A Retrospective Chronicle of the Midwest School Social Work Council: Its Vision and Influence after Forty Years

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In 2007, the Midwest School Social Work Council celebrated its fortieth anniversary in Cleveland, Ohio. This article reviews early efforts to build alliances of school social workers across state lines, the early collaborative relationship with the National Association of Social Workers, and the eventual need for a new organization. The Midwest Council was seminal in its efforts to offer regular continuing education, to provide conference organizational planning, and to promote scholarship for school social workers. Eventually, its efforts led to the development of the School Social Work Association of America while maintaining a relationship with the National Association of Social Workers. It remains the most stable force for school social workers throughout the Midwest.

Keywords: Midwest School Social Work Council; National Association of Social Workers; School Social Work Association of America; state associations

This review of the Midwest School Social Work Council was prompted by its recent fortieth anniversary conference held in Cleveland, Ohio, in 2007. To understand the development of a regional school social work organization, one must begin with a brief review of past attempts to

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organize and advocate for school social workers across state lines. This article will cover early efforts, beginning with an organization for visiting teachers that reached its pinnacle in 1955, with the founding of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW). Retrenchment occurred in 1963 and provided the impetus for the first Midwest School Social Work Conference in 1968. In the early 1990s, Midwest helped give birth to the School Social Work Association of America while simultaneously advocating for a separate section within the NASW.

Promising Beginnings

In 1920, the National Association of Visiting Teachers (NAVT) was formed in New York City. At the time, there were about ninety visiting teachers working in twenty-eight cities across fifteen states. They alternated between having conferences with the National Education Association and the National Conference of Social Work. In 1924, NAVT began publishing *The Bulletin*, a quarterly newsletter that had three purposes: building closer affiliations among members; exchanging information regarding their work; and creating standards regarding qualifications, functions, salaries, and caseloads. By 1928, NAVT had created ten regional committees. In 1943, it renamed itself the American Association of School Social Workers, and in 1945, it became the National Association of School Social Workers (NASSW). Under the leadership of Opal Boston, the NASSW began collaborating with the American Association of Social Workers. On October 1, 1955, NASSW merged with six other organizations to form the NASW. The new bylaws included five Section Executive Committees, including one for school social workers (McCullagh, 2001). The NASW News published a "School Social Work" section. The Social Work journal published an article on school social work in each of its issues (Abbe, 1957; Altmeyer, 1956, 1957; Arbit, 1956; Mitchell, 1957; Nesbit, 1957; Smalley, 1956), as a result of the journal's policy of including a school social work section representative on its editorial board with the power to select papers for publication. In 1956, the NASW also sponsored a national workshop on school social work in Lake Forest, Illinois. It is difficult to imagine a more supportive and collaborative national organization.

Retrenchment

By 1963, however, NASW had eliminated the five section committees and created nine councils (including Social Work in Schools) that were subordinate to a larger division. The number of papers on school social

work in the flagship journal dropped precipitously. In 1965, the NASW began publishing *Social Work Abstracts* as a way to publish brief summaries of articles in professional journals related to social work. Even though school social work was a recognized field of practice, few education journals were reviewed. National conferences seemed to be a distant memory. School social workers across the country began to feel that their concerns were ignored or trivialized (Anderson, 2001).

Midwest Conference

In 1966, when the National Association of State Consultants in School Social Work held its annual meeting, members expressed concern about the lack of leadership within the U.S. Department of Education and the NASW. To increase the influence of school social work, it was decided that regional groups of state consultants should meet regularly and plan ways to improve professional practice. Over the following six months, the state consultants from Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin held several meetings. They decided to invite specific members of the state education agencies and school social workers to the 1967 Illinois School Social Work Conference in Zion, Illinois. Participants responded positively to the Illinois conference, and the idea for an annual Midwest conference was born.

Founding

An invitational meeting was held at the Pere Marquette State Park in Grafton, Illinois, and education officials responsible for the development of pupil services in eight states attended. Some felt that a national conference was needed to clarify the role and function of school social workers. Others felt it was important to focus on the full spectrum of services to students. As a result of the Grafton meeting, a school social work conference planning committee was formed from the original three states, consisting of Geraldine Tosby and Lynn Unterbrink (Illinois), Larry Pool (Iowa), and Richard Staples (Wisconsin).

They held an initial planning meeting in Dubuque, Iowa, in December 1967. Illinois assumed responsibility for hosting the first regional conference and obtained funding through a Title VI grant (Midwest Annual Regional Conference, 1968). In January 1968, each of the other seven state education agencies was asked to commit \$500 each to the conference. The first program-planning meeting was held in Davenport, Iowa, in February 1968, with Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, and Minnesota represented (Staples & Tosby, 1973). The first board of directors included two leaders

from Illinois, Geraldine Tosby and Lynn Unterbrink; three from Indiana, Marcella Egenes, Sparkle Crowe, and Opal Boston; one from Iowa, Larry Pool; two from Kentucky, Ross Mills and Marshall Swain; one from Michigan, Frank Maple; two from Minnesota, Gerald Anderson and Stanley Knox; and one from Wisconsin, Richard Staples. Because five state education agencies agreed to cosponsor the conference, the fee for this two-day event was set at just \$15 (Rinkenberger, 1969; Tosby, 1968b).

A month later, the final planning meeting was held at the Wagon Wheel Inn in Rockton, Illinois, with the same four states, plus Wisconsin represented. Under the conference chair Geraldine Tosby, attendees organized a two-day conference that would begin with a banquet on Sunday evening and end with a banquet on Tuesday at noon. Monday would consist of all-day workshops on such topics as group work, behavior modification, learning disabilities, early detection and intervention, and interdisciplinary team function. Tuesday would hold half-day workshops on such topics as writing federal grant proposals, new research, consultation, school social workers as anthropologists, and an introduction to the roles and functions of school social work for new practitioners. They also hoped to have either William Glasser, author of Reality Therapy (1965) and Schools without Failure (1968) or Haim Ginott, author of Group Psychotherapy with Children (1961) and Between Parent and Child (1965), as their banquet speakers (Tosby, 1968b). Eventually they were able to recruit Dr. Irving Berlin, professor of psychiatry at the University of Washington, for the keynote address.

At that first conference, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin were all involved. The presentations were of high quality, with professors from the University of Chicago, University of Illinois, University of Michigan, University of Minnesota, University of Oregon, and University of Tennessee leading seminars. National leader Opal Boston and state leaders Larry Pool and Lynn Unterbrink collaborated on one of the workshops (Midwest Annual Regional Conference, 1968). The first conference from September 29 to October 1, 1968, was a phenomenal success: six hundred people participated and they had to turn away another two hundred for lack of space!

Three months later, in January 1969, a planning group met in Chicago to debrief and plan for the Indianapolis conference. William Glasser was recruited for the conference keynote speech. One concern of the organizers was the potential competition from a joint conference of the NASW and the National Institutes of Mental Health to be held June 11–14 at the University of Pennsylvania called the National Workshop on School Social Work. Organizers eventually invited Rosemary Sarri (1969) to provide a summary of the highlights from the Philadelphia

meeting at the Indiana conference. The second conference was to be held at the luxurious Atkinson Hotel in Indianapolis from September 28–30, 1969, for the cost of \$20, which included a copy of the published conference proceedings.

Conference Organization

On March 10, 1969, the planning committee drafted its first conference planning guidelines, outlining the various roles that key members would play. These included the following:

General Chair (or Co-chair): Coordinate all aspects of the Conference. Assist all committee chairs (Program, Arrangements, Publications, Public Relations, and Membership). Work with the Conference President, and through the President, with the Board of Directors.

Program Chair: Coordinates the assignment of the conferees to the sessions, including their assignment as to choice (1st, 2nd, etc.). The task of programming the time of each conferee is a major function of this assignment. The work is carried on in close cooperation with the Arrangements Chair. It is also the duty of this Chair to obtain recorders, discussants, respondents and similar support personnel who are not otherwise designated by the Board of Directors, which selects all program leaders and content.

Arrangements Chair: Develops the necessary committees and personnel to provide for reservations, accommodations, hospitality and facilities. Works closely with the Program Chair on assignments of conferees to workshop sessions. Joins with Program and Publicity Chairs and the total staff in the preparation of advance and final program, reservation forms, etc. Works closely with, and oversees the activities of the Convention Bureau staff and the hotel personnel in promoting the Conference. Supervises the Membership Chair.

Coordinator of Publications: Supervises the distribution of major papers and position papers to the conferees. Assists in the preparation of advance materials, and supervises the preparation and distribution of the final report of the Conference. Composes appropriate forward and summation statements.

Publicity Chair: Develops all publicity for the Conference. In coordination with other Conference planning members, develops mailouts, forms, and brochures. Arranges for mass media coverage of the Conference. Works with the Office of the State Superintendent's public relations staff who may be assigned to the Committee.

Membership Chair: Works under the supervision of the Arrangements Chair to record and maintain registrations for a membership in the Conference. (Midwest Annual Regional Conference, March 1969)

In reflecting back, it was impressive how quickly the group became organized to plan for these major conferences. The current Midwest Conference guidelines are thirty-three pages long and represent the accumulated wisdom of forty years of conference planning, but they owe their inception to this group of visionaries who wrote the first guidelines just six months after the first conference while it was still fresh in their memories.

It also is noteworthy that each state gave its net profit to the next host state in the early years. After the first conference, Illinois transferred \$2,863 to Indiana (Rinkenberger, 1969). After the second conference, Indiana transferred \$3,269 to Minnesota (Midwest Annual Regional Conference, 1970). After the third conference, Minnesota transferred \$2,402 to Kentucky (Lee, 1971). Each conference was always meant to be self-supporting, but the early infusion of working capital must have made planning easier to manage. By the time the conference returned to Illinois in 1976, the seed money had grown to \$9,480!

Scholarship

For the first nine years, the Midwest Conference published proceedings of their conferences. These yearly booklets, ranging from 47 to 142 pages, were the first consistent periodical literature in the field of school social work since the NASW reduced its commitment to school social work in 1963. Over the next nine years, the proceedings would cite more than forty different periodicals, but only a handful were social work journals, such as *Social Work, Social Casework*, and *Social Service Review*. Clearly, there was a need for a journal specific to the field, so Illinois began publishing the *School Social Work Journal* in 1976, the last year in which the proceedings were published. The NASW began publishing its specialty journal, *Social Work in Education*, two years later, with Richard Anderson of Illinois as the editor in chief.

Incorporation

By the meeting on December 9–10, 1969, near Chicago, the board of directors had its first discussion about incorporating as a nonprofit association. Gerry Tosby reported that the Illinois Association of School Social Workers had already incorporated without difficulty, but representatives from Minnesota (Don Rinkenberger), Iowa (Ron Huff), Michi-

gan (Esther Belcher), and Wisconsin (Dick Staples) were concerned about the complexities of organizing across state lines. They agreed to study the issue and return later with more information. In 1973, they explored the issue again, but the Internal Revenue Service declined to recognize the Midwest Conference as an educational association because it had no plan on how to divide assets in the event of its demise. Finally, in 1975, the Midwest Conference officially voted to change the name of the organization to the Midwest School Social Work Council (Yeck, 1975).

Growing Diversity

By the time of the third annual conference at the first Radisson Hotel in downtown Minneapolis on September 27–29, 1970, the conference workshop offerings had grown increasingly diverse. Rather than have twelve full-day workshops as they did at the first Illinois conference, the organizers offered only half-day workshops thereafter (Born, 1970). Whereas the Indiana conference had eighteen workshops, the Minnesota conference offered twenty-five sessions, including five site visits to various special education settings. The popularity of the regional conference may be estimated by the number of brochures states requested for the conference in Minneapolis: Illinois wanted seven hundred: Minnesota needed four hundred; Wisconsin about three hundred; and Indiana, Kentucky, and Michigan about two hundred each. The remaining states asked for about one hundred brochures. Marcella Egenes noted that several conferees had suggested that the conference be held on a Thursday to Saturday schedule (Rinkenberger, 1969). This suggestion was finally instituted in 1976, when Illinois hosted the conference and moved it to the first weekend of October to avoid conflicts with the Jewish holidays (Swenson, 1975). Both traditions remain standard practice today.

National Influence

In 1973–1974, the Midwest Council goaded NASW into advocating that school social work services be written into the Education for All Handicapped Children's Act (Pub. L. No. 94-142), later called the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Anderson, 2001). The council accomplished this through petitions, numerous meetings with NASW staff members, and a national letter-writing campaign (Morrison, 2006). By this time, most of the Midwestern states had their own state school social work associations and state school social work conferences. Midwest Council was instrumental in helping organize associations in Kansas, Nebraska, and Ohio. State NASW chapters seldom offered support or educational opportunities for social workers in schools, and the

national NASW never allowed members to choose which journal they received with their membership dues. Randy Fisher of Illinois concluded that both the school social work credential and *Social Work in Education* journal were meant to produce income for NASW, not necessarily provide additional services for members (Huxtable, 1993).

National Coalition

The first step toward addressing national issues was the formation of the National Coalition for School Social Work. Many state representatives to the School Social Work Leadership Meeting met four times between 1991 and 1993 (once in St. Paul, twice in Chicago, and once in Seattle). The forum seems to have been prompted by the reorganization of the NASW in 1991, which abolished the Education Commission (Struckman, 1995). This commission had been responsible for developing the NASW school social work standards, publishing an information bulletin, and initiating the school social work credential (Fisher, 1993). At the initial meeting, there were eleven states present (mostly from the Midwest, but also Oregon and Washington) with written input from three others (California, Louisiana, and Florida). Isadora Hare also attended as the NASW representative from Washington, DC. Frederick Streeck noted that school psychologists had a national association, but no regional organizations, hinting that the regional associations might no longer be necessary. Sally Carlson of Wisconsin, however, suggested having one representative from each regional association. Lyn Lewis of Kentucky thought that the regional associations might work with NASW. Elaine Kirk of Minnesota wondered whether there was some way to increase influence within NASW. Isadora Hare suggested the possibility of a separate section for school social work but warned that there would be a special fee and admitted that "the bureaucracy of NASW makes it difficult to mobilize" like the regional associations (School Social Work Leadership Meeting, n.d., p. 5). She suggested that the question of starting a new national organization was a trade-off between efficiency (like the regional associations) and power (of NASW). Ultimately, the national coalition's goal was not necessarily to form a national organization, but to develop a "National Agenda for School Social Workers" (Streeck, 1994, p. 6).

School Social Work 2000

They formed the School Social Work 2000 Planning Committee, composed of representatives from the Midwest Council (Bob Goodwin), the

Southern Council (Lyn Lewis), and the Western Alliance (Frederick Streeck). This committee sent out a survey asking states to prioritize the issues that they experienced. The results included the following concerns about NASW:

- 1. How a national school social work organization would affect the relationship with NASW.
- 2. Difficulty seeing the benefit of NASW membership.
- 3. NASW needs to provide regular communication to its school social work members.
- NASW Education Commission needs to provide lobby and support services.
- The percentage of the NASW budget that goes to the Education Commission.
- 6. The percentage of NASW members that are school social workers (7 percent).

On the basis of all the results received, the School Social Work 2000 group made five major recommendations: establish a national agenda for school social work, establish a national clearinghouse for best practices (similar to the U.S. Department of Education's ERIC), sponsor a national school social work conference, raise funds for the clearinghouse, and establish an advisory committee to temporarily replace the NASW Education Commission. The advisory committee was to build a coalition and a media campaign, distribute a quarterly newsletter, provide a national legislative action network, and establish a job clearinghouse. The committee was to consist of two representatives from each region, two representatives from the former Education Commission, two academic representatives, and one NASW representative, for a total of thirteen individuals (Jordan, 1992). Planning for a possible school social work section was under way, but NASW wanted an endorsement of at least 10 percent of the eight thousand estimated school social workers who were members (Midwest School Social Work Council, 1994). The advisory committee eventually changed its name to the National Coalition for School Social Work.

From September 30 to October 3, 1993, the Midwest School Social Work Council met with representatives from NASW in South Bend, Indiana. Isadora Hare presented information on how a new school social work section would work. She took issue with Randy Fisher's (1993) article on the failure of NASW to support school social work at the national level. Fisher felt that a new coalition of state school social work

organizations was needed to balance NASW's lack of responsiveness. Hare, however, gave NASW sole credit for school social work being written into the IDEA legislation. She acknowledged, "While it is true that NASW has not done as much as it could, NASW represents 145,000 social workers and education is not always at the top of the agenda" (Midwest School Social Work Council, 1993, p. 3). Six months later, the Midwest School Social Work Council met in Northbrook, Illinois, to discuss the national coalition. Some expressed concerns that the coalition had "funding and resource difficulties and close ties with NASW" (Midwest School Social Work Council, 1994, p. 2). Some wanted a national organization and felt that leaders were not moving fast enough toward that goal. Vaughn Morrison, the Illinois state consultant, wondered whether the Midwest Council had fulfilled its role to plan conferences and help states form their own associations or needed to evolve into something else. Randy Fisher offered Illinois' annual summer leadership retreat as a possible venue to explore the issue in depth (G. Thomas, personal communication, May 13, 2007), noting that Illinois would contribute \$2,000 to the national gathering (Struckman, 1995). Sally Carlson of Wisconsin moved that the Midwest Council would hold a meeting in Edwardsville, Illinois, "to establish a framework for a nation[al] organization of school social worker[s]" (Midwest School Social Work Council, 1994, p. 3). The council passed the motion unanimously.

Birth of SSWAA

The National School Social Work Organization planning session was held at Southern Illinois University July 22-24, 1994. Sixty-four school social workers from twenty-two states attended. Alongside the nine Midwestern states were Arizona, Georgia, New Mexico, New York, New Jersev, Nevada, Oregon, South Carolina, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Texas, Washington, and Wyoming (Thomas, personal communication, 2007). It was truly a national meeting. Greg Petty from Illinois hosted the event and gave the opening welcome. Interestingly, Jim McCullagh (1994) of Iowa had just published an article on the formation of NAVT. His purpose was to "provide a perspective from which to make decisions in the 1990s regarding optimal organizational structures to represent their interests" (p. 32). Shirley McDonald (personal communication to Greg Petty, 1994) of Illinois sent Greg Petty a copy of it for a historical perspective two weeks prior to the meeting. The group debated whether it should strengthen its position with NASW or build a new organization from scratch. Jim Clark of Iowa suggested that they could do both (Struckman,

1995). By Friday night, they opted to create a new national organization. The statement of purpose was as follows: "The School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA) is dedicated to promoting the professional development of school social workers to work with students and their families in order to enhance their education experiences" (Struckman, 1995, p. 29). This would be accomplished through six activities:

- 1. Offering opportunities for ongoing professional development
- 2. Opening nationwide channels of communication and information sharing
- Responding in a timely, efficient manner to the changing needs of school social workers
- 4. Influencing public policy and educational issues
- Demonstrating school social workers' effectiveness through evaluation and research
- 6. Linking home, school, and community on behalf of students and their families

Sally Carlson (1994) of Wisconsin researched related professional associations and put together a possible budget for the new association. It included a full-time staff person, full-time assistant, and full-time secretary. It presumed that SSWAA would need an office in Washington, D.C., an 800 number, and office equipment. It planned on at least two face-to-face board meetings per year. Services could include lobbying, a quarterly newsletter, a school social work video, position papers, and national conferences. She estimated the costs would be \$415,900 for the first year alone (p. 33). To offset these expenses, SSWAA would need to collect \$100 from three thousand members, raise \$30,000 from foundations, and collect \$1,000 in association dues from at least thirty-five state associations (p. 34).

A steering committee of nine persons was named and Randy Fisher was designated as the chair. His first concern was that SSWAA be "able to provide products and services quickly" to be effective in serving school social workers. His hope was to offer Illinois' *School Social Work Journal* to SSWAA members (Fisher, 1994a). By October 1994, Doug Riley of Georgia had drafted a constitution and bylaws for SSWAA with the help of Illinois' state consultant Vaughn Morrison. Frederick Streeck, the treasurer, reported that the SSWAA had a net balance of \$1,325 with fifty-eight paid members.

Since that time, SSWAA has grown to nearly three thousand members nationwide and provided much-needed support to states that wish

to start their own association. It currently provides the only legislative advocacy for school social work in Washington, DC. In 2007, the SSWAA board voted to raise dues from \$75 per year to \$120 by October 1, 2008. Only time will tell if SSWAA will survive the challenges and changes ahead.

NASW and School Social Work

In 1992, NASW developed the School Social Work Specialist Credential in conjunction with the Educational Testing Service (ETS) in Princeton, New Jersey. By 1999, however, no state education agencies had recognized the advanced credential (Alvarez & Harrington, 2004; Shaffer, 1996) and ETS informed NASW that so few people were taking the qualifying exam that they could no longer offer it. In 2000, NASW developed the Certified School Social Work Specialist certification. Unlike the credential, there was no required examination. Certificate holders had to meet seven criteria: maintain current NASW membership, hold a master's degree from a program accredited by the Council on Social Work Education, have two years of post-MSW direct school social work experience, receive at least seventy-two hours of supervision during the same period, obtain a recommendation letter from a social work colleague, hold a relevant license or certificate, and receive at least twenty hours of continuing education every two years (NASW, n.d.).

In 1994, Jim Clark of Iowa was named the first chair of NASW's new School Social Work section (Fisher, 1994b). Other Midwesterners to serve on the School Social Work Section Committee have included (chair) Michelle Alvarez of Indiana and Nic Dibble and Brenda Ward of Wisconsin. Unfortunately, Midwest representatives have been told that their role in the NASW section is to advocate for NASW to school social workers not to advocate for school social workers to NASW (Secor, 2005). Any membership association that chooses to be deaf to the concerns of its constituents is at risk for failure.

In September 1997, NASW established the Publications Task Force to examine the role of the NASW publications in meeting the needs of its members. This task force had two recommendations regarding *Social Work in Education*. First, it wanted to distinguish the journal from the Council on Social Work Education's similarly named *Journal of Social Work Education*. Second, it wanted "the journal to be more inclusive of other child practitioners" working in the community, including those in child welfare (Franklin, 2000, p. 194). When the editorial board of *Social Work in Education* met in April 1998, it "believed that the journal should continue to serve the needs of school social workers and also become

more inclusive of all social workers both inside and outside the schools who work with children" (Franklin, 2000,, p. 195). In July 1999, newly appointed editor in chief Cynthia Franklin sought input from readers before the editorial board renamed the journal *Children & Schools*. Franklin hoped that subscriptions would increase as social workers from a broader range of community settings would become readers. This plan, however, may have backfired, as more school social workers gradually subscribed to the discipline-specific *School Social Work Journal*, making it the larger of the two publications.

Current Situation

The Midwest Council continues to support its eleven member states through twice yearly meetings. A systemic perspective recognizes that when school social work is strong in many states it retains the vitality to grow and develop in others. Currently, only about thirty states have state associations and Midwest and SSWAA continue to provide technical assistance to fledgling state organizations that need help developing a constitution, bylaws, and articles of incorporation. As SSWAA continues to have growing pains and NASW remains only tepidly supportive of school social workers, the Midwest School Social Work Council remains the rock for school social workers throughout the Midwest.

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