THE BENEFITS OF SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS ON STUDENT ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT, ATTENDANCE, AND BEHAVIOR IN MIDDLE SCHOOLS

A Project

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MASTER OF SOCIAL WORK

by

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Jamie Ann Bateman Gomez

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Division of Social Work
Abstract

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When the economy is facing troubling times there is a tendency to cut social service programs first, often including school social work positions. A pervasive view often exists within academia where support services and preventative interventions are not valued as much as strictly traditional academic services. As students struggle to meet their basic needs, it can be difficult to focus on education and fulfill maximum academic potential. This study aimed to investigate parent’s perspectives on current services offered through the schools, what services their families are in need of, and how these unmet needs have affected their child’s attendance, behavior, and academic performance. Parents of middle school students in the Folsom Cordova Unified School District (FCUSD) were the subjects of this study, and the data reflected views that schools should be a center for community services, students would benefit from a social worker on campus, and families could use assistance acquiring needed resources. Findings provided useful information which can be applied to further research or program development.

_______________________, Committee Chair
Francis Yuen, DSW

Date
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

In October 2010, a student at Hiram Johnson High School in Sacramento was tragically shot and killed in a gang related drive-by shooting. Many of the students at Hiram Johnson were personally acquainted with this student and were significantly affected by this terrible event. Fortunately, the school was already employing four school social workers who were able to provide direct services and immediate support to assist students with their grief. These efforts were implemented in a timely manner, the same week of the tragedy, to promptly address the needs of the students, faculty, and the community. Despite the terrible circumstances, Hiram Johnson High School was able to facilitate positive changes within the school and the surrounding community, and possibly prevent similar tragic events from following.

Due to the tireless efforts of Hiram Johnson High School social workers, a campus-wide anti-violence week was implemented. This program continues as an annual event, which promotes peace and alternatives to violence amongst the student body. The school social workers used this week long program to educate and empower the students and school faculty. One of these efforts was an assembly where students come together and were encouraged to become acquainted with others with whom they would not normally interact. Through meaningful activities and education, the students came away from the program changed, with an understanding of the value of kindness to others, particularly their fellow classmates. This event appeared to make a strong impression on
the participants, and may have influenced the way they interact with and view others for the rest of their lives.

School social workers at Hiram Johnson High School also organized and facilitated a lunchtime rally where students were encouraged to sign a pledge of anti-violence for the entire school year. A large banner was signed and displayed prominently on the campus, which served as a reminder of the anti-violence pledge the students made. The social workers also used this event to conduct fundraising to support positive programs within the school and community.

Social workers currently are available throughout the year at Hiram Johnson High School to meet with students who may be experiencing bullying, violence, or other problems in their lives. A peer mediator program, which is led by exemplary Junior and Senior grade students, is overseen and organized by school social workers. This mediation program has dramatically reduced the amount of fights and violent acts both on and off campus. Staff and students alike have expressed their gratitude for having this program and the various other mental health services provided by the school social workers on campus (Mary Struhs, personal communication, 2011).

In Rancho Cordova, a community east of Sacramento, a similar tragedy occurred during the same school year. Two students were shot and killed in a drive-by shooting while riding their bikes near the local high school, Cordova High. Immediately, the students set up a makeshift memorial on the street where the incident took place. There was a large police presence at the school, interrogating students about what happened to
try to identify the shooters. In terms of support services for grieving students, there were county chaplains available to meet with them. The students did not know the chaplains, and as they were faith-based, this service may not have been culturally appropriate for all of them. The next day, out of fear of violent retaliation, many parents kept their children home from school. Many students who did attend school that day organized a walk-out during class time. Text messages were being sent around stating that if students wore red to school they would face retaliation from rival gang members. All the while, there was never a clear story communicated about what happened. This led to a great deal of rumors and hearsay, further exasperating the problem and causing a growing fear among community members.

To this day, there have never been intentional steps taken by the school district to facilitate a positive learning experience from the tragedy. Had there been school social workers present on campus, the outcome would have likely been more positive, as presented previously in the similar situation at Hiram Johnson. The students impacted by this tragedy could have benefited from the services of social workers who had an established relationship with the school and the needs of the community.

School social workers are valuable and effective in times of crisis, as seen in the examples mentioned here. It is also important to recognize the important role they can fill within school campuses on a daily basis. The students from these stories are an example of at-risk youth, who are representative of many of the students who attend school in the Folsom Cordova Unified School District (FCUSD) every day. They face many challenges, including inadequate healthcare, lack of social and school support
services, negative attitudes toward school, lack of peer or family support, few options for positive recreational opportunities, personal disabilities, lack of community involvement, peers who are negative influences, school and community deficiencies, and deficiencies in necessary prerequisite skills to succeed academically (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 1999). These students and their families are often struggling, going without the resources necessary to support success in their child's academic performance, school attendance, and behavior. School social workers are appropriately qualified and may be more available to attentively meet these needs experienced by many students and their families. Social workers augment educator's responsibilities in meeting the unique needs of students and their families, particularly those who are in under-served and at-risk populations. They provide holistic services in areas such as health, safety, campus and community development, academic support, mental health, behavioral and emotional difficulties, and crisis intervention.

Statement of Collaboration

This thesis project is a collaborative effort between Jamie Ann Bateman Gomez and Elizabeth Anne Murta. It fulfills the requirement of their Master's in Social Work Degree Program at California State University, Sacramento.

Background of the Problem

There are legal mandates and ethical responsibilities that compel public schools to provide a high quality and appropriate education to all minors residing in the United States. Despite this, many students are not receiving this level of education because they
face overwhelming barriers to learning. In our modern society, students are negatively impacted by poverty, domestic violence, homelessness, family discord, drug abuse, alcoholism, negative images in the media, racism, lack of cultural sensitivity within the school system, and countless other challenges. School can no longer be simply a place for curricular education. Part of the responsibility for providing a quality and appropriate education is ensuring that at-risk students are appropriately served by school staff and administrators who have their best interest in mind. Educators are employed in the school systems to educate, administrators are employed in the school systems to keep campus safe and running smoothly, support staff are employed by the school system to monitor the campus or assist the educators. Accordingly, school social workers are often most qualified within the school system to provide holistic services that meet the diverse but interrelated needs of students, families, and community.

The Folsom Cordova Unified School District

The areas presently known as Folsom and Rancho Cordova were first populated during the gold rush era with the discovery of gold at Negro Bar along the American River. Folsom was the first to become incorporated as a city in 1946 (City of Folsom, 2011) and Rancho Cordova incorporated much more recently, in 2003.

In 1949 the Folsom Cordova Joint School District was established, serving many communities within El Dorado County, the community of Orangevale, and city of Rancho Cordova. During the district's early years there were only two schools, both of which were located in the Folsom area. Throughout the 1950’s Rancho Cordova
experienced a housing boom, adding four more schools to the district, all located within the Rancho Cordova community. In 1967 the Folsom Cordova Joint School District was officially instated and called the Folsom Cordova Unified School District (FCUSD).

During the 1980’s, Folsom experienced a housing development growth and nine more schools were added to the district, specifically in the Folsom area. The community known as Rancho Cordova was eventually incorporated as a city in 2003 (Folsom Cordova Unified School District, 2010 A).

The FCUSD currently serves over 18,000 students, nearly 4,000 of whom are students in six, seventh, and eighth grade (Folsom Cordova Unified School District, 2010 B). Although the school district unifies the communities of Folsom and Rancho Cordova, there tends to be a large disconnect due to the differences in demographics within the cities (see table 1.1). The table below displays information on the ethnic diversity, average income, and rate of unemployment in both communities.

Table 1.1
Folsom/Rancho Cordova Demographics 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Folsom</th>
<th>Rancho Cordova</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>74% Caucasian</td>
<td>60% Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10% Asian</td>
<td>19% Hispanic/Latino</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6% African American</td>
<td>12% Asian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5% Other</td>
<td>10% African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2% Multi Race</td>
<td>7% Multi Race</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean annual income</td>
<td>$123,733</td>
<td>$62,611</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment rate</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td>13.80%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Table retrieved from U.S. Census Bureau, 2011, Rancho Cordova Prospector, 2011)
As displayed in table 1.1, the demographics of Rancho Cordova and Folsom are notably different in terms of race, annual income and unemployment. The community of Folsom has one of the lowest per capita crime rates in the region, while Rancho Cordova’s crime rate is high in comparison to other communities (City of Folsom, 2011, City of Rancho Cordova, 2011, Sacramento County Sheriff, 2011). These differences often present as barriers to the FCUSD’s implementation of a strong school support system which successfully meets the needs of students and their families in both communities.

Rancho Cordova inhabits a large population of families in need. Historically, there was a strong military presence in the community due to the Mather Air Force base centrally located within the area. Resulting from the closure of Mather Air Force base in 1993, the dynamics of the Rancho Cordova community were significantly changed. The base was transformed into Mather Community Campus in 1995. Mather Community Campus is a transitional housing and employment service program administered through the Department of Human Assistance and The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The families living in transition at Mather Community Campus face many barriers including addiction, domestic violence, and mental health issues. Many of the children from the program attend school in the FCUSD. This unique population can benefit from extensive learning supports at the schools in which they attend (Sacramento County Department of Human Assistance, 2011).

Although statistically it appears as though the Folsom community does not have a large “at-risk” population in comparison to Rancho Cordova, there are multiple schools
within the area serving a low income population. Folsom is home to Old and New Folsom Prisons, bringing with them many families who have relocated to the area to be near their loved ones. Many of these families live at Mercy Housing apartment home complexes; which are low income complexes that provide case management and resources for their residents. The youth living in the Mercy Housing complexes attend schools within the FCUSD. Families of prisoners often face similar challenges as the families living at Mather Community Campus (Mercy Housing, 2011).

The entire FCUSD has a great need for resources to support its students and their families. As of 2009, there were 783 documented cases of homelessness within the FCUSD, with only two Homeless Services Coordinators to serve them (Project 680, 2009). The employment of school social workers would enhance the academic success of at-risk students, build vital connections between the school and the community, and improve overall school climate. Social workers could assist with and reinforce the efforts of currently overwhelmed support staff including Homeless Services Coordinators and law enforcement.

Due to recent budget cuts nationwide, the Folsom Cordova Unified School District’s funding has been cut by 18%. This 18% has led to the elimination of many existing support staff positions within the district including school counselors, special education support staff, and school psychologists (Folsom Cordova Unified School District, 2011 C). A Rancho Cordova community town hall meeting was recently held on teen alcohol use sponsored by Club Live participants at Mitchell Middle School in Rancho Cordova. At this meeting, the question was posed regarding what strategies the
The district is currently implementing to prevent alcohol use among teens, and why the district does not allocate funds to appoint a school social worker to provide preventative services on campuses. The response to this question was given by a district board member stating that if the district had extra funds, they would be utilized to fund a position for another teacher because education was the district’s highest priority (Social Host Ordinance, 2011). This is an example of a lack of awareness among many administrators about the roles of school social workers and the positive impact of the services they can offer to enhance academic achievement.

In times of economic crisis, community resources and services can be directly linked to the academic success of students. Despite the FCUSD’s financial challenges and stance on allocation of surplus funds to the provision of holistic services for students and their families, there are extremely limited school supports currently in place within the district. Unfortunately, much of the current programming and services which are available to students and families in the district are only available in Rancho Cordova. This programming is made possible through funding which was acquired in the late 1990’s through Healthy Start monies, stemming from the Full Service Community Schools National Program. One support implemented out of this original funding is the Cordova High School Student Union. This school-based service was originally a family resource center housing homeless services coordinators, a school social worker, and a Department of Human Assistance (DHA) worker. What remains of the program, years after the original funding has ended, are the homeless services coordinators and a small space for students to spend time after school.
Another resource based in Rancho Cordova is the Family Support Center. The district’s current superintendent is encouraging parent engagement on all campuses within the district. The Family Support Center has responded to this encouragement by establishing the Parent Engagement Project, which brings programming for students and parents to schools throughout the district. The project develops and implements parent support groups and community events. Their focus is on increasing parental involvement in schools and educating parents on resources available to help meet their family’s various needs. The Parent Engagement Project serves the entire district, however accessibility to this program for parents in the Folsom area is very limited due to transportation challenges, limited business hours, and the disconnect between the Folsom and Rancho Cordova communities (L. Burkholder, personal communication, November 4, 2011).

The Folsom Cordova Unified School District is proactive in building community partnerships in both Rancho Cordova and Folsom through the Family Support Services department. In Rancho Cordova, one major non-profit agency serving the community is the Folsom Cordova Community Partnership (The Partnership). The Partnership offers grant funded programming for youth within the district including school-based individual and group mentoring programs and after school activities. The Partnership provides a small portion of learning supports needed by many youth in Rancho Cordova. The district would continue to greatly benefit from the Partnership’s programs by adding more district support staff who are responsible for securing the future of this program long after
the grants expire and are no longer the source of funding (L. Burkholder, personal communication, November 4, 2011).

The Rancho Cordova Police Activities League (PAL) is another organization serving Rancho Cordova youth and providing much needed learning supports to students as well (L. Burkholder, personal communication, November 4, 2011). District budget cuts have eliminated nearly all sports programming on school campuses, however through PAL grants, some sports programming has continued. PAL also provides group mentoring programs on school campuses, and after-school enrichment activities (Rancho Cordova Police Activities League, 2011).

In Folsom, there is a program serving elementary students, referred to as JUMP mentoring. This program is implemented by parent volunteers. At this time, all known community-based learning supports serving students in middle school and high school in the Folsom community are faith-based. Although faith-based organizations have a vital role in the community and provide countless benefits, they are not appropriate for all students. Families who do not adhere to any religion or are of a faith different than the organization may feel uncomfortable or be reluctant to participate in any programs they have to offer.

The district offers a couple of options for after school programming at all FCUSD schools. One of these programs is Student Care, an after school program which requires parents to pay a monthly fee. Another program is called Star Talented and Responsible Students (STARS) Academy, which is a federally funded after school program. The
district also houses two community health clinics through Catholic Healthcare West on two school campuses; including one located in Rancho Cordova and one in Folsom (Folsom Cordova Unified School District, 2011 D).

There are currently no mental health services provided directly on school campuses in Rancho Cordova or Folsom. Year to year, there are no guarantees that programs currently implemented on school campuses will continue. There is a need for consistency among these programs, as well as a need for these programs to be sustained throughout the last year of their grant funding and into the future (L. Burkholder, personal communication, November 4, 2011).

The Folsom Cordova Unified School District is in a unique position, serving two very different communities. Although the demographics of each city are very different, the needs are similar. At each school within the district, there are students struggling with many issues ranging from unmet basic needs to severe mental health issues. The implementation of a strong school support system which successfully meets the needs of students in both communities is vital to the success of at-risk youth throughout the district.

**Statement of the Research Problem**

Services provided by school social workers have been incredibly helpful to students and families who are at-risk or under-served. While their utilities are recognized by those schools which have benefited from school social worker’s services, many still are not fully aware of or understand the functions of school social workers. Recent
budget shortages, while increasing the needs for school social workers, also eliminate the resources to provide school-based social work services. As a result of this lack of services, the district is affected by poor attendance, below average academic performance, and increased behavior problems.

**Purpose of the Study**

This study aimed to evaluate the perspectives of parents of middle school students within the FCUSD on current services offered through the schools, what services they need the schools to offer, and how these unmet needs have affected their child’s attendance, behavior, and academic performance. The purpose for obtaining this information was to show evidence of the need for the district to provide support services to families through school social workers. The study further explored what roles and contributions school social workers could offer in the FCUSD based on the needs and perspectives of the students’ parents.

**Theoretical Framework**

School social workers are most qualified to provide needed services to families of students in middle school due to their holistic approach to serving their clients. Compared to other professionals, social workers are unique because they are trained to view the people they work with through the lens of an ecological framework. This perspective enables social workers to develop a thorough understanding of social and emotional determinants of student behavior. Children are not students only, they are unique and complex individuals with a range of experiences both in and away from school. Social workers have the expertise to see the broader picture of influences on the
individual and the effect these influences may have on academic performance, attendance, and behavior. The ecological framework encourages creativity with interventions and the development of wraparound services which address all essential needs of the student.

California Education Code Laws mandate that schools provide breakfast to students in the public school system every school day. This policy reflects the underlying value within the educational system to address all levels of student needs. These values are represented and validated through the theoretical framework of Maslow's Hierarchy of needs. Maslow theorized that there are various specific needs every human being must fulfill in order to progress to self-actualization. The first level are physiological needs, which include food, water, health, hygiene, and other basic necessities for life. The school is meeting this first level of needs in one way by providing school breakfast. If the school believes in providing basic necessities and meeting the needs of its students in order to enhance their learning, then all needs should be addressed and valued as well. The other needs indicated by Maslow include safety, social needs, esteem, and self-actualization.

**Definition of Terms**

**School Social Worker**

A professional with an accredited Master of Social Work degree who is hired by the school district to specifically work with students identified by administrators and staff as needing extra support in the following areas: socio-emotional, academic, behavior, and attendance.
At-risk Youth

Adolescents who face barriers to academic and lifelong success due to poverty, frequent exposure to criminal activity, lack of access to services, and other risk factors.

Low Income

Living at or below the guidelines stipulated in the requirements for receiving free or reduced school lunch, mandating that the annual household income is at or below 130% of the Federal income poverty guidelines (www.fns.usda.gov, 2011).

Poor School Attendance

The operational definition of poor attendance for this study is a student who receives a letter from the school regarding an attendance problem within the current academic year.

Poor Behavior

Defined in this study as a student who has been suspended from school within the current academic year.

Poor Academic Performance

Defined in this study as a student who earns grades that are mostly B’s or below.

Assumptions

The questionnaire results were analyzed with the assumption that parents are indicating honest answers, have a child in the appropriate grade level, and have an understanding of the issues the questionnaire inquires about. There is also an assumption that the participants are representative of the middle school parent population for the entire Folsom Cordova Unified School District (FCUSD).
Another assumption has been made that school administration and staff on campuses where school social workers are present would support the role and responsibilities of the school social worker, and would not act as a barrier to the success of the social worker. It is also assumed that the students and family members accept the services and support that social workers have to offer, and perceive the social worker as a useful resource.

In terms of employing school social workers, several assumptions are made. The first is that the social workers will have adequate experience and professional skills to perform effectively in their job positions. Another important factor is that these social workers will closely adhere to the professional guidelines laid out in the NASW Code of Ethics.

**Justification**

School social work jobs have been severely impacted by the current status of the economy in the United States. As pressure is being placed on school districts to reduce costs and operate with significantly less funding while improving academic results, support staff are often among the first to be cut from the budget. Unfortunately, support staff are often viewed as non-essential or even disposable at times. This study aims to provide support for the idea that school social workers are an essential and invaluable resource to all middle schools, particularly those serving at-risk populations in the FCUSD.
Limitations

The findings of this study are limited due to the convenient sampling method that it employed. The questionnaire was only administered in English and Spanish languages. The populations who speak languages other than English or Spanish were not properly represented in this study. The questionnaire results only reflect the current student body, and may not be generalized to future middle school parents’ opinions and needs within the district.

Other limitations of the study include terms and concepts that may not be familiar to the participants. This limitation may have led to inaccurate responses due to possible confusion or misunderstanding. It is reasonable to consider that a participant understood the services mentioned in the questionnaire by different names, which also could have led to confusion in the responses. In consideration of these limitations, questions were worded as clearly and simply as possible, using the most universal and commonly known language in the hopes they would be well understood. It is possible, though unlikely, that families may not have been honest in all of their responses. This limitation was addressed by ensuring confidentiality for all participants and phrasing questions in a neutral, non-judgmental manner.

The time frame in which the questionnaires were distributed was limited. The researchers felt if there had been time and resources to administer a pre-questionnaire, provide education on the role and benefits of school social workers, and later administer a post-questionnaire, the findings could have been more substantial and statistically significant.
Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

School social workers provide a variety of benefits to the students, families, and faculty at the school sites where they serve. This chapter will provide a review of the literature which supports the importance of the role of social workers on school campuses. It is important to examine how and why social work services developed within the public education system. Understanding the historical roots of school social work will demonstrate how and why specific services and practices developed. We can learn a great deal from examining strategies which produce effective results, as well as those strategies which were not successful, and use this knowledge to guide current practice and policy. In assessing how school social work began, the various changes it has experienced as a profession, and where it is at currently, we will gain a more thorough understanding of what social work has to offer to the public school system and the most effective strategies at delivering these services.

Public schools are compelled both legally and ethically to provide a quality and appropriate education to all minors residing in the United States. Unfortunately, many students face insurmountable barriers to learning that must be addressed if they are to succeed in school. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recognized specific barriers to learning that students often experience on an individual level including inadequate healthcare, lack of social and school support services, negative attitudes toward school, lack of peer or family support, lack of recreational opportunities,
personal disabilities, lack of community involvement, peers who are negative influences, school and community deficiencies, and deficiencies in necessary prerequisite skills to succeed academically (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 1999). When viewing through a macro lens, one can see how students are also negatively impacted by poverty, domestic violence, homelessness, drug abuse, alcoholism, negative images in the media, racism, lack of cultural sensitivity within the school culture, and countless other challenges. It is no longer sufficient in our contemporary society to view school as a place for curricular education only. School social workers serving on campus are the most appropriately qualified to adequately meet the needs of the students and their families.

Limited research has been done at this point on parent’s perspectives of school social work. It is unclear what their opinions are regarding the role of social workers and the variety of benefits they can offer to their children and families. More research must be done in order to examine parents’ attitudes regarding school social work. It is also important to clearly understand the roles, responsibilities, and special qualities school social workers have to offer to the educational system.

Research shows that social workers carry a great deal of understanding and empathy for the families they work with, which is unique to the profession. It was observed that during interviews with abused children and their families, school social workers “included empathic statements about the challenges families faced, particularly related to poverty, mental illness, and inadequate services” (Chanmugan, 2011, p.153). It
would be beneficial to assess whether or not parents are able to see the valuable skills school social workers can offer their families.

**Duties of a School Social Worker**

Social workers have a diverse skill set that offer countless benefits to school campuses and the community on a variety of levels. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics,

In schools, social workers often serve as the link between students' families and the school, working with parents, guardians, teachers, and other school officials to ensure that students reach their academic and personal potential. They also assist students in dealing with stress or emotional problems. Many school social workers work directly with children with disabilities and their families. In addition, they address problems such as misbehavior, truancy, teenage pregnancy, and drug and alcohol problems and advise teachers on how to cope with difficult students. School social workers may teach workshops to entire classes on topics like conflict resolution (2011).

Given the diverse demands of their jobs, social workers are most effective when they can adapt to new challenges and environments easily. This job definition created by the Bureau of Labor Statistics demonstrates the variety of skills and resources which school social workers can provide. By listing these characteristics, it highlights the unique nature of this work and validates the importance of the profession.
School Social Work and the Ecological Perspective

Regarding what social workers have to offer in a school setting, they provide a holistic perspective of student’s environments and understand how to synthesize this information to develop an accurate view of the student’s challenges and strengths. This is expressed through their ability to integrate information from home, school, the community, and the outside world for the benefit of students. This ecological perspective enables social workers to develop a thorough understanding of social and emotional determinants of student behavior. But it is important to understand that children are not students only, they are unique and complex individuals with a variety of experiences, strengths, and challenges. Social workers have the expertise to see the broader picture of influences on the individual and the effect these influences may have on academic performance. Factors such as abuse, poverty, homelessness, broken relationships, learning disabilities, exposure to criminal activity, environmental stressors, the media, health issues, cultural factors, religion, and even political issues may all have a profound effect on the individual student.

Consequently, claims are now being made that the ecological perspective is particularly useful to apply when making plans for improving school climate. Some researchers purport that it is necessary to view students within their school climate and social environments. It can be difficult for teachers, principals, and other school staff to understand and embrace this new framework. The focus of the training educators receive tends to ignore the ecological perspective of their students. Their training supports the idea that educators should only focus on group dynamics within the classroom or
individual student behavior. As one study explained, “after all, the vast majority of educators do not receive training in the ecological and systemic influences on academic outcomes...These limited, selective data are consistent with an overall school improvement approach described as building-centered and walled-in” (Hopson & Lawson, 2011, p.109). This approach of educating the “whole child” is necessary to effectively teach this generation of students. The ecological framework provides a theoretical basis for the research conducted for this thesis project.

School Social Work and Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs

If one were to apply Maslow’s hierarchy of needs to an analysis of the public school system, particularly in neighborhoods experiencing high poverty and crime rates, it would become clear why many students are struggling. In order to survive, humans require their physiological needs to be met at all times. The next level of needs is safety, which is often a challenge when living in a neighborhood experiencing high crime rates. When families are living in survival mode, struggling to meet their basic needs, it is difficult to find higher level functions such as education a priority. Social workers are able to help students and their families function and eventually emerge from a crisis situation, with positive outcomes resulting. When the various levels of needs are being met, the individual can approach the concept of reaching self-actualization. Education is the key to reaching this level of personal awareness and life experience.

Cultural Competency in School Social Work

Cultural competence is a core value of the social work profession, and school social workers can serve as a link between the school and the community using culturally
appropriate skills and building a respect for diversity within the school. Services provided by the school need to be delivered in languages that represent the populations it serves, and need to be sensitive of individual cultures and religions. Social workers are trained to work in a respectful and culturally appropriate manner with various subgroups and cultures. This can build a bridge between school staff and the families which they serve. Parents are more likely to feel respected and appreciated when the educators they encounter have cultural sensitivity and understanding. These skills break down barriers between the home and the school.

**Administrator Perspectives on School Social Work**

In a study conducted by Bye, Shepard, Patridge & Alvarez, they sought to gain insight on the role of school social workers in public schools, as well as the attitudes of their respective school administrators. Their data effectively demonstrated the variety of roles school social workers play, and went as far as breaking it into categories to display the amount of time typically spent in each role. Their data from the self reports of school social workers showed that 43% of their time was spent in direct services such as therapy, 26% in case management, 15% in consultation with other school staff and outside agencies working with students, 12% on school-wide interventions, and 4% on other responsibilities (2009). These findings shed an important light on the eclectic nature of this profession.

One of the more notable findings in this study showed that school administrators and social workers alike place a high value on the role of social workers in providing mental health services, finding “both school administrators and social workers viewed
provision of front-line mental health services as the major benefit of employing school social workers” (Bye, et al., 2009, p.102). This reflects an appreciation for the clinical skills held by social workers, as well as other benefits provided by these professionals. The other identified benefits in this study included school social workers’ ability to provide training and consultation to school staff and parents, increase attendance, advocate for students and their families, make a positive impact on the school climate, provide crisis intervention, contribute to academic success, and implement behavior interventions. These findings are consistent with the functions identified in much of the literature on the role of school social workers. Accordingly, this study provides a complimentary starting point for further discussion on the specific duties and benefits social workers have to offer.

Mental Health Services

The current public school expectations require teachers to focus on a demanding curriculum and improving test scores, administrators to focus on discipline and funding, and school psychologists to focus on assessment. Consequently, there are a lack of mental health and character development opportunities within most schools. Student behavior often reflects this deficit in the educational system. Schools that have a high need for mental health services and a lack of access to these needed services often suffer in many ways. Employing a school social worker is an effective strategy to address these challenges. Social workers are trained in facilitating groups and providing clinical case management and therapy. These skills can be of great benefit on any school campus, particularly one where many of the students are in at-risk populations. In addition, these
services benefit individual students dealing with high levels of stress and emotional problems and can help facilitate their academic success.

Often there is a need for individual and group counseling among the student body on a school campus. A school social worker is able to provide these services and possesses the skills to make referrals to outside agencies when needed. Being able to provide direct services in this manner can be particularly useful with situations such as conflict management or brief therapy. This ability to provide mental health services combined with the other services school social workers have to offer provides additional support for the importance of this professional role in the school system.

Psychosocial assessments are a useful tool that middle schools can implement when building academic or behavior plans for students experiencing challenges. School social workers are essential when compiling student assessments, as the basic focus of the school social worker is the constellation of teacher, parent, and child. The social worker must be able to relate to and work with all aspects of the child’s situation, but the basic skill underlying all of this is assessment, a systematic way of understanding and communicating what is happening and what is possible. Building on assessment, the social worker develops a plan to assist the total constellation—teacher and students in the classroom, parents, and others—to work together to support the child in successfully completing the developmental steps that lie ahead (Massat, Constable, McDonald & Flynn, 2009, p.6).
Social workers can help to develop interventions based on the data that is collected in assessment, enlist parental involvement and support, and help understand the root causes of the concerns. In addition, they are in the unique position to personally implement these interventions and support students through this process.

**School Social Workers and Parent Engagement**

The relationship between families and school staff is essential to develop a positive school climate which embraces diversity and promotes student success. School social workers can facilitate this by encouraging communication, advocating for families and students, creating attainable opportunities for quality parent involvement, and assisting parents and teachers in communicating and collaborating with each other. In explaining the role of school social workers, researchers explained they “typically serve as liaisons among the family, school, and community, and they help mobilize resources to meet the identified needs of students and their families” (Davey, Penuel, Allison-Tant, & Rosner, 2000, p.190). Social workers are involved in the communities they work in, conducting home visits, collaborating with neighborhood agencies, attending parent-teacher meetings, and linking families with services which will benefit them. Parent involvement and effective communication with the home is essential for students to receive quality education. The relationship between students, families, and school staff needs to be positive and strong in order to promote student success.

**Promoting Student Safety**

Student safety both at home and at school are of great concern to school personnel, and are essential for academic success. Social workers are mandated
reporters, and receive specialized training on assessing for and reporting abuse. School social workers have professional skills that make them best equipped to make reports and referrals on behalf of the child. When reporting concerns of child abuse and maltreatment, social workers proceed in ways that are most appropriate for the child and make every effort to maintain a positive relationship with that child throughout the process. They are often able to intervene before a report is necessary, as they build relationships with families and offer resources and support to caregivers who are overwhelmed.

Crisis intervention

Crisis intervention is another important aspect of a school social worker’s job. No child is able to reach his or her full potential when a significant environmental, emotional, or personal challenge is being experienced, without appropriate intervention from a qualified professional. Social workers can implement effective crisis intervention strategies and interventions with students as needed. They are often the first adults to observe and acknowledge the personal crisis, and by offering their support they are supporting the academic success of those students.

Often there are a variety of programs and resources within the community that could be of great benefit to these struggling students and their families. Social workers specialize in maintaining updated information about community resources, and knowing how to best disseminate the information regarding those opportunities. They understand how to refer consumers to outside agencies, how to best utilize the services, and often maintain professional contacts in order to streamline the referral process. Social workers
take in to account issues with transportation, language differences, and other barriers to service that may interfere with accessing these resources, and are capable of generating creative solutions to address these barriers. Teachers and other school staff rarely have this knowledge or multidimensional understanding of the community the students are living in.

Working with students who are experiencing homelessness is another essential function of crisis intervention provided by the school social worker. Although this study does not focus solely on the needs and challenges of homeless students, examining research done on this topic provides useful information that can be applied to any at-risk school population. A study done in Nashville, Tennessee analyzed a program for homeless students to see what was necessary to effectively address their needs. Although the program started with school teachers, they found that academic interventions alone were not enough to support homeless students. In fact, they needed psychosocial supports that only social workers had the appropriate professional skills to provide. Because of their understanding of the ecological perspective and their unique position within the school system, school social workers are capable of helping the entire school staff understand the challenges homeless children are having while providing support to their families. Results showed that, “without the focus of viewing a person in his or her environmental context, educational efforts aimed at making a difference will do little for homeless students” (Davey, et.al, 2000, p.189).

Homeless students could greatly benefit from advocates who support them through their educational career, despite frequent displacement and needing to move. In
their study examining the educational experience of homeless students, Davey, et.al, argues that this long term relationship with the same professional can be the key to the academic success of this particular subgroup of students. They also suggest that, “for homeless students, school social workers can engage in a number of roles that can help: case management; provision of basic needs, such as school supplies and adequate clothing; advocacy and communication with teachers; and coordination of services for families” (2000, p.190). This study supports the idea that social workers are necessary within the school system to serve as effective advocates for homeless students.

**Additional Roles of School Social Workers**

Additional roles that school social workers are responsible for often go unnoticed, although there are a few more notable functions they commonly serve. They often are the key staff member to apply for grants and other additional funding opportunities. When a fundraiser is needed, school social workers typically are responsible for every aspect of its implementation. They also have the skill set to offer trainings and inservices to school staff members, parents, community members, and students. These can be on various topics from character education, parenting skills, and teacher interventions for students with special needs or behavior problems. Attendance is another area where social workers can facilitate improvement at the school level. School social workers regularly perform individual interventions with students experiencing challenges with their attendance or behavior. They create reward systems and track individual goals and progress for at-risk students.
Given the unique challenges and needs of students with disabilities, school social workers can provide special support in this area as well. Specifically, social workers can take a lead role with services such as creating functional assessments and conducting team meetings on behalf of the students. Functional assessments require a variety of specialists to provide their unique professional perspective for the benefit of the students they serve. Harrison and Harrison published an article asserting school social workers are best equipped to conduct Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings and configure functional assessments. They argue that the school social worker should take the lead role in functional assessments, "particularly because of his or her experience in negotiating other tertiary processes in the schools, such as wraparound services...and possess knowledge in systems and understands the importance of engaging with various individuals who influence clients, he or she could take the lead in identifying and securing their participation" (2009, p.122). Their work emphasizes the unique skill set these professionals have to offer.

The role of school social workers is complex and challenging. They often work with some of the most vulnerable populations and influence pivotal points in the educational process of students. When taking a broader view of all the benefits school social workers have to offer, it is difficult to see how a school could find it possible to meet the needs of their students even at a basic level without a social worker on their team.
History of School Social Work

When school social work as a profession began, the first workers were not school employees, rather they were employed by agencies within the community. The official academic year that school social work has been documented to have begun is 1906-1907. During this period, social workers were starting their efforts in Boston, Chicago, New York, and Hartford (Costin, 1969). Various programs sponsored workers to serve the populations of particular schools and the communities they lived in. At the time, these programs were considered experimental and innovative. Ultimately, these early programs had many of the same values and responsibilities as modern day school social work programs. The idea of education as a relational process, creating a mission within schools, the importance of inclusion within education, and respecting differences amongst students are all social work ideologies that came from the early school social workers and still prevail to this day (Masaat, et.al, 2009).

Another important concept in the history of school social work was the role of what were called "visiting teachers". Their responsibilities were focused on building a connection between the school and the home, and taking a more holistic view of the students' education to look at the whole child in all areas of their lives. The first visiting teachers were hired in Rochester, New York by the Board of Education in 1913 (Masaat, et.al, 2009). Education during this time was beginning to embrace a mission of being more widely available to all populations, not only the wealthy.

Although there was a desire to educate children living in poverty faced with many barriers to education, there was a growing realization of the need to specifically address
these barriers. Visiting teachers attempted to do this, but did face many challenges along the way. Mary Richmond, one of the most well-known social work advocates in history, wrote about the role of visiting teachers in her groundbreaking book, What is Social Casework? She explained,

a visiting teacher is a social worker… for a given number of pupils reported to her by the school for poor scholarship, bad health, misconduct, lateness, irregular attendance, or for what appear to be adverse home conditions, to discover the causal factors in the difficulty and then tries to work out a better adjustment (1922, p.198).

These factors are all still relevant to this day in terms of what school social workers have to offer. It is interesting to also note that the challenges of students have been consistent throughout the decades and still apply to modern day students at risk.

By 1920, concerns began to surmount about the specific roles and duties of the visiting teachers. A meeting was held to address concerns about role definition, organization, and administration of these unique teachers. The result of that meeting was the official organization of the National Association of Visiting Teachers, which ultimately merged with the National Association of Social Workers in 1955.

During the period of time when school social work was a new concept, the focus was primarily on educational interventions and making school relevant to the most under-represented populations. Around the 1940’s to the 1960’s, a change in school social work slowly began to develop. This focus began to gain respect for the individual child, by changing goals and methods while emphasizing individual casework. Professionals
started to recognize that school practices and policies could have a negative impact on
students, and studied ways to ameliorate these issues. Parents also began to be a more
prioritized focus of school social workers, and they were seen as an important aspect of
the individual casework with students (Allen-Meares, 1996). Much of this career
development and formation of professional ideology which focuses on the individual led
to current day practices of school social work.

Throughout the mid-century, social work in schools had established a strong
professional foundation within many school systems. Florence Poole was a well-known
social worker who wrote about and advocated for the profession. She promoted the idea
that social workers are an important part of education, and the services they provide are
irreplaceable. The concept of social work shifting from being an afterthought to
traditional education to being an essential function of education was being supported.
Poole stated, “We see one of our most significant social institutions establishing social
work as an integral part of its service, essential to the carrying out of its purpose. We
recognize clarity in the definition of the services as a social work service” (Poole, 1949,
p.454). She argued that the education system should focus on adapting to the needs of its
students and their families, rather than focus on or blame students who were recognized
as having the most significant problems.

The first official school social worker exam and credential was awarded by the
National Association of Social Workers (NASW) in 1992. This credential was called the
School Social Worker Specialist (SSWS) credential and in 2000 was renamed the
Certified School Social Work Specialist (C-SSWS) credential. In order to earn this
credential you have to have a Master’s Degree in Social Work from an accredited university, two years of supervised school social work experience, and abide by the NASW code of ethics (National Association of Social Workers, 2011). Several different fields, including Social Work, offer the Pupil Personnel Specialist (PPS) credential, which further supports the role and professional identity of the school social worker.

There are two national organizations which represent school social workers in the United States. One organization is the School Social Work Association of America, established in July 1994 by a group of sixty-four (64) school social workers who met in Edwardsville, IL. The other organization is the American Council for School Social Work, founded in June 2009. Both organizations advocate for the growth of the profession and the strengthening of professional identity. These organizations also provide the essential function of supporting political causes which promote and protect the profession of school social work.

**Current Issues (Policies and Practices) in School Social Work**

Although the role of the school social worker is often thought of as a micro and mezzo level position, there are growing opportunities for macro work. In the current era of school reform, social workers have the unique professional expertise to bring towards policy development and leadership. Much of this work is school and district level advocacy and systemic work. Corbin makes the argument that social workers should be involved in site-based management, which can be seen through active participation in various teams within the school system such as child study teams, parent-teacher teams, and site-based decision making teams (2005). Every school campus has its own unique
culture, procedures, policies, and set of needs, therefore school social workers must adapt their involvement accordingly.

Students are facing a variety of serious challenges in their lives that can impede or prevent their academic success. Ensuring academic success for all students is a legal mandate in the United States, as well as a core American value. Factors contributing to academic failure and other at-risk behaviors in youth include homelessness, alcohol and drug abuse, victimization and abuse, and running away. These factors, as well as other negative experiences and relationships in the home can contribute to a youth’s estrangement from community programs, school, and other youth activities (Heinze, Jozefowiz, & Toro, 2010). School social workers can provide effective interventions to address many of these issues, which are necessary to provide quality education for at-risk youth.

Teachers are experiencing a growing pressure on their jobs to improve test scores, provide a quality education to each individual student while class sizes continue to grow, collaborate with the family while maintaining a positive working relationship, and address the behavioral concerns that arise within the classroom. With all of this pressure, many teachers find it difficult to meet these goals in a meaningful way. School social workers can be of great assistance given this current climate of public education. Social workers should focus on implementing data-driven programs and interventions while making every effort to support outcome-based education. School social workers can offer support to staff on a personal level, as well as provide trainings and in-services for career development.
When considering the status of our economy, public schools are often struggling to expand their budget. Although it is necessary to utilize funds from the general budget in order to employ a social worker, the benefits are priceless. School social workers, operating in an appropriate role, are both cost-effective and an investment in the success of the entire school community. Social workers are able to utilize their skills to apply for grants and develop programs that are cost effective and produce measurable results. By doing this, social workers are actually creating additional funds for the schools and communities they work in. They are also able to provide free trainings to parents, faculty, and students. Overall, social workers are a benefit to the schools and the communities in which they work.

A study conducted in the United Kingdom focused on the cost-effectiveness of school social workers and the intervention projects that they implement. The study took place over a three year period, during a time where unemployment in the region was rising significantly and had a major impact on the participants. Despite the social challenges experienced during that time, results demonstrated favorable support for the role of school social workers. The researchers found there were improvements in a variety of areas where a social work program was implemented. The improvements were specifically in the areas of bullying, attendance, drug use and abuse, theft, and fights on campus. The research not only had face validity, but the gains were also "statistically significant in their own right, and when the direction of positive gains is aggregated it is clear that the gains are not due to random variation" (Bagley & Prichard, 1998, p.226).
In addition, the researchers conducted interviews and examined specific case studies which supported their findings.

Bagley & Pritchard's data and statistical analysis provide more detailed information in support of the role of school social workers and their potential for implementing effective programs. For example, in one of the studied elementary schools, bullying reduced 22% at the school with the social work program during the study period compared to a 7% rise at the "study control" school without any services. At those schools during the same time period, the school with the social work program had a 33% reduction of student's engaging in theft versus an 81% rise at the school with no program. At the high schools they studied, researchers found the social work program made a significant positive impact as well. The school with the social work program had a 53% reduction in truancies, 9% reduction in fights, and 43% reduction in the cases of students using hard drugs during the study period. At the school without any services, the incidences in each of these categories actually increased, 12%, 11%, and 200% respectively.

The researchers applied their convincing data to advocate for employing more school social workers. They believed this job position was justified by the cost-effectiveness and overall positive outcomes of their programs. These results demonstrate great potential for similar results if these practices were to be put in place in the United States. This data suggests that the schools which are experiencing the highest rate of problem behavior can benefit the most from implementing a high quality support program facilitated by a social worker.
Improving school attendance is essential for ensuring academic success as well as increasing revenue to the school. School social workers can create an invaluable role for themselves on a school campus by implementing successful, evidence-based attendance programs and interventions. Research has indicated that, “school social workers need to assess risk and protective factors related to the likelihood of absenteeism and truancy and be familiar with best practices in the context of specific situations” (Teasley, 2004, p.126). In a study conducted recently, in 2009, administrators and school social workers demonstrated that the social work services on their school campuses improved behavior and attendance. In this study, school social workers and administrators expected an increase in attendance and a reduction in behavior problems due to employing school social workers, with results in agreement they were “consistent with the top two actual outcomes reported by school social workers” (Bye, et.al, 2009, p.104).

Student behavior in a school setting can be measured by various indicators such as number of suspensions, expulsions, office referrals, citations, and loss of privileges. School social workers are able to implement strategies to improve overall student behavior and school climate. To the extent that a negative school climate contributes to problem behaviors and risk factors. They can do this on an individual level, intervening with specific students most at risk of behavior challenges. School social workers are also able to develop campus or district-wide programs to address behavior problems specific to those populations. Improving the overall school climate can have a positive impact on many levels, from the entire community to the individual students. It is also important to note, and it is often overlooked that, “in the students they treat, social workers who lead
organizational improvement initiatives are engaging in important secondary prevention, ideally reducing the severity of young people's needs” (Hopson & Lawson, 2011, p.110). An example of this is students who are being bullied are more likely to experience mental health problems, and secondary prevention can reduce the impact of this on individual students.

There is also a growing problem of a lack of student engagement and commitment to their own education. Academic failure is often a result of student disengagement in school. Many behavioral, instructional, curricular, and social interventions within a school system are focused on the problem of student disengagement. Student disengagement in school is defined by his or her level of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. Deficiencies in this key element of the educational process can lead to student misbehavior and the increase in likelihood for delinquency (Hirschfield & Gasper, p.210). School social workers are in a position which allows them to form a relationship with students and their families, and assist in engaging and empowering the students in their academic programs.

According to the recommendations in the 2008 U.S. Department of education plan, student engagement should be a primary focus of all schools. They base engagement on attendance, behavior, and connection to the school, and assert that student engagement will lead to a reduction of the dropout rate. The article states that, "during the middle school years, students’ interest in school and academic skills may begin to lag, so that by high school, students may need intensive individual support or other support to re-engage them” (Dynarski, Clarke, Cobb, Finn, Rumberger & Smink, 2008). Some of
this “lag” may be due to normal developmental experiences. On the other hand, this report emphasized the importance of not allowing this experience to spiral into a pattern of educational disengagement. The authors urge policymakers and educators to emphasize student engagement and focus on creating strategies to improve it.

**Future of School Social Work**

Upon reviewing the literature, much was learned about the perceptions of school social workers within a school system, and the role that they are recommended to take in the future. In his article examining the future of school social work, Corbin explains how the professional social worker can bring an ecological perspective to a school, which can counterbalance the traditional views of educators. Part of the traditional views are that student challenges are individual problems, and the interventions they put in place to address these challenges only focus on the individual and their parents. This article demonstrates how social workers can bring a unique perspective on the student-in-environment.

Social workers are trained in the ecological perspective, which gives them the ability to understand the impact different systems have on a students' educational experience. This insight can be used to develop interventions, shape school policies, and lead to an overall improvement of the school climate. By using the ecological perspective in a school setting, it "allows school staff to consider how interactions between a student and other students, or how the transactions between teachers and school district policies, contribute to a seemingly individual student issue" (2005, p.241).
The complex dynamics within a school and the community can be most effectively understood by applying the ecological perspective. Social workers use this lens to give them perspective and insight on how to help the population they are working with. In doing so, they can develop programs, outreach, and apply interventions to address concerns effecting individual students as well as the student body as a whole.

It is important that school social workers develop and maintain a professional identity based on a set of clear and focused core areas of expertise. The profession must stand out as unique, irreplaceable, and necessary for the success of students and schools overall. Freeman et.al, explain this goal can be attained by understanding that "social workers must demonstrate to educators their expertise in providing creative and effective leadership in six core areas of school reform efforts: environmental assessment, mediation, goal attainment, resources assessment, political action, and needs assessment and intervention planning" (1998, p.397). By applying these core skills within the school system, social workers provide evidence of the special knowledge and skills they have to offer.

Evidence based practice is becoming increasingly relevant in our data driven educational system. Many advocates for the profession are calling for more research to be done in the field on evidence-based practices. James C. Raines makes suggestions for researchers on, “how to evaluate practice effectiveness using a person-in-environment approach that monitors students and their contexts…[and places] evidence-based practice into perspective by providing essential elements of systematic eclecticism and by looking
at larger issues in the change process” (2004, p.71). This will provide a strong empirical support for the role of the school social worker.

Legislation is another important component in establishing a strong professional presence as well as advocating for the profession in general. On March 16, 2011, a bill called “School Social Workers Improving Student Success Act” H.R. 1138, was introduced. It was presented by Congresswoman Gwen Moore of Wisconsin to amend the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and “establish a grant program to fund additional school social workers and retain school social workers already employed in high-need local educational agencies” (School Social Work Association of America, 2011). There is a great deal of advocacy taking place around this act, as it will secure funding for school social workers through four year grants awarded to schools experiencing the highest level of need for the services provided by school social workers.

In conclusion, school social work as a profession is vital to the proper education of youth in the United States, particularly those going without their basic needs being met. The costs to the educational system are minimal, as social workers are trained and skilled in grant writing to fund their position and other programming on school campuses. The benefits to school staff and administrators are numerous, making it possible for schools to function more effectively and ensure that staff are able to focus on their primary duties as educators. By supporting the students and their families with basic needs as well as useful interventions, school social workers are promoting their academic success.
Chapter 3

METHODS

This research sought to examine the unmet needs of the population who attended middle school in the Folsom Cordova Unified School District (FCUSD) during the 2011 fall semester, and how those needs affected the population’s behavior, school attendance, and academic performance. Only limited services were available from the school district to link its students and their families to resources which would meet their basic needs. The study aimed to consider whether or not this deficit might also be related to these students’ poor academic performance, problems with school attendance, and an increase in suspensions.

Study Design

A questionnaire survey design was used to collect relevant data for this study. The questionnaire consisted of twenty-eight multiple choice, close ended questions, and one open ended question. The first section addressed family needs and the availability of a staff member on campus to assist with linking families to needed resources. The second portion of the questionnaire collected demographic information and specific data regarding their student’s performance in school. The writers avoided the use of double-barreled or leading questions when creating each item on the questionnaire.

Participants for this research study were parents of youth who were enrolled in middle schools in the FCUSD in the Fall of 2011. Parents who agreed to participate were asked in person to complete the study questionnaire about their middle school students’
academic performance, behavior and attendance interventions received, and resources needed.

**Sampling Procedures**

Participants were recruited through the use of convenience and snowball sampling methods. In order to identify appropriate participants for this study, the researchers sought out parents of youth who were enrolled in Rancho Cordova area middle schools in the FCUSD in the Fall of 2011. The researchers surveyed parents attending various school functions associated with the Folsom Cordova Unified School District's middle school events, as well as parents receiving services from a local non-profit in the Rancho Cordova area. These agencies providing services were the Folsom Cordova Community Partnership and Folsom Cordova Unified School District’s Family Support Services. No inducements were offered. The researchers attended nine different District and agency events during the months of September through December of 2011. Announcements through events’ organizers, flyers, posters, and personal contacts were used to identify opportunities to recruit potential participants. In total, thirty eight (38) participants were recruited. Determination of whether or not youth were in middle school in this district was based upon self-reports by the participants.

**Data Collection Procedures**

The researchers approached participants while attending district, community, and agency events where parents of middle school students were likely to be present. The hosting agencies made brief announcements regarding the presence of the researchers and made a general invitation for parents to participate in the study. First, the researchers
introduced themselves and explained the nature of the study. Once participants stated their interest and agreed to participate, the researchers explained informed consent and confidentiality. Informed consent for participation in this study was obtained through a signed written consent (see appendix A & B). All participants were given a consent form prior to completing the questionnaire. Copies of the consents were made available for participants to keep.

Upon completion of the consent form, the participants received a questionnaire. The researchers were not present while participants were completing the questionnaire. Participants left completed questionnaires in a secured collection envelope which was available at the participation location. At the end of the study, the researchers were available if the participants wished to ask them any additional questions.

The researchers avoided any conflict of interest by strictly giving questionnaires to participants of whom the researchers had no relationship or acquaintance with. The researchers were not employed by the Folsom Cordova Unified School District and were not pursuing political involvement in the area, both of which may have presented a conflict of interest.

**Instruments**

The primary instrument being utilized in this study was a questionnaire (see appendix C & D). The instrument focused on the possible needs of families who were served by the FCUSD. Guided by the purpose of this study and informed by the literature, this questionnaire focused on the service needs of the respondents. They were asked if their family needed any of the following services: food stamps (EBT card), free
or low cost health insurance, free tutoring for the child, counseling, free school supplies, transportation, after-school activities, free clothing, financial assistance, and free or reduced school lunch. The response choices to these needs were “yes,” “no,” or “we currently use this service.” It was expected that these closed-ended answers would identify whether the families were in need of these services, yet were not receiving them, needed these services and were already using them, or were not in need of the services. The utilization of simple, easy to understand, closed-ended questions allowed the questionnaire to be easier to answer, faster to complete, and consequently increased the likelihood of participation.

In an effort to more accurately reflect the community and obtain a more representative participant sample, the questionnaire was offered in Spanish as well as English (see appendix C & D). This allowed parents who were monolingual and spoke only Spanish to be able to provide important feedback through participation in this study. The researchers were interested in the possibility of any responses reflecting needs or challenges that were unique to the Spanish speaking subgroup of study participants. The questionnaire and consent form were first developed in English, and then translated into Spanish with the assistance of a native Spanish speaker. Once the questionnaires were completed, the responses were translated back to English and incorporated with the rest of the data.

The questionnaire asked participants a variety of meaningful questions. Parents were asked whether or not they had received a letter from the school regarding their middle school students’ attendance problems and how many absences their child had this
school year, in order to assess their child’s attendance. In an effort to identify students with disciplinary challenges, the questionnaire inquired if their children had ever been suspended from middle school. The questionnaire requested information about what grades their children mostly received to gain an understanding of student academic achievement. Participants were also asked to answer whether or not the school offered assistance with the various resources mentioned.

The questionnaire (see appendix C & D) had a total of twenty nine questions and typically required less than ten minutes to complete. It was written at approximately a sixth grade reading level in an effort to keep the questionnaire simple and easy to understand by a majority of the participants. Based on the information being sought, the researchers developed two hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1**

Respondents who are in need of resources but are not receiving them have a higher likelihood of reporting that their middle school students have attendance, academic, or behavior problems.

**Hypothesis 2**

There is an association between needs and knowledge of social work services and the preference of schools serving as a center for community services:

a. Respondents who have expressed the needs for service would likely indicate that their middle school students would benefit from having a school social worker on campus;
b. Respondents who have expressed the needs for service would likely agree that schools should be a center for students and families to access needed community services.

**Data Analysis**

The data received through the questionnaire was analyzed using the Statistical Program for Social Sciences (SPSS). The questions on the instrument used for gathering data were renamed as variables. The participants’ responses to these variables were coded and entered to calculate the number of responses for each code (i.e., yes=1, no=2). Basic descriptive statistics were used to illustrate the answers for each of the questions. Similar items were regrouped into three categories for further analysis: 1. Families in need of services, but not receiving services; 2. Families not in need of services; and 3. Families in need of and already receiving said services. Measurements of central tendency were used to make comparison across categories. These categories of participants were further analyzed through cross tabulation to observe how the access to needed resources may have been related to their child’s academic performance, school attendance, and behavior. Cross tabulation was also used to analyze demographic data with the participants’ level of education and how this variable may have been related to the family’s level of need for the services discussed in the questionnaire.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

The Protocol for the Protection of Human Subjects Application for this study was submitted to the California State University, Sacramento (CSUS) Division of Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee. It was approved as a minimal risk study.
Signed consents were obtained from both the Folsom Cordova Unified School District and the Folsom Cordova Community Partnership stating their approval of the research (see appendix E & F).

When considering all aspects of the study, it becomes clear why the research was classified as minimal risk. According to the CSUS Division of Social Work Human Subject Review Committee’s Level of Risk in Policies and Procedures, a research study can be approved and classified as minimal risk when, “the probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated for participants are no greater than what might be encountered in daily life or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examination or tests” (2008, p.6). There may have been participants who experienced a sense of shame if their children were not performing well in school, or they may have been reminded that their family was in need of assistance from community resources. In order to minimize the possibility of negative feelings being triggered, the questionnaire used to study participants was designed with neutrality which sought to avoid the participants from feeling any emotion when filling it out. To address the potential risk of discomfort which may have been experienced while completing the questionnaire, all participants were given contact information to a local agency (Sacramento County Mental Health) for counseling services if needed to resolve their discomfort. This information was provided on the informed consent form provided to all participants prior to completing the questionnaire.

Participant anonymity was protected by the safe-keeping of the consent forms and questionnaires by the researchers. Participants were informed that their participation in
the study was completely voluntary and they could opt out at any time if they chose. The researchers explained that participation in the study as well as all responses would be kept completely confidential. Once the data was analyzed, the consents and surveys were destroyed.
Chapter 4

STUDY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The researchers approached this study to gain insight regarding the perspectives of parents of middle school students in the Folsom Cordova Unified School District (FCUSD) towards community resource needs and the role of school social workers. The results were enlightening, and exposed the need for increasing public awareness and further research in the field of school social work.

Overall Findings

The subjects were asked to complete a questionnaire for data collection. The questionnaire was two pages and twenty-nine (29) questions long, taking an average of five minutes to complete. In an effort to avoid any emotional impact, the researchers took special precaution to formulate the questions to be neutral and non-controversial. The questionnaires were gathered using convenience sampling. The subjects for this study were identified through their participation in services provided by a local non-profit agency and various events on the two middle school campuses in Rancho Cordova. Participants were approached with a request to complete the brief questionnaire, and assured that it was completely voluntary and would be anonymous.

The subjects in this study shared many common characteristics. All participants lived in the Rancho Cordova region at some point during the study period of the 2011 Fall semester. Every participant had at least one child attending the sixth, seventh, or eighth grade in the FCUSD.
A total of thirty-eight (38) questionnaires were collected. A portion of the collected surveys were incomplete, as many participants did not respond to certain questions they did not know the answer to, or felt did not apply to them. Twenty-seven of the questionnaires collected were completed by English-only speaking parents. Of the remaining eleven questionnaires, five were completed by parents who spoke Spanish only, and two spoke another language. Four participants chose not to respond to this question. Regarding the education level of the subjects, nineteen had completed a two year college degree or farther, fifteen subjects indicated they had completed middle school or high school only, and four chose not to respond. Twenty-two (22) of the subjects stated that their child qualified to receive free or reduced school lunch. The United States Department of Agriculture’s National School Lunch Program’s guidelines for free and reduced price meals were obtained by multiplying the 2012 Federal income poverty guidelines by 1.30 and 1.85, respectively, and by rounding the result upward to the net whole dollar (www.fns.usda.gov, 2011, p. 17705). This signifies that each participant who stated their child qualified to receive free or reduced school lunch was living in a low-income household. Fifteen participants stated that they did not qualify for free or reduced school lunch, and one participant did not respond. Table 4.1 below displays the basic demographics of the respondents.
The questionnaire was created with several themes in mind. These themes included exploring the current needs of the subjects’ families, identifying parents’ perspectives of school social workers, and evaluating the subjects’ awareness of resources available on campus and how to access those resources. A related theme explored in the study was the subjects’ opinions on the role of schools in the community. More specifically, the questionnaire examined if parents thought schools could also serve as a resource center to positively impact the community. The questionnaire also aimed to identify various details about the subjects and their middle school students affecting their overall performance in school, including student behavior, attendance, and academic performance.

The original purpose of this study was to gain insight on the perspectives of parents of middle school students in the FCUSD towards school social work. This purpose led the researchers to develop two hypotheses:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic categories</th>
<th>Participant Demographics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>71.1% (n=27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish or other</td>
<td>18.4% (n=7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declined to State</td>
<td>10.5% (n=4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School or Below</td>
<td>39.5% (n=15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College or beyond</td>
<td>50% (n=19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declined to State</td>
<td>10.5% (n=4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualify for free/reduced lunch</td>
<td>57.9% (n=22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not qualify</td>
<td>39.5% (n=15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declined to State</td>
<td>2.6% (n=1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Hypothesis 1

Respondents who are in need of resources but are not receiving them have a higher likelihood of reporting that their middle school students have attendance, academic, or behavior problems.

Hypothesis 2

There is an association between needs and knowledge of social work services and the preference of schools serving as a center for community services:

a. Respondents who have expressed the needs for service would likely indicate that their middle school students would benefit from having a school social worker on campus;

b. Respondents who have expressed the needs for service would likely agree that schools should be a center for students and families to access needed community services.

Hypothesis one, in terms of data frequency, did not produce any significant findings. The responses to the questions identifying needed resources were mixed among all respondents, regardless of their indication of academic, behavior, or attendance problems with their middle school students. However, some notable responses analyzed through Fisher’s Exact Test served as indicators of the relationship between the need for food stamps and other important resources, as seen in table 4.2 (p=.000, Fisher’s Exact Test).
Table 4.2
Fisher’s Exact Test of Food Stamps and Free to Low Cost Health Insurance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Need Free to Low Cost Health Insurance</th>
<th>Need Food Stamps</th>
<th>Fisher’s Exact Test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These variables had a statistically significant correlation of .000 according to Fisher’s Exact Test. This finding suggested that all respondents who stated the need for food stamps also were in need of free to low cost health insurance. The significance of this finding was that the majority of participants surveyed were in need of more than one service essential to the well-being of their child.

The findings in table 4.3 further indicated that participants who stated the need for food stamps were in need of other resources that could possibly affect a child’s overall academic performance. See table 4.3; Counseling and food stamps (p=.012, Fisher’s Exact Test), tutoring and food stamps (p=.030), school supplies and food stamps (p=.009), transportation and food stamps (p=.005), clothing and food stamps (p=.035), financial assistance and food stamps (p=.075), free lunch and food stamps (p=.004).
Table 4.3 demonstrated that economic status (i.e. the need for food stamps, financial assistance, and free lunch) was closely related to other needs and services.
Respondents who demonstrated these economic needs indirectly expressed the need for school social workers and added support to access community services, therefore supporting the researchers’ hypothesis 2a and 2b.

**Specific Findings**

In an effort to gain a better understanding of respondents with children who were at-risk, the researchers analyzed specific questionnaires. Parents who responded that their child needed or received services for their academic basic needs and also had attendance, academic, or behavior problems were separated out and compared to the other questionnaires which fit this particular subgroup criteria. These problems were identified based on their answers to the following questions:

- **Question 11**: Has your child ever been suspended from middle school?
- **Question 12**: Have you ever received a letter from the school because your child has an attendance problem?
- **Question 13**: In the past month, how many days of school has your child missed?
- **Question 16**: On average, my child is receiving grades that are mostly... (A, B, C, D, F).

Questionnaires which stated the student had been suspended from school were categorized as a student with a behavior problem. Participants who had received a letter from the school due to an attendance problem, or had missed more than two days in the past month were interpreted as a student with an attendance problem. Reports of students receiving mostly B, C, D, or F grades were interpreted as students with academic problems. These qualifiers limited the sample size of the at-risk sub-group to only seven
questionnaires. As a result of the small sample size, statistical analysis was inappropriate for interpreting this data set. The researchers found that the number of subjects studied were not sufficient to effectively analyze each variable using cross tabulation. Ultimately, the variables analyzed through cross tabulation were not statistically significant.

As an alternative, the researchers compiled the data into one composite parent respondent, with characteristics that were representative of this subgroup of questionnaires:

**Data Composite Demonstrating At-Risk Respondent Sub-Set**

“Joey” is a middle school student in a Rancho Cordova area school. His family is currently receiving assistance with basic needs including food stamps, free to low cost health insurance, and free to reduced school lunches. Joey’s parent’s highest level of education is high school.

Although Joey does not have to worry about food, there are other basic needs that he goes without daily. These unmet needs are clothing, financial assistance, and school supplies. The researchers inferred that these needs Joey goes without everyday have affected his overall school performance.

Joey has behavior problems resulting in at least one suspension throughout his middle school career. Joey has received a letter from his school telling his parents that he has an excessive amount of unexcused absences in one school year. Joey is an average student, receiving mostly C’s on his report card.
Joey’s parent stated that they would like more information on services that could benefit Joey’s performance in school. The specific services Joey’s parent was interested in were free tutoring, access to counseling, transportation assistance, and access to after-school student activities.

Joey’s parent agreed that he could benefit from a school social worker on campus, and also believed that Joey’s school is not just a place where he can gain an education, but also to access needed community services. Joey’s parent was unaware of any staff member specifically designated to help their family obtain the resources needed for Joey to overcome the obstacles to getting the best education he can.

Joey’s needs joined with his academic, behavior, and attendance problems reinforced hypothesis one which stated that respondents who are in need of resources but not receiving them will report that their child has academic, behavior, or attendance problems. This is a reality among students currently attending school in the FCUSD. Joey has many aspects of his life that need to be taken into consideration when examining his academic performance. This study’s review of the literature suggested that school social work professionals possess the unique skills necessary to empower Joey to succeed academically. School social workers serve as the link between schools, families, and needed resources (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011). As both the Ecological Perspective and Maslow’s Hierarchy of needs theorize, in order for Joey to succeed, he must first have his basic needs addressed. A social work professional at the school could view Joey’s situation with an ecological lens, working not only with Joey, but also his family,
teachers, and peers to ensure that his basic needs are met, and his performance in school improves (Hopson & Lawson, 2011, Maslow, 1943).

The second hypothesis of the study revealed mixed results. Although the question which asked “do you believe your child would benefit from a school social worker on campus” was interrelated with “do you think that school should serve as a center for students to access community resources”, it was notable that the responses to these question were much different. Significantly more parents reported that they believe schools should serve as a center for students and families to access community resources than the number of parents who saw a potential benefit to having a school social worker at their students' school, as seen in tables 4.4 and 4.5.

Table 4.4
Response Frequencies: “Do you believe your child would benefit from a school social worker on campus?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree or Agree</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>60.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree or Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>21.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>81.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>System</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>18.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
An overwhelming majority of parents agreed that the school should serve as a center for students and families to access needed community services. In fact, only one respondent who answered this question responded in disagreement to this concept. This was the question which had the most agreement among the entire group of respondents. Parents who participated in this study appear to share the perspective of schools being more than just institutions which focus solely on academic needs. Schools must educate the whole child, providing support and resources along the way in order to maximize student success.

Additional Findings

Numerous subjects expressed a lack of interest in a school social worker who works on the middle school campus. These same subjects responded that they had never been helped by a school social worker, indicating that they may not know what social workers have to offer. Most of the subjects responded that they believe schools should be a center for students and families to access needed community services. To connect these concepts, it can be concluded that these subjects believe that the school has a

Table 4.5
Response Frequencies: “Do you think that school should serve as a center for students to access community resources?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree or Agree</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>81.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree or Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>84.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>System</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
responsibility to assist families with accessing needed community services. Upon further analysis, it has been inferred by the researchers that had the subjects been educated about the potential benefits of school social workers, the findings would have reflected a larger percentage of questionnaires stating that their student could benefit from a school social worker. With a lack of familiarity of the role of the social worker, they did not have enough information to be in favor of the position.

One unexpected finding revealed the lack of information parents in Rancho Cordova have about the field of social work in general. Not all of this information was indicated in the responses on the survey. Some of this information was received through comments made by potential respondents who refused to participate in the study and others who did participate, but still made comments which reflected caution regarding employing a school social worker. There was some expressed concern that the school would be employing a Child Protective Services (CPS) social worker to work at the school. Many respondents even questioned the researchers if they were associated with CPS upon hearing the title "social workers".

There appears to be a disconnect between parents and the school in terms of communication. Many parents responded that they did not know about the resources available from their children's school, if any were at all. For the questions asking if there is a person on campus to help obtain various resources, the majority of parents did not respond at all. Many parents even wrote in question marks next to the answer boxes instead of selecting an answer. They explained that they did not know if any professional
at the school offered these services or not. In fact, many participants claimed they had no information regarding services of this nature offered by the school.

The goal of the researchers was to identify parents of middle school students in the FCUSD who had a high level of needs related to their child’s overall academic performance. Although the demographics of the participants varied, the study was able to capture numerous expressed needs which, according to the parent’s perspective were not met through the school system. Examination of the parents’ responses on the questionnaire, and their association with other responses show evidence of high needs in the Rancho Cordova population. The positive responses from parents on resources that could be made available to their children testify to the likely success of future services that could be provided by the school district if funding is made available.
This study was conducted with the intention of learning more about the needs and opinions of parents with middle school students in the Folsom Cordova Unified School District (FCUSD). The results were expected to provide insight regarding the challenges students and their families were experiencing. These challenges are likely to prohibit youth from reaching their full academic potential. Increased awareness of the specific hardships their students are experiencing can be used by educators and administrators to develop programs and information within the school system. Respectively, another purpose of this study was to provide data to advocate for the inclusion of school social workers in the FCUSD. The information gathered provided a better understanding of what contributions school social workers could offer in the FCUSD, and potentially in other school districts serving similar populations.

Summary of Study

Parents of students in sixth, seventh and eighth grade attending school in the FCUSD were the subjects of this study. There were a total of thirty eight (38) participants who filled out a short, two page questionnaire. This questionnaire was offered in both English and Spanish to better accommodate the needs of the participants. Questions addressed parent opinions on the role of the school in providing resources, their opinions regarding school social workers, what resources their family was in need of, and if there was a professional at their child’s school to assist them in obtaining these resources.
Findings were limited, but did reveal useful information which can be applied to further research or program development. Most notably, all but one participant responded that they view school as a center for families to learn about and access community resources. Many parents also indicated that they believe their child could benefit from a school social worker operating at their child's school.

**Implications for Social Work**

When the economy is facing troubling times, there is a tendency to cut social service programs first. There is often a pervasive view within academia where support services and preventative interventions are not valued as much as strictly traditional academic services. The fallacy in this view is that it overlooks the bigger picture. More specifically, when a student is struggling to meet his or her basic needs, it is difficult and sometimes impossible to focus on education and fulfill maximum academic potential.

Social workers should be compelled to correct this erroneous perspective which often devalues what the profession has to offer. Students, their families, school staff, and the community all stand to benefit from hard working social workers embedded within the framework of the school system. They are often the most qualified to intervene in difficult situations facing students, school staff, and communities.

Employment security and opportunities are commonly discussed as a concern within the social work profession. If more studies were conducted which highlight the valuable skills social workers have to offer while demonstrating that these services often lead to measurable improvements, it would add credibility to the profession. Social
workers have a personal investment in ensuring their practices are evidence-based and supported by high quality research.

Another important implication derived from this study was a need for the field of social work to engage in more effective ways to increase public awareness and support for the profession. Though not directly spelled out in the data, there were numerous indicators which demonstrated the need for social workers to improve understanding of the field. On the questionnaire, several parents wrote in comments or question marks expressing their lack of understanding about the role of school social work professionals. In person, several parents verbally asked the researchers if they were representing Child Protective Services (CPS). They asked questions which reflected their understanding of social work and CPS to be mutually exclusive. Many of these parents appeared to be lacking in knowledge that social workers provide services in a range of other roles as well as a variety of agencies which vastly differ from CPS.

**Recommendations**

For the purpose of providing more resources to families in need in the Folsom Cordova Unified School District and subsequently raising overall academic achievement, the researchers recommend that the district board and administrators consider investing in employing social work professionals. These social workers should focus on identifying and applying for grants and other funding sources. These additional funds earned as a direct result of the efforts of social workers will enhance district schools with the resources and personnel to link families with needed services.
To show the significance of grant-funded programs on school campuses, the researchers evaluated programs which took place during the 2011/2012 school year in the Sacramento City Unified School District (SCUSD) at Hiram Johnson High School and Will C. Wood Middle School. These schools serve a population comparable to Rancho Cordova’s middle schools. The SCUSD received funding in 2010 from The California Endowment (TCE) Building Healthy Communities (BHC) grant to increase attendance. This was done by providing health, wellness, and human services for students and their families. This grant was also used to increase safety at schools and in the community through the development of youth-directed violence prevention programs. Without the tireless efforts of social work professionals employed by the SCUSD, this grant would likely not have been discovered, applied for, and awarded (Struhs, 2011).

With these funds, the SCUSD was able to establish a central resource center located at the district office for students and families who were not already being served by school social workers on their school campuses within the district. At this center, these under-served students and families receive assistance accessing needed community services. This assistance is crucial to students’ school attendance and academic performance, especially when their needs are directly related to health. The SCUSD also uses the funding to educate stakeholders within the district at school board and cabinet meetings, showing the direct correlation between student wellness and learning (Struhs, 2011).

Along with an increase in health and wellness services and education, the SCUSD allocated funding to reduce student bullying district-wide. This was done through the
implementation of district policies on anti-bullying, the development of a strategic plan for the reduction and prevention of bullying, and the provision of trainings for students, families, staff, and community members on bullying. In addition, this plan included two anti-violence and bullying prevention campaigns (Challenge Day) led by students at Hiram Johnson High School and Will C. Wood Middle School designed to provide education and increase awareness about bullying for the students. Funding was also allocated towards a peer mediation program at Hiram Johnson High School to prevent and reduce the occurrence of fights on school campuses (Struhs, 2011).

The outcomes of the funding received by the SCUSD from TCE BHC grant revealed there was a significant impact on both school campuses. The students who participated in Challenge Day, both at the middle and high school levels, were asked to complete a pre and post survey administered before and two months after the violence and bullying prevention campaigns. In all but one question, the survey results demonstrated an increase in agreement to the statements which were utilized to evaluate the effectiveness of the anti-violence and anti-bullying campaign (Challenge Day). Some of the student responses which increased in agreement on the post survey are displayed in Table 5.1. Please note the students' awareness of the effects of bullying was the outcome which reportedly made the strongest impact (Struhs, 2011).
Table 5.1

Results of Challenge Day Pre and Post Student Surveys

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Statement: After participating in Challenge Day I am...</th>
<th>Pre Survey Total agree + strongly agree</th>
<th>Post Survey Total agree + strongly agree</th>
<th>Increase in agreement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. “more aware of the effects of teasing”</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. “more connected to other students and adults”</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. “more likely to feel safe at school”</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. “more hopeful about my future”</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. “more likely to have friends and school staff who I can go to for support”</td>
<td>(question not included on pre survey)</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Many students who took part in the campaign also commented that they observed a positive difference in their school climate since the start of the annual campaigns three years ago. Correspondingly, these students stated there is less violence on campus (Struhs, 2011).

The example shown by the SCUSD, a school district located within the same region as the FCUSD, is evidence that resources and programming implemented by school social workers have made a difference in the schools. These results came to fruition over a short period of time, and the outlook for continuing progress is optimistic. The funding used for this programming was grant based and did not adversely affect the district’s limited budget. Through education, programming, and the provision of needed
resources, school social workers within the SCUSD were able to positively impact the students and schools they worked with daily.

**Limitations**

Although this study was conducted with careful attention to conducting the highest quality research possible, some limitations did have an impact on the findings. One notable limitation, which is shared among all studies done with convenience sampling, is that generalizations about the entire population being studied cannot be directly made from the data collected. This is due to the sampling not being completely randomized or representative of the entire population of parents in the school district. It is essentially impossible to collect a purely representative group of participants, but it is important nonetheless to examine the views of a group of parents to see what similarities they share.

Questionnaire-based research designs inherently restrict access to certain participants for a study. For example, parents who speak another language than what the questionnaire is offered in are unable to participate, and their views cannot be included in the study. Some parents have literacy challenges, and the questions may be restrictive or difficult for them to understand. Literacy issues could possibly prevent a parent from being willing to attempt to complete the questionnaire at all. A strategy to address this limitation would be individual interviews via telephone or in person.

Another significant area of limitation comes from the small sample size included in the study. Given the nature of the research, including the restrictive time period and
resources to facilitate in the completion of the study, it was difficult to survey a large number of participants. Due to the relatively small number of parents providing data, the information cannot be viewed as representative of the entire student body.

The format of the questionnaire resulted in some limitations which might have affected the validity of the data. Closed-ended questions were utilized, which may lead parents to be confused on how to respond and possibly answer without much thought put into the question. Participants sometimes have a tendency to respond in ways that make them look favorable, so confidentiality was so strongly emphasized in order to address this issue. Closed-ended questions limit the information being collected to a very selective and specific focus. This format of questioning also prohibits participants from offering additional responses or any flexibility because of the highly structured design.

Conducting a pre-test or trial distribution of the questionnaire may have offered insight in the design and formatting of the instrument. Knowledge of questions which were confusing or misleading could have assisted in formulating the entire study. It would have been advantageous to the researchers if an opportunity were afforded to educate participants on the role of school social workers prior to the completion of the questionnaire. This would have increased confidence in the clarity and accuracy of the participants’ responses.

While acknowledging the measures which were implemented to facilitate the inclusion of a diverse participant group, some external factors influenced who participated. Most of the data was collected at parent events and community meetings, and the parents attending these meetings may have views which are more favorable
towards community services and related issues. Parents who were involved in their communities and schools may also have been likely to have children with good school attendance and few behavior problems. These issues might have affected the pattern of responses that developed within the study. The fact that a parent even agrees to participate indicates the likelihood that they will provide more favorable responses to certain questions. Regarding the requirement that the researchers self-identified, both verbally and on the consent form, as graduate students in the Social Work program at California State University, Sacramento may have caused a subtle influence to the participants. This influence may have lead participants to feel a certain level of pressure to respond favorably to questions regarding the importance of social work within the school.

Conclusion

This study demonstrated a number of interesting findings. The researchers learned that many parents in the FCUSD were supportive of the concept that schools should be a center for essential services in addition to meeting the academic needs of students. Data also suggested that many parents were in favor of the idea of having a school social worker on staff at their local middle schools. The information gathered in this study can be applied to other schools with similar demographics in order to gain an understanding of how to more effectively educate and serve all students.

For future research in this area, parent participation could be increased through the Folsom Cordova Unified School District’s sponsorship of special events designed to attract middle school parents. The events could increase parent awareness of needs on
campus, as well as give the study more credibility. It would be in the interest of the school district to support research such as this in order to understand the needs of its students. The knowledge gained from such research would serve as a benefit to the district’s schools where most need is present.
APPENDIX A

Written Consent Form (English).
Written Consent Form (English)

The Benefits of School Social Workers on Student Academic Achievement, Attendance, and Behavior in Middle Schools.

You have been asked to participate in a research study by Jamie Gomez and Elizabeth Murta for their Master of Social Work thesis. This study has been reviewed and approved by the California State University-Sacramento Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects through the Division of Social Work.

Purpose of the study:
I understand that the purpose of this study is to examine the benefits of school social workers on student academic achievement, attendance, and behavior in grades 6, 7, and 8 in the Folsom Cordova Unified School District.

Procedures:
I understand that I will be given a questionnaire and asked to answer several questions regarding the demographic background of my family, my knowledge of school-based resources in my community, the academic performance of my 6th, 7th, or 8th grade child(ren), my 6th, 7th or 8th grade child(ren)’s social habits, and my 6th, 7th, or 8th grade child(ren)’s perception of self.

Risks/Discomforts:
I understand that there will be no physical risks or discomforts that will exceed anything that would be expected of me in my daily life.

I understand that some of the questions are personal, and may cause some discomfort in answering them.

I understand that if after completion of the questionnaire, I feel any emotional discomfort, I can contact the Sacramento County Mental Health Department at 916-875-7070 for counseling services at any time to resolve my discomfort.

Benefits:
I understand that the benefits from participating in this study may help generate information that could be presented to the Folsom Cordova Unified School District to enhance services addressing barriers to learning for students in the future.

Confidentiality:
I understand that a research code number will be used to identify my responses from those of other participants, and that nowhere on the questionnaire will any identifying information be requested.

I understand that the researcher will not be present at the time of my participation, and at the completion of my questionnaire, I will place it in a secured box for the researcher to collect immediately after all participants are finished.

Right to Withdraw:
I understand that I do not have to take part in this study, and my refusal will not involve any penalty or loss of rights to which I am entitled.

Signatures:
I have read and understand my rights as a potential research subject. I voluntarily consent to participate in this research. I have been informed that I will receive a copy of this consent. Should questions arise I could contact the researcher Jamie Gomez, 916-370-7668, jamieannbateman@hotmail.com, Elizabeth Murta, 916-949-4484, lizmurta@aol.com, or their thesis advisor, Dr. Francis Yuen fyuen@csus.edu, 916-278-7182.

____________________________________  __________________
Study Participant Signature               Date
APPENDIX B

Written Consent Form (Spanish).
**Written Consent Form (Spanish)**

**Los Beneficios de Trabajadores Sociales en la Escuela y el Rendimiento del Estudiante**

Usted ha sido seleccionada para participar en un estudio de investigación para Jamie Gomez e Elizabeth Murta para su Tesis de Maestría de Trabajo Social.

Este estudio ha sido examinado y aprobado por el comité de protección de los derechos humanos de la Universidad de California de Sacramento.

**Propósito del estudio:**

Yo entiendo que el propósito del estudio es examinar la relación entre trabajo social en la escuela y la realización académico, asistencia, y comportamiento de los estudiantes asistiendo los grados 6, 7, y 8 en el Distrito Escolar de Folsom Cordova.

**Procedimientos:**

Yo entiendo que me darán un cuestionario y me van a pedir que responda a varias preguntas en lo que concierne la información demográfica de mi familia, mi conocimiento de servicios escolares en mi comunidad, y el rendimiento académico, asistencia y comportamiento de mi hijo/a de los grados 6, 7, o 8.

**Riesgos o Incomodidades:**

Yo entiendo que no habrá riesgos físico ni incomodidades que excedería las expectaciones diarias en mi vida.

Yo entiendo que algunas de las preguntas son personales y podrán causar incomodidad al responderse.

Yo entiendo que si, al terminarse el cuestionario, siento alguna incomodidad emocional, puedo ponerme en contacto con el departamento de salud mental del Condado de Sacramento County al 916-875-7070 para servicios de consejería.

**Beneficios:**

Yo Entiendo que los beneficios de participar en este estudio pudieran ayudar en la generación de información que pudiera ser presentada al Distrito Escolar de Folsom Cordova para aumentar servicios disminuir barreras de aprendizaje para los estudiantes en el futuro.

**Confidencialidad:**

Yo entiendo que un número del código de investigación será usado para identificar mis respuestas de los de otros participantes y que el cuestionario no tendrá datos personales

Yo entiendo que el investigador no estará presente durante la hora de mi participación y al terminarse el cuestionario, lo pondré en una caja asegurada para que el investigador lo recoja inmediatamente al terminar el cuestionario de todos los participantes.

**Derecha de No Participación:**

Yo entiendo que no tengo que tomar parte en el estudio y mi falta de participación no traerá castigo ni pierda de mis derechos.

**Firmas:**

Yo he leído y entendido mis derechos como sujeto de investigación. Voluntariamente, doy mi consentimiento para participar en esta investigación. También he sido bien informado y recibí una copia de este consentimiento. Si tengo preguntas puedo contactar a las investigadoras Jamie Gomez al teléfono 916-370-7668; Elizabeth Murta, al teléfono 916-949-4484, o el asesor del tesis, el Doctor Francis Yuen, al correo electrónico fyuen@csus.edu, o al teléfono 916-278-7182.

Firma de Participante __________________________ Fecha ________________
APPENDIX C

Questionnaire (English).
**Questionnaire (English)**

**School social work and student performance:**

*A survey of parents of middle school students*

*Directions: This is a study of services related to your child that is in 6th, 7th, or 8th grade. If you have more than one child in middle school, please answer these questions regarding the oldest middle school student. Please check the answer that best explains your oldest child that is in 6th, 7th, or 8th grade.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Does your family need any of the following:</th>
<th>Is there a staff member at your child's middle school that helps your family obtain these resources?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Food stamps (EBT Card)</td>
<td>Yes  ❑ No ❑ We currently use this</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Free or low cost health insurance</td>
<td>Yes  ❑ No ❑ We currently use this</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Free tutoring for your child</td>
<td>Yes  ❑ No ❑ We currently use this</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Counseling</td>
<td>Yes  ❑ No ❑ We currently use this</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Free school supplies</td>
<td>Yes  ❑ No ❑ We currently use this</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Transportation</td>
<td>Yes  ❑ No ❑ We currently use this</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. After-school student activities</td>
<td>Yes  ❑ No ❑ We currently use this</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Free clothing</td>
<td>Yes  ❑ No ❑ We currently use this</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
9. Financial assistance
- Yes
- We currently use this
- No

10. Free or reduced school lunch
- Yes
- We currently use this
- No

11. Has your child ever been suspended from middle school?
- Yes
- No

12. Have you ever received a letter from the school because your child has an attendance problem?
- Yes
- No

13. In the past month, how many days of school has your child missed?

14. What is your primary language spoken at home?
- English
- Spanish
- Other

15. Please check your highest level of education:
- Elementary school
- Middle school
- High school
- 2 year college
- 4 year college
- Graduate school or beyond

16. On an average, my student is receiving grades that are mostly
- A
- B
- C
- D
- F

17. Have you ever been helped by a school social worker?
- Yes
- No

18. I think my child could benefit from a school social worker who works on the middle school campus.
- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

19. I believe the school should be a center for students and families to access needed community services.
- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.
Your participation is greatly appreciated!
APPENDIX D

Questionnaire (Spanish).
**Questionnaire (Spanish)**

**Trabajo Social en la Escuela y el Rendimiento del Estudiante:**

Encuesta del padres del estudiantes en grados 6, 7, y 8.

**Direcciones:** Este es un estudio de su niño/a que está en grado 6, 7, o 8. Si usted tiene más que un niño/a en estos grados, favor de solo responder a estas preguntas por su niño/a mayor. Favor de trazar un círculo alrededor de la respuesta que explica su niño/a mayor del grado 6, 7, o 8.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>¿Su familia necesita ayuda de algunas de estos programas?</th>
<th>¿Hay un empleado designado de la escuela que puede ayudarle obtener estos servicios?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Estampillas de comida (Tarjeta de EBT)</td>
<td>☐ Sí ☐ Ya tenemos este servicio ☐ No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Segurança de salud gratis o de coste bajo</td>
<td>☐ Sí ☐ Ya tenemos este servicio ☐ No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Tutoría gratis para sus hijos</td>
<td>☐ Sí ☐ Ya tenemos este servicio ☐ No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Consejería</td>
<td>☐ Sí ☐ Ya tenemos este servicio ☐ No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Artículos académicos gratis</td>
<td>☐ Sí ☐ Ya tenemos este servicio ☐ No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Transportación</td>
<td>☐ Sí ☐ Ya tenemos este servicio ☐ No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Actividades después de escuela</td>
<td>☐ Sí ☐ Ya tenemos este servicio ☐ No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Ropa gratis</td>
<td>☐ Sí ☐ Ya tenemos este servicio ☐ No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
9. Asistencia económica
☐ Sí
☐ Ya tenemos este servicio
☐ No

10. Programa de almuerzo gratis o rebajado/ con descuento
☐ Sí
☐ Ya tenemos este servicio
☐ No

11. ¿Tu hijo/a ha sido suspendido de la escuela secundaria?
☐ Sí  ☐ No

12. ¿Alguna vez ha recibido una carta por parte de la escuela por estar ausente muchas veces su hijo/a?
☐ Sí  ☐ No

13. ¿En el mes pasado, cuántos días ha faltado su hijo/a?
# __________

14. ¿Qué es el idioma más usado en la casa?
☐ Inglés  ☐ Español  ☐ Otra

16. Favor de escoger su nivel de educación más alta:
☐ Primaria  ☐ Secundaria  ☐ Preparatoria  ☐ Universidad de 2 años  ☐ Universidad de 4 años  ☐ Maestría o más

16. ¿Cuáles son los grados que su hijo/a sirve la mayoría del tiempo?
☐ A  ☐ B  ☐ C  ☐ D  ☐ F

17. ¿Alguna vez te han ayudado una trabajadora social de la escuela?
☐ Sí  ☐ No

18. Yo pienso que mi hijo/a se puede beneficiar de la ayuda de una trabajadora social quien trabaja en su misma escuela secundaria.
☐ Muy De Acuerdo  ☐ De Acuerdo  ☐ No De Acuerdo  ☐ Muy No De Acuerdo

19. Yo creo que la escuela debería ser un centro para estudiantes y familias tener acceso a servicios en la comunidad.
☐ Muy De Acuerdo  ☐ De Acuerdo  ☐ No De Acuerdo  ☐ Muy No De Acuerdo

¡Gracias por tomar el tiempo para llenar este cuestionario. Les agradecemos mucho por su participación!
APPENDIX E

Letter of consent stating approval for research from the Folsom Cordova Unified School District.
September 26, 2011

To Whom It May Concern:

The Folsom Cordova Unified School District's Family Support Services office has granted Jamie Gomez and Elizabeth Marta, MSW graduate students at California State University-Sacramento, permission to survey the parents of our participants over the next few months for the purpose of their research study aimed at finding the relationship between school social work and students' performance in school.

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me at 916-635-4301.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Linda Burkholder
Director
lburkhol@fusd.org
APPENDIX F

Letter of consent stating approval for research from the Folsom Cordova Community Partnership.
September 19, 2011

To Whom It May Concern:

The Folsom Cordova Community Partnership has granted Jamie Gomez and Elizabeth Murta, MSW graduate students at California State University-Sacramento, permission to survey our walk-in clinic clients over the next few months for the purpose of their research study aimed at finding the relationship between school social work and students’ performance in school.

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact us at 916-361-8684 ext. 290.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Robert Sanchez
Executive Director
The Folsom Cordova Community Partnership
References


“Social Host Ordinance” Town Hall Meeting. Mitchell Middle School Rancho Cordova.

Tuesday, March 6, 2012


