perceived barriers, special student populations, and school-based tasks performed by Texas's school social workers in comparison to other Specialized Instructional Services Providers (SISP) professionals in schools.

**Methods:** A convenience sample from a survey of 212 school social workers and school services providers from the Texas School Social Workers Conference. The survey was developed using previous surveys and practice knowledge and assessed (a) demographics, (b) characteristics of school social work practice, (c) types of tasks, (d) special population served, (e) types of barriers, and (f) the tools and training that are most needed.

**Results:** The roles of Texas School social workers are similar to school social workers nationally. There were significant differences between the roles, tasks, and barriers to practice for school social workers than other SISP providers. School social workers more frequently served on the frontlines with high-needs students and special populations, assisted teachers in classroom management and contributed to in-service training for the school than other SISP professionals.

**Practice Implications:** School social workers make significant and sustained contributions to K-12, public schools, magnet schools, and charter schools. School social workers play a key role in serving a school's high-needs students and specialized populations; better implementation of state standards, professional development, and opportunities for networking are needed.

## Keywords

Keywords: School social work, Texas survey, at-risk students, school mental health, research on roles

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## **Assessing Texas School Social Work Practice: Findings from the First Statewide Conference Survey**

### **Introduction**

Surveys on state data about school social work practice are essential to understanding how school social work is delivered in school districts across states nationally. Based on past literature, the practice of school social workers may be variable across states and school districts despite the national guidelines for school social work practice that have been developed (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2012). School social work differs in practice across states based on how school social work is developed, implemented, and regulated by state agencies. Previous literature discusses that there is a range of differences in school social workers nationally, including a lack of consistent job expectations and educational criteria for state-level certification compared to their non-social worker counterparts who also serve as specialized instructional support personnel (SISP) in schools (Altshuler & Webb, 2009; Constable & Alvarez 2006; Franklin & Harris, 2015). Many states also have emerging school social work practice and do not regulate or certify practice through state educational agencies. These states exhibited significant needs of knowing how emerging school social work is implemented in a state when there is an absence of clearly defined state certifications and mandates from state education agencies. According to the national school social work survey, even in states with well-developed certification structures, there is a deficiency of singling out the profession by mapping training onto school social work's nature and core activities (Kelly et al., 2015).

Researchers have noted in the past, the national survey on school social work was not able to obtain an even distribution of information on school social work across different regions, states, and localities (Kelly et al., 2010a; Thompson et al., 2019). In addition, limited state survey data have been reported over the past two decades (Whittlesey-Jerome, 2013). A survey of school social work practice in individual states can be instrumental in filling this gap in information by providing comparisons to the national data and guidelines for school social work practice. Such state data does not replace the need for frequent national surveys but has the potential to augment the information across time. State surveys, for example, can be administered to provide more frequent updates on trends in job functions for emerging school social work in states. This type of individual state information may also be invaluable to other states who are developing school social work as they work with school districts to develop their practices. The accumulation of state data may also be useful in the future revisions of the national survey and guidelines, especially in relationship to the unique roles and functions of school social workers in relationship to the roles of other SISP providers across individual states and regions.

## Literature Review

School social workers' job functions have shifted across time from resource linkage and coordination to an all-around clinical service provider and their roles are expanding quickly (e.g., Allen-Meares, 1994; Costin 1969; Kelly et al., 2010a; Kelly et al., 2015). For example, school social workers' consulting and training role is increasingly vital as a previous study found teachers in classrooms are principal in the delivery of effective school-based mental health services (Franklin et al., 2017). Previous research also suggests that schools are at the frontline of mental health issues (Eklund et al., 2020; Lyon & Bruns, 2019; Kelly et al., 2010b), and school social workers may be especially effective and helpful in working with specialized populations (Kim et al., 2017; Park et al., in press). The COVID-19 pandemic, and renewed attention to issues of diversity, equity and inclusion are also demanding that the roles of school services providers evolve to respond to current crises. School social workers are often on the frontline of social justice issues and crisis intervention (Redondo-Sama et al., 2020; Scott et al., 2020). This calls for changing and expanding roles and a need to understand school social work practice in the face of the changing times.

### *Roles in Relationship to Other SISP Providers*

Social work, counseling, and psychology are disciplines that work in schools as SISP professionals, and each provides specialized school services. Efforts have been made to clarify the scope and importance of school social workers' work and responsibilities in comparison to other SISP providers, primarily through the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and the School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA). School social workers have a graduate degree (i.e., Master of Social Work) in a program accredited by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) and actively seek specialized training about the historical and current context of school services (NASW, 2012, p. 8). School social work includes services at the student, family/school personnel, and the school district/community level (Allen-Meares et al., 2000; Constable & Alvarez 2006; SSWAA, 2013). Literature suggests the roles of different SISP professionals may both overlap and complement one another, and this has sometimes added to the lack of knowledge about what school social workers contribute to schools in comparison to the other SISP providers. Despite the potential overlap in scope between different SISP providers, social work is believed to remain the primary profession that impacts students' and families' socio-emotional well-being in relation to mental health and special populations (Kelly et al., 2010b; Kelly et al., 2015; Thompson et al., 2019). As the demands for mental health and crisis intervention have surmounted during the COVID-19 pandemic, individual state data from emerging school social work practices are useful in understanding the unique roles of school social workers concerning other SISP providers within states.

A case in point is the state of Texas. Texas is a large state with many regional differences and includes over 1,200 independent school districts, making

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the variation and practices of school social work inevitable and challenging to track. This is especially the case since there is an absence of state certifications, guidelines, and mandates for unified practice definitions, titles, and domains of practice within the state education agency and local education authorities (LEA's). The authors could only find two published articles beyond the national school social work survey that address emerging school social work practices in Texas (Danis et al., 1993; Hernandez et al., 2002). Given the absence of current data in Texas and the lack of individuality in the national data on school social work practice, it is necessary for the present survey to fill the gap by exploring the characteristics and contributions of school social work practice in comparison of other SISP providers in the state. The data has significance to complement other national data by examining emerging school social work practices in a state.

### **Aims of the Current Study**

This study examined the characteristics, perceived barriers, special student populations, and school-based tasks performed by Texas's school social workers in comparison to other SISP providers in schools. Because there are no practice guidelines or professional designations for school social workers in Texas, a survey was administered to understand current practices better. Nationally, school social work surveys have been a powerful tool for researchers to gather useful information to fill knowledge gaps (Allen-Meares 1994, Kelly et al., 2010a; Kelly et al., 2015). The present study sought to explain Texas school social workers' roles and responsibilities and their unique contributions to school-based services, contrasting with other school practitioners through the Texas School Social Work Survey findings. To our knowledge, this is the first school-based service study that compared school social workers and non-social work practitioners in terms of their job functions in the state of Texas. Consistent with past literature of tasks and roles of school social workers, we hypothesize the perceived barriers, special student populations served, and the frequency of different task performance would significantly differ between the school social workforce and other helping professions and will be similar to school social work practice nationally.

## **Methods**

### **Sample**

The sample consisted of a convenience sample of school support personnel in Texas. Participants were first recruited from a statewide, annual conference for all school-based social service providers to discuss the latest developments and challenges in Texas school social work services. The conference took place in February 2020 and was attended by more than 700 professionals. It is important to note that the designation of the professional title of *school social worker* is used inconsistently across many school districts in the state. Thus, some licensed social workers in schools are called *school social workers*, but others have titles like *licensed mental health providers*, *school community liaisons*, or *social services*

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*providers*. Based on licensure information, the majority (two-thirds) of participants at the conference were social workers, but non-social workers also attended, making it feasible to compare different SISP roles. After the conference, the survey was sent to all attendees who were encouraged to share it with colleagues. A total of 212 professionals completed the survey. The majority of those completing the survey were school social workers (n=161) with an LMSW (n=107), LBSW (n=14), LCSW (n=44) or ACSW (n=1). Non-social workers (n=51) include school counselors (n=4), LMFT (n=3), LPC (n=10), and those self-identified as other (n=18) and/or non-licensed school-based social service providers (n=24).

### Survey Development

The survey was developed using previous surveys and literature that assess school social work and school practitioners' roles, including the National School Social Work Survey (Kelly et al., 2010a). The research team has several members with many years of school social work practice experience in the state of Texas as well as experience in school social work research. The survey was designed in five sections to gather information about: (a) the demographics (i.e., race/ethnicity, age, education, licensure type, and employment), (b) common characteristics of school social work practice (i.e., working regions, grade level and number of campus served, years working in/with schools), (c) types of tasks performed (i.e., administrative tasks, clinical tasks, case management tasks, assessment tasks), (d) special population served (i.e., homeless, refugees/immigrants, incarcerated, early childhood, special education, foster care, bilingual education/ESL), (e) types of barriers faced (i.e., lack of clinical supervisions or guidelines, lack of resources, overwhelming caseloads, and so on), and (f) the tools and training that are most needed by school social workers. Multiple choice items for each topic were presented verbatim in the result tables. After the survey design was completed, the school social work practice experts on the research team provided feedback on each question's relevance and clarity. Feedback was collected, and adjustments were made until consensus was reached among team members.

### Data Collection

The survey was submitted for human subjects review and received exempt approval from the University of Texas at Austin institutional review board (IRB) on 1/30/2020. Data collection took place online between February 26, 2020, and June 18, 2020, through the Qualtrics survey tool provided by The University of Texas at Austin (Qualtrics, Provo, UT). The survey was first disseminated at the 29th Annual Texas School Social Workers Conference. Conference attendees received fliers with a scan code to allow them to take the survey online. Survey participants were also recruited via mass emailing through the email listserv of Texas School Social Work Network (TSSWN) and Texas School Social Work Conference. Snowball sampling method (Johnson, 2014) was used to locate hidden school service providers who were unable to attend the conference and participants were encouraged to share the survey with colleagues at their workplaces. The

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survey was also advertised on the social media platforms Facebook and Twitter. The initial recruitment email was sent to all contacts on the network and conference email lists to invite them to participate in the survey. Two follow-up emails, which are identical to the initial email, were sent to non-respondents 14 days and 21 days after the first emails. All participants had the opportunity to enter a raffle to win one of four prizes. After completing the survey, participants were directed to an external survey and given the opportunity to enter a drawing for either an Amazon gift card or a registration for the next year's school social work conference.

### Data Analysis

Following data collection completion, data was downloaded into IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 27), a software package used for data storage, cleaning, and analysis. Descriptive data analysis focused on frequencies to encapsulate the characteristics of Texas school social work practice. The differences between school social workers and non-social worker school practitioners were compared using Fisher's exact tests considering the small sample size. Fisher's exact test is a test that assesses the null hypothesis of independence between the distribution of two groups of categorical variables. It can be practically applied in analysis of small samples especially when more than 20% of cells have expected frequencies <5 (Kim, 2017). The study was primarily concerned with examining the significant differences in task performance, student population served, and barriers to effective practice between Texas school social workers and non-social worker school practitioners.

### Results

**Table 1**

Texas School Social Worker Characteristics

	<b>School social workers</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Total Sample</b>	<b>Percent</b>
	N=161	%	N=212	%
<b>Age</b>				
18-24	2	1.24	6	2.83
25-34	55	34.16	69	32.55
35-44	37	22.98	46	21.70
45-54	24	14.91	30	14.15
55-64	20	12.42	22	10.38
65+	3	1.86	3	1.42
<b>Race</b>				
White/Caucasian	75	46.58	83	39.15
Black/African American	17	10.56	24	11.32
Hispanic	56	34.78	75	35.37
Asian	2	1.24	3	1.42

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American Indian/Alaska Native	4	2.48	5	2.36
<b>Highest Degree Completed</b>				
High school/GED	0	0.00	1	0.47
Bachelor's	4	2.48	18	8.49
Master's	136	84.47	158	74.53
Doctorate or professional degree	2	1.24	2	0.94
<b>Employer</b>				
Texas public school/magnet school/charter school	121	75.16	151	71.23
Texas non-profit agencies	25	15.53	34	16.04
Texas religious school/private school	1	0.62	3	1.42
Texas government agencies	4	2.48	5	2.36
Other	10	6.21	16	7.55
<b>Number of served campuses</b>				
0	23	14.29	27	12.74
1	60	37.27	70	33.02
2	15	9.32	23	10.85
3	6	3.73	8	3.77
4	3	1.86	6	2.83
5 or more	54	33.54	69	32.55
<b>Years work in/with schools</b>				
Less than 1 year	13	8.07	22	10.38
1-2 year	14	8.70	19	8.96
3-5 year	31	19.25	41	19.34
6-9 year	29	18.01	32	15.09
10-15 year	25	15.53	29	13.68
16-20 year	13	8.07	16	7.55
More than 20 years	15	9.32	18	8.49
<b>Grade level served</b>				
Early childhood/Pre-k	48	29.81	55	25.94
Elementary	73	45.34	90	42.45
Middle school/junior high	66	40.99	83	39.15
High school	65	40.37	88	41.51
Other	48	29.81	56	26.42
<b>Additional language speaking</b>				
None	80	49.69	97	45.75
Spanish	55	34.16	73	34.43
Other	6	3.73	9	4.25

As presented in Table 1, the sample is primarily adults aged 25-44 (54.25%). Hispanic (35.37%) and Caucasian (39.15%) school social workers constitute more than two-thirds of the study sample. More than two-thirds of the participants were licensed social workers and hold an LMSW (50.47%) or LCSW (20.76%). Most Texas school social workers have a master's degree (84.47%), and 83.85% of them completed their highest degree in social work. Consistent with the Texas population, other than English (49.69%), Spanish (34.16%) ranked the most popular additional



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language spoken among Texas's school social workers. Data on the practice context of Texas school social work suggests the vast majority of school social workers practice in public schools, magnet schools, or charter schools (75.16%) and non-profit agencies partnering with schools (15.53%). As for years working within schools, the responses were similarly distributed in three ranges: 3-5 years (19.25%), 6-9 years (18.01%), and 10-15 years (15.53%). Participants indicated that most frequently, they work in the elementary (45.34%), middle school/junior high (40.99%), and high school settings (40.37%) and serve multiple grade levels (see Table 1). Texas school social workers also tended to be required to cover multiple campuses. The majority of participants reported covering either one campus (37.27%) or five or more campuses (33.54%). Among the non-social work SISP, 47.1% reported having no licenses or certifications; 5.9% of them identified as school counselors, 15.7% as licensed professional counselors (LPC), and 17.6% reported other credentials not included in the options.

### Barriers

**Table 2**

Comparison of Barriers by Non-social Workers vs. Social Workers

	Non-Social work licensure N=51		Social work licensure N=161		p-value
	n	%	n	%	
My workload is too high	7	13.73	61	37.89	<0.01***
Need more funding for materials and supplies	14	27.45	49	30.43	0.73
Families need services that are not available in our community	18	35.29	90	55.90	0.02***
Lack professional development opportunities to learn skills to implement at my school	3	5.88	20	12.42	0.30
There is a lack physical space for meetings and groups	13	25.49	44	27.33	0.86
Social work services are not seen as a priority within the school	11	21.57	55	34.16	0.12
I do not feel supported by my colleagues	1	1.96	18	11.18	0.05**
I lack clinical supervision/consultation for challenging cases <sup>8</sup>	3	5.88	22	13.66	0.21
There are systemic inequalities in our school and/or community	16	31.37	67	41.61	0.25
I am required to cover multiple campuses	12	23.53	56	34.78	0.17

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I have difficulty accessing students during the school day due to academic instruction/testing	10	53	0.08
There is a stigma related to social work services	12	49	0.38
Lack of specific guidelines for social work practice in TX	4	39	0.01***
The role and expectations of a school social worker are unclear/conflicting	11	67	0.01***
I do not face any of the barriers above in completing my job tasks	5	6	0.14

\* $p < 0.1$  \*\* $p < 0.05$  \*\*\* $p < 0.025$

Note. Of those non-social workers, 13.73% stated that “my workload is too high;” of those social workers, 37.89% stated that “my workload is too high,” etc.

As presented in Table 2, there were significant differences in perceptions of barriers faced by professionals. In terms of workload, 37.89% of social workers reported feeling “my workload is too high” compared to 13.73% of non-social workers ( $p < .01$ ). With regard to services, 55.90% of social workers stated, “families need services that are not available in our community,” whereas 35.29% of non-social workers felt the same way ( $p = .02$ ). As for the working environment, 11.18% of social workers reported “I do not feel supported by my colleagues,” whereas only 1.96% of non-social workers reported experiencing the same ( $p = .05$ ). Other perceived barriers include lack of specific guidelines or expectations for social work practice in Texas, and the role and expectations of a school social worker are unclear/conflicting. In terms of practice, 24.22% of social workers perceived “lack of specific guidelines for social work practice in Texas” as a barrier compared to 7.84% non-social workers ( $p = .01$ ). Social workers (41.61%) also have a significantly higher rate of reporting “the role and expectations of a school social worker are unclear/conflicting” compared to the non-social workers (21.57%) ( $p = .01$ ).

### Special Populations

**Table 3**

Special Population Served by Non-social Workers vs. Social Workers

	Non-social work licensure N=51		Social work licensure N=161		p-value
	n	%	n	%	
Homeless	30	58.82	142	88.20	<0.01***
Refugees or immigrants	27	52.94	113	70.19	0.03**
Incarcerated	10	19.61	32	19.88	>0.99

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Early childhood	8	15.69	70	43.48	<0.01***
Special Education	26	50.98	133	82.61	<0.01***
Foster Care	22	43.14	128	79.50	<0.01***
Bilingual Education/ESL	30	58.82	121	75.16	0.03**
None of the above	1	1.96	10	6.21	0.47

\* $p < 0.1$  \*\* $p < 0.05$  \*\*\* $p < 0.025$

*Note.* Of those non-social workers, 58.82% of them served homeless student population; of those social workers, 88.20% of them served homeless student population, etc.

As presented in Table 3, Texas schools work with a wide range of special student populations. There were significant differences in serving special populations between the school social workers and the non-social work staff. The majority of social workers (88.20%) reported serving “homeless” as a special student population compared to 58.82% non-social workers ( $p < .01$ ). Moreover, 70.19% of social workers and 52.94% of non-social workers reported working with “refugees or immigrants,” respectively ( $p = .03$ ). In terms of serving the “early childhood” population, a significantly higher rate of social workers (43.48%) reported early childhood as a special population they serve compared to non-social workers (15.69%) ( $p < .01$ ). Other than early childhood, a significantly higher rate of social workers reported working with the “special education” (82.61%) population compared to their non-social worker colleagues (51.98%) ( $p < .01$ ). A significantly higher percentage of social workers (79.50%) also reported working with “foster care” students compared to the non-social workers (58.82%) ( $p < .01$ ). Finally, 75.16% of school social workers reported working with “bilingual education/ESL students,” whereas only 58.82% of non-social workers said the same ( $p = .03$ ).

### Performed Tasks in Schools

**Table 4**

Comparison of Clinical/Mental Health Tasks by Non-social Workers vs. Social Workers

	Non-social work licensure N=51		Social work licensure N=161		p-value
	n	%	n	%	
<b>Provide crisis intervention</b>					0.10
Never	7	13.72	12	7.45	
Monthly or less	15	29.41	50	31.06	
Weekly or more	17	33.33	88	54.66	
<b>Assess student mental health concerns</b>					0.05*

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Never	7	13.73	13	8.07	
Monthly or less	10	19.61	24	14.91	
Weekly or more	22	43.14	113	70.19	
<b>Help children develop social emotional skills</b>					0.26
Never	3	5.88	13	8.07	
Monthly or less	8	15.69	16	9.94	
Weekly or more	28	54.90	121	75.16	
<b>Help with anger management</b>					0.33
Never	4	7.84	17	10.56	
Monthly or less	11	21.57	26	16.15	
Weekly or more	24	47.06	107	66.46	
<b>Develop intervention strategies to increase academic success</b>					0.86
Never	3	5.88	12	7.45	
Monthly or less	7	13.73	22	13.67	
Weekly or more	29	56.86	116	72.05	
<b>Provide mental health support for teachers and school staff</b>					0.16
Never	13	25.49	28	17.39	
Monthly or less	14	27.45	60	37.27	
Weekly or more	12	23.53	59	36.65	
<b>Support parent/caregiver mental health</b>					0.50
Never	4	7.84	16	9.94	
Monthly or less	21	41.18	64	39.75	
Weekly or more	14	27.45	67	41.61	
<b>Provide individual or group counseling</b>					0.05**
Never	9	17.65	29	18.01	
Monthly or less	9	17.65	14	8.70	
Weekly or more	21	41.18	104	64.60	
<b>Help with conflict resolution/mediation</b>					0.27
Never	6	11.76	11	6.83	
Monthly or less	14	27.45	50	31.06	
Weekly or more	19	37.25	85	52.80	
<b>Provide grief and loss support</b>					0.04**
Never	11	21.57	17	10.56	
Monthly or less	15	29.41	78	48.45	

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Weekly or more	13	25.49	51	31.68
*p<0.1 **p<0.05 ***p<0.025				

*Note.* Of those non-social workers who responded to “provide crisis intervention,” 13.72% never performed this task; of those social workers who responded to “provide crisis intervention,” 7.45% never performed this task, etc.

Professionals also reported significant differences in terms of the tasks they perform at schools. There was a significant difference in the provision of assessing students’ mental health concerns ( $p=.05$ ). School social workers appear to be more involved in mental health assessment, with 70.19% reporting that they perform mental health assessment weekly or more than weekly compared to 43.14% of non-social workers. There was a significant difference in the provision of individual or group counseling ( $p=.05$ ). Social workers appear to be more involved in individual or group counseling, with 64.60% reporting that they perform this task weekly or more compared to 41.18% of non-social workers. Social workers also appear to be more involved in providing grief and loss support, with 80.13% reporting that they provide grief and loss support compared to 54.90% of non-social workers ( $p=.04$ ).

**Table 5**

Comparison of Case Management Tasks by Non-social Workers vs. Social Workers

	Non-social work licensure N=51		Social work licensure N=161		p-value
	n	%	n	%	
<b>Assist teachers with classroom management</b>					0.10*
Never	21	41.18	53	32.92	
Monthly or less	11	21.57	57	35.40	
Weekly or more	8	15.69	46	28.57	
<b>Interview families to assess problems affecting a child's education</b>					0.64
Never	3	5.88	15	9.32	
Monthly or less	15	29.41	46	28.57	
Weekly or more	22	43.14	95	59.01	
<b>Work with parents to facilitate support on their children's schooling</b>					0.52
Never	3	5.88	12	7.45	
Monthly or less	15	29.41	43	26.71	

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Weekly or more	22	43.14	99	61.49	
<b>Provide case management to help the family and child alleviate stress</b>					0.63
Never	3	5.88	14	8.70	
Monthly or less	12	23.53	35	21.74	
Weekly or more	25	49.02	106	65.84	
<b>Coordinate community resources to meet student needs</b>					0.15
Never	4	7.84	7	4.35	
Monthly or less	13	25.49	37	22.98	
Weekly or more	23	45.10	111	68.94	
<b>Coordinate systems of care</b>					0.36
Never	2	3.92	11	6.83	
Monthly or less	16	31.37	44	27.33	
Weekly or more	22	43.14	99	61.49	
<b>Staff cases with interdisciplinary teams</b>					0.20
Never	4	7.84	18	11.18	
Monthly or less	14	27.45	32	19.88	
Weekly or more	22	43.14	103	63.98	
<b>Provide truancy and/or drop-out recovery services</b>					0.38
Never	11	21.57	41	25.47	
Monthly or less	12	23.53	63	39.13	
Weekly or more	17	33.33	50	31.06	
<b>Support students transitioning back to school from alternate placements</b>					0.63
Never	12	23.53	36	22.36	
Monthly or less	19	37.25	84	52.17	
Weekly or more	9	17.65	34	21.12	
<b>Conduct home visits</b>					0.33
Never	8	15.69	37	22.98	
Monthly or less	24	47.06	72	44.73	
Weekly or more	8	15.69	45	27.95	
<b>Attend court related to a student outcry</b>					0.54

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Never	32	62.75	111	68.94
Monthly or less	8	15.69	42	26.09
Weekly or more	0	0.00	1	0.62

\*p<0.1 \*\*p<0.05 \*\*\*p<0.025

*Note.* Of those non-social workers who responded to “assist teachers with classroom management,” 41.18% never performed this task; of those social workers who responded to “assist teachers with classroom management,” 32.92% never performed this task, etc.

There was a significant difference in the provision of case management tasks. Social workers appear to be more involved in assisting teachers with classroom management, with 63.97% reporting that they assist teachers with classroom management compared to 37.26% of non-social workers ( $p = .10$ ). With some other case management tasks (e.g., provide truancy and/or drop-out recovery services, support students transitioning back to school from alternate placement, etc.), there were no significant differences between school social workers and non-social workers.

**Table 6**

Comparison of Assessment Tasks by Non-social Workers vs. Social Workers

	Non-social work licensure N=51		Social work licensure N=161		p-value
	n	%	n	%	
<b>Substance abuse</b>					0.65
Never	16	31.37	51	31.68	
Monthly or less	17	33.33	70	43.48	
Weekly or more	6	11.76	31	19.25	
<b>Child abuse and neglect</b>					0.05**
Never	8	15.69	12	7.45	
Monthly or less	25	49.02	100	62.11	
Weekly or more	6	11.76	41	25.47	
<b>Family violence</b>					0.12
Never	10	19.61	22	13.67	
Monthly or less	24	47.06	93	57.76	
Weekly or more	5	9.80	38	23.60	
<b>Suicide and self-harm</b>					0.05*
Never	7	13.73	13	8.07	
Monthly or less	23	45.10	64	39.75	

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Weekly or more	9	17.65	63	39.13	
<b>School violence</b>					0.65
Never	9	17.65	27	16.77	
Monthly or less	22	43.14	97	60.25	
Weekly or more	8	15.69	29	18.01	
<b>Dating violence</b>					0.68
Never	13	25.49	44	27.33	
Monthly or less	22	43.14	84	52.17	
Weekly or more	4	7.84	25	15.53	
<b>Anxiety</b>					0.10*
Never	1	1.96	17	10.56	
Monthly or less	12	23.53	28	17.39	
Weekly or more	26	50.98	108	67.08	
<b>Disordered eating</b>					
Never	14	27.45	46	28.57	0.67
Monthly or less	23	45.10	93	57.76	
Weekly or more	2	3.92	14	8.70	
<b>Depression</b>					0.60
Never	3	5.88	20	12.42	
Monthly or less	12	23.53	39	24.22	
Weekly or more	24	47.06	94	58.39	

\* $p < 0.1$  \*\* $p < 0.05$  \*\*\* $p < 0.025$

*Note.* Of those non-social workers who responded to “substance abuse” assessment, 31.37% never performed this task; of those social workers who responded to “substance abuse” assessment, 31.68% never performed this task, etc.

There was a significant difference in the provision of child abuse and neglect assessment ( $p = .05$ ). Social workers appear to be more involved in child abuse and neglect assessment, with 87.58% reporting that they perform this task compared to 60.78% of non-social workers. A similar significant difference was found in the provision of suicide and self-harm assessment ( $p = .05$ ). Social workers appear to be more involved in suicide and self-harm assessment, with 78.88% reporting that they perform this task compared to 62.75% of non-social workers. Social workers also appear to be more involved in providing anxiety assessment, with 84.47% reporting that they performed this task compared to 74.51% of non-social workers ( $p = .10$ ).



**Table 7**

Comparison of Administrative Tasks by Non-social Workers vs. Social Workers

	Non-social work licensure N=51		Social work licensure N=161		p-value
	n	%	n	%	
<b>Develop or facilitate staff in service training/professional development</b>					0.03**
Never	16	31.37	30	18.63	
Monthly or less	22	43.14	106	65.84	
Weekly or more	1	1.96	10	6.21	
<b>Supervise student interns</b>					0.14
Never	28	54.90	78	48.45	
Monthly or less	4	7.84	23	14.29	
Weekly or more	7	13.73	45	27.95	
<b>Attend ARD and IEP meetings</b>					0.08*
Never	19	37.25	49	30.43	
Monthly or less	14	27.45	81	50.31	
Weekly or more	6	11.76	16	9.94	
<b>Provide prevention programming</b>					0.45
Never	10	19.61	31	19.25	
Monthly or less	19	37.25	87	54.04	
Weekly or more	10	19.61	28	17.39	
<b>Help schools and/or districts assess school climate</b>					0.78
Never	13	25.49	40	24.84	
Monthly or less	20	39.22	79	49.07	
Weekly or more	6	11.76	27	16.77	
<b>Interpret language or non-English speaking students and families</b>					0.60
Never	19	37.25	83	51.55	
Monthly or less	7	13.73	23	14.29	
Weekly or more	13	25.49	38	23.60	
<b>Coordinate campus-wide events</b>					0.47
Never	15	29.41	48	29.81	
Monthly or less	23	45.10	83	51.55	

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Weekly or more	1	1.96	13	8.07	
<b>Fill out paperwork</b>					0.72
Never	3	5.88	7	4.35	
Monthly or less	3	5.88	11	6.83	
Weekly or more	33	64.71	126	78.26	
<b>Track students' outcomes</b>					0.40
Never	6	11.76	12	7.45	
Monthly or less	12	23.53	45	27.95	
Weekly or more	21	41.18	86	53.42	

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\*p<0.1 \*\*p<0.05 \*\*\*p<0.025

*Of those non-social workers who responded to “develop or facilitate staff in service training/professional development,” 31.37% never performed this task; of those social workers who responded to “develop or facilitate staff in service training/professional development,” 18.63% never performed this task.*

There was a significant difference in the provision of administrative tasks. School social workers appear to be more involved in developing or facilitating staff in service training/professional development, with 72.02% of school social workers reported they perform such task, whereas only 45.10% of non-school social workers said the same ( $p = .03$ ). Social workers also exhibited a significantly higher rate in attending Admission, Review, and Dismissal (ARD) and Individual Education Program (IEP) meetings. Almost two thirds of school social workers (60.25%) reported they attend ARD and IEP meetings compared to 39.21% of non-social workers ( $p = .08$ ). With some other administrative tasks (e.g., provide prevention programming, help schools and/or districts assess school climate, etc.), there were no significant differences between school social workers and non-social workers in terms of the frequency of task performance.

### Needs of School Social Workers

Additionally, more than half of Texas school social workers (53.4%) reported they would like to participate in school social work certificate programs. The most needed resources are a catalog of mental health screening tools and assessments for children and adolescents (64.62%), guidance on evidence-based interventions (62.26%), and resources for non-English speaking students and families (61.32%). The top five rated training to better assist Texas School social workers' practice are brief therapeutic interventions (49.53%), trauma-informed interventions (49.53%), crisis response (49.06%), family intervention (46.70%), and ethics specific to school settings (44.81%).

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**Discussion**

This study reports findings from a state survey in Texas that provides a more in-depth look at emerging practices in that state in comparison to national guidelines and perspectives on school social work. In Texas, there are no standards or practice models for school social work, making the emergence of school social work practice interesting to study in relation to how school social work is practiced and delivered to other SISP providers. This data augments information on a state and local level that are absent in other national data sources (Kelly et al., 2010a; Thompson et al., 2019). This is the first study to delineate Texas school social workers' characteristics and practice modalities in three decades. Our findings suggest that Texas school social workers serve unique roles in bridging each part of the ecological system consisting of students, families, schools, and communities and that they make complementary but different contributions to schools than other SISP service providers. Interestingly, the results on the roles of school social workers were generally consistent with the national school social work surveys in describing the workforce credentials, demographics, and scope of practice (e.g., Kelly et al., 2010a; Kelly et al., 2015) with some differences in exhibited specialties and themes concerning the Texas school social workforce.

The credentials of school social workers practicing in Texas are comparable to what is recommended nationally. Most school social workers holding a master's degree in social work are licensed by the State Board of Examiners, working in the public education system serving multiple schools. The majority (44.81%) of them have been practicing for more than five years. These characteristics are aligned with the previous school social work-study and the national survey findings (Allen-Mears, 1994; Kelly, 2010a). Unlike the national demographics, Texas school social workers are predominantly White and Hispanic (74.52%) compared to Black (11.32%), Native American (2.36%), and Asian (1.42%). Correspondingly, Hispanic students exceeded White students and accounted for the largest percentage among all racial/ethnic groups enrolled in Texas public schools for the past two decades (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2002; 2019). The shifting of racial constitutions in the Texas student body and the school social workers workforce has raised demands for bilingual school-based services and resources in English and Spanish.

Additionally, the national practice model contains three broad practice goals: (1) to provide evidence-based educational, behavioral, and mental health services; (2) to promote a school climate and culture conducive to learning; and (3) to maximize access to school-based and community-based resources (Thompson et al., 2017). Although experts have advocated to allocate more efforts to the whole school system rather than individual intervention (Dupper et al., 2014; Frey & Dupper, 2005), the majority of Texas school social workers provide education, behavior, and mental health services frequently at the individual level and this is consistent with practice trends nationally (Kelly et al., 2010a). Mental health assessment, individual/group counseling, and service to specialized populations are

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essential elements of school-based mental health services. In addition, Texas school social workers often attend interdisciplinary meetings and assist teachers with classroom management. Data from this study indicate school social workers contribute to education and in-service training in schools more than other SISP providers in schools. However, more efforts are needed in removing learning barriers and creating a school culture conducive to learning. More training in service coordination, evidence-based intervention, and a growing repertoire of Texas school social workers' resources is indispensable in addressing students' and families' issues more preventatively.

Data collected indicated that Texas school social workers work with child abuse and neglect, homelessness, immigration, and in assessment of suicide risk and self-harm more than other SISP service providers. Homeless, refugees/immigrants, special education, foster care, and bilingual students are the most frequently served special student population by Texas school social workers. For example, almost nine out of ten Texas school social workers reported having homeless clients. Homeless children and youths are more likely to experience behavioral, academic, and family challenges. School social workers indicated they served as liaisons while working with homeless students at schools. This requires Texas school social workers to work in tier two and three interventions and daily services requiring clinical and crisis interventions and advocacy. The data also demonstrated the lack of services in the community being a barrier showing the community roles of the school social workers. They also identified providing services in multiple schools and carrying large caseloads, and this has been in past literature on the roles of school social workers nationally (Altshuler & Webb, 2009; Constable & Alvarez 2006; Franklin & Harris, 2015). This suggests the school social workers in Texas, while mainly performing in clinical and mental health services, are also involved in liaison and community roles and provide services to meet students' basic needs as they carry out their direct services roles.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Other statewide school social work surveys are needed to examine the unique features and challenges each state faces as only limited state survey data was found in the past two decades (Whittlesey-Jerome, 2013). Surveys in states with emerging school social work have the added advantages of revealing how school social work is developing in situations without the regulation of state agencies. We believe individual statewide school social services surveys will help delineate and complement other national survey data when data is incomplete (Kelly et al., 2010a; Thompson et al., 2019). Interestingly, this study showed school social workers in Texas were adhering to the national practice model even in the absence of state guidelines. We can only speculate at this point that school social workers are receiving training and benefit from the statewide conference that has been hosted by a school of social work and that is a major source for the sample of the survey. Schools of social work within the state also provide certifications in school social work within MSW programs. Future research is needed further

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investigate how different states develop emerging school social work and maintain practice guidelines in the absence of state certification and support from state agencies. Although this study showed Texas follows national guidelines for school social work and patterns similar to other school social work practices nationally, it is not known how the training and support of these social workers are accomplished. Additional research will be needed to examine how school social workers receive training and professional development to adhere to the school social work practice guidelines. The COVID-19 pandemic and uptick in mental health needs may also change practices as we move forward, and follow-up studies are needed across states to see how these changes will impact job functions of school social workers in relationship to other SISP providers and the provision of mental health services.

### **Limitations**

This study relied on a convenience sample and, hence is not representative of all social workers in Texas schools. Given that there is no comprehensive list of school social workers, a representative sampling frame was not available. Thus, it is unknown how closely our sample is indicative of all social workers practicing in Texas schools, and the response rate is not feasible. The majority of the participants for this study came from urban cities. Fewer school social workers reached by the survey were from the Texas rural areas. In that case, findings might be skewed due to the lack of rural participation. The study did not ask about sex, gender identity, or sexual orientation for demographic questions. Considering the field of school social work has been dominated by cisgender female social workers in the past, the current school social workforce's makeup is also worth exploration. The present survey only had 10.6% Black participants, which may reflect the makeup of school social workers but could underestimate actual numbers of Black school social workers due to regional differences in participation. However, as indicated, the predominant makeup of Texas schools is White and Hispanic. Finally, the study fixed less attention on the service receiving students' characteristics in the state of Texas. Future researchers could examine the general student population and their needs and match with practice features and modalities of Texas school social workers.

### **Conclusion**

This study shows that Texas School social workers follow national practice guidelines and have been working in the schools for many years. The survey showed social workers are on the frontlines of a school's most high-needs students and work more with specialized populations than other SISP professionals. They are similar to other school social workers nationally in that they make significant contributions to student mental health, family and community interventions. Texas school social workers practice directly with high-needs and special populations of students and assist teachers in classroom management. Like other school social workers nationally, they need more professional development and networking

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opportunities to keep up with the times and emerging needs to provide quality care and services to students and schools.

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