

School social workers became the case managers for children with disabilities after the passage of the **Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975**. This act mandated an education for every child, including children with disabilities. In 1990, the act was reauthorized as the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), which is discussed later in the chapter.

Throughout the 1980s, school social workers emphasized coalition building and collaboration with other social service agencies and the community and focused on getting parents involved in their children's education. Parents were encouraged to participate in developing **individualized education plans (IEPs)** for children with disabilities and to network with other programs and services. The IEP outlines the expected level of educational performance, annual goals, including short-term objectives, specific educational services that will be provided to the child; the extent to which the child will be able to participate in regular education classes; and an evaluation process to determine how goals and objectives will be met. An IEP must be prepared for every child with a disability by a representative from the school district, the student's teacher, and the parents. The plan must be revised annually.

The passage of the **Improving America's Schools Act in 1994** secured the role of school social workers as advocates and brokers of services for students with disabilities, students from nondominant groups, and students who are economically disadvantaged. In addition, school social work became a conduit for bilingual Spanish-speaking social workers. This is especially true in California, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and Florida, where there are large populations of monolingual Spanish-speaking families. Sometimes, due to teachers' and school administrators' unfamiliarity with non-English-speaking students' lack of English language skills, non-English-speaking students have been funneled into special education classrooms. Language barriers can result in misdiagnosing what the children need in school. Bilingual social workers can play an important role in protecting the rights of non-English-speaking students.

School Social Work Roles and Skills **LO2**

According to Allen-Mearns (2014), school social workers serve to link the school, home, and community by providing direct services, such as mental health intervention, crisis management and intervention, and community liaison in the schools while monitoring and evaluating the organization of school systems and policies. To achieve this goal, school social workers—like other trained social work professionals—rely on systems theory and the ecological framework to analyze the transactions among students, teachers, parents, and the school system (NASW, 2010).

For example, a school social worker receives a referral from a teacher indicating that a student recently began to exhibit serious behavioral problems in the classroom. The social worker will investigate the teacher's, student's, and parent's perspectives of the problem as well as the perspectives of other teachers and school personnel who interact regularly with the child and perhaps the perspectives of significant classmates. Exactly what are the behaviors? When



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Responsibilities of School Social Workers

About 5 percent of the nation's social workers are at work in the public school system. The roles of these school social workers and the interventions utilized vary from state to state and from school district to school district. In some school districts, social workers are solely responsible for assessing and meeting the needs of students using special education services. Their primary function is to ensure that students with disabilities receive free and appropriate educational services in the **least restrictive environment**. Each state must provide personalized instruction with sufficient support services to permit a child with disabilities to benefit educationally from that instruction. The state must ensure a continuum of alternative placements, including regular classes, special classes, home instruction, and instruction in hospitals and institutions.

In other school districts, school social workers focus entirely on providing group and individual counseling for regular education students and sometimes, when necessary, for their families. In some schools, the school social worker is part of an interdisciplinary team, sometimes referred to as the **pupil health or services team** (Horne & Sallo, 2013). Teachers, school administrators, school psychologists, school nurses, parents, and perhaps a speech/hearing therapist may also be part of the team. The purpose of the team is to make an ongoing assessment of students' social, emotional, and physical needs as well as their strengths. The school social worker helps students use their strengths to meet the identified needs, and also helps them gain access to school and community resources when appropriate.

Some schools have developed family service centers on their campuses. These centers provide clothing and services ranging from family counseling to medical and dental treatment. Lack of dental services has become a serious problem for students in many low-income neighborhoods.

According to the National Association of Social Workers, school social workers are primarily advocates, consultants, and mediators (NASW, 2010). They advocate for the rights of all students, especially students who are socially and economically isolated and students with disabilities. Advocacy efforts take place in schools through the IEP process, in the community, and in the larger society through the promotion of state and national policies that advance and protect students' rights and improve the educational environment.

School social workers have long advocated for educational equity—less disparity between school programs in poor districts and in rich districts. Traditionally, schools have been funded solely through local property taxes. This system has provided poorer rural and inner-city districts with fewer resources for