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Evaluation of the Impact of Social Work Services in Rural School Districts

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ABSTRACT

Students in rural communities are often subject to unique barriers and challenges that impact their holistic emotional, cognitive, physical, and social success in school. Because these factors have a strong impact on school attendance, behavior, and overall success, educators have begun to implement social work programs within both rural and urban school districts across the nation. While existing research affirms the effectiveness of school social work, very little research has been conducted to determine the effect in rural school districts. This paper evaluates the impact of a newly developed social work pilot program in two West Texas school districts implemented with students who have been identified as having one or more of the following characteristics: poor school attendance, behavior referrals, or crisis situations. Results indicated that students who received any social work intervention had significantly fewer behavior referrals and improved progress in crisis situations compared to data collected prior to start of social work services. Results further indicated that students specifically targeted for attendance, behavior, or crisis interventions had significantly fewer absences, behavior referrals, and improved progress in crisis after the start of targeted interventions. Overall, the results of this study suggest that school social work is effective in improving attendance, behavior, and crisis outcomes of students in rural school districts.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Educators and professionals alike have begun to recognize the growing need for the development and implementation of interventions specific to youth in rural communities. Though rural students share many similar challenges with students in urban school districts, these students also experience many barriers specific to rural communities. Many rural communities experience higher poverty rates than their urban counterparts, thus influencing academic achievement and other school outcomes (Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012; Cheung & Pomerantz, 2015; Khanh & Rush, 2016; Nelson, 2016).

Student success is largely affected by many factors including attendance, behavior, and other crisis situations. According to national reports by Communities in Schools, an organization directed toward at-risk students, students who are chronically absent are 7.4 times more likely to drop-out of school (About Us, 2015). Also, according to a national study, behavior disorders are the second most common mental health diagnoses in youth (Merikangas et al., 2010), implying that behavior problems may be more prevalent within schools than initially anticipated.

Likewise, students experiencing anxiety, depression, or other mental health issues as a result of internal or external circumstances have been shown to be at increased risk of negative school outcomes including aggression, suspension, and poor academic performance (Cicchetti et al., 2014; Smokowski, Cotter, Robertson, & Guo, 2013). These three indicators have the potential to negatively influence academic, social, and

educational outcomes of rural students who do not have access to the resources or skills to confront these issues on their own.

Because students in rural areas encounter additional challenges that impact their attendance, behavior, and academic success at school, many students do not have the resources they need to achieve their educational goals. However, school districts have already begun to incorporate social work positions into the school system to help intervene with students experiencing these challenges. According to the U.S. Department of Labor (2016), there are approximately 38,780 social workers employed in schools across the nation with an increase of 6% annually. The continuing development and implementation of social work programs within schools leads to the following question: What is the impact of social work services on attendance, behavior, and crisis situations of adolescents in rural school districts?

This paper evaluates the impact of a newly developed social work pilot program in two West Texas school districts implemented with students who have been identified as having one or more of the following characteristics: poor school attendance, behavior referrals, or crisis situations. Before rural school districts and government education agencies can better meet the unique needs of these students, it is imperative that they are aware of the unique challenges already affecting this population, as shown within the literature.

Definition of Terms

Attendance

As defined by Chapter 129 of the Texas Administrative Code (2016), students enrolled in public school are counted absent under the following conditions:

> Students absent at the time the attendance roll is taken, during the daily period selected, are counted absent for the entire day, unless the students are enrolled in and participating in an alternative attendance accounting program approved by the commissioner.

Crisis

A crisis referral category includes any issue other than attendance and behavior that serves to impact academic, social, emotional, or educational outcomes of students. Specifically, school social workers dealing with crisis-like issues may address homelessness, abuse (physical, sexual, or emotional), family conflict, sexual behavior, grieving and loss, body image and identity, and a variety of mental illnesses such as anxiety, depression, and suicidal thought (Allen-Meares, Montgomery, & Kim, 2013; Cronley, Jeong, Davis, & Madden, 2015).

External Supports

An external support is any external opportunity or support system that is used for the benefit of students, families, teachers, and administrators in school. The primary external support systems include community partnerships and regional education service centers, which provide additional support to benefit students directly as well as indirectly (Ausburn, 2010; Sheldon, 2007).

Internal Supports

For the purpose of this study, an internal support is any opportunity or support system available to students within the school district setting to help respond to the effects of mental, social, and behavioral needs. Students in rural school districts generally have two primary internal support systems available to them: teachers and school counselors.

Problem Behavior

As defined by Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (2016), a problem behavior is any "behavior that may disrupt quality of life across multiple domains including school, home, and the community" (p. 4). Most school districts categorize problem behavior into minor and major behavior violations.

Minor problem behavior. Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (2016) defines a minor problem behavior as the following: inappropriate verbal language, low intensity physical aggression, disrespect, small disruption, dress code violation, minor violation of technology rules, misuse of property, or routine tardiness (PBIS, 2016).

Major problem behavior. Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (2016) defines a minor problem behavior as the following: inappropriate/profane languages, alcohol/drug/tobacco use or possession, any threats to public safety, defiance and disrespect, major disruption, dress code violation, fighting/physical aggression, theft, harassment, inappropriate contact with another student or adult, violation of technology rules, lying, cheating, property damage and vandalism, truancy, weapon use or possession, or leaving school boundaries (PBIS, 2016).

Rural Area

A rural area is defined by the Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census as a county with a "population of at least 2,500 but less than 50,000 people" (Hawley et al., 2016, p. 6).

Rural School District

As defined by the Texas Administrative Code 19 § 23.25(7) (2016), a "rural school district is a Texas public school district having a majority of schools that are located in a county whose population is less than 50,000."

School Community Types

According to the Texas Education Agency (2015), public school districts are classified into 8 community types according to "enrollment, growth in enrollment, economic status, and proximity to urban areas" (p. 1). For the purpose of this study, the term "rural school district" will include the following TEA community categories: non-metro: fast growing, non-metro: stable, and rural.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Search Methods

A search of existing literature was conducted using EBSCOhost journal database to accumulate a large body of relevant literature on the topic of rural youth and social work outcomes. The search terms used within the search procedure are as follows: "rural AND education," "education," "youth," "Positive Behavior Intervention Strategies," "Response to Intervention," "school attendance," "behavior AND school," and "rural youth." The search procedure excluded articles that were not peer-reviewed. The literature was reviewed to establish information on the effects of social work services on student outcomes in rural school districts.

Rural Schools and Communities

It is estimated that approximately 65% of the 1,024 Texas school districts are classified as rural school districts (TEA, 2015). In fact, Texas Education Agency (2015) estimates that roughly 500,000 students were enrolled in a Texas school district in a rural area in 2015. According to the Texas Administrative Code 19 §23.25(7) (2016), a "rural school district is a Texas public school district having a majority of schools that are located in a county whose population is less than 50,000."

As a result of the isolated nature of rural communities, students and families in these areas experience a variety of challenges that differ from those of urban areas. In turn, the problems experienced by families within rural communities are brought into the

school environment as well. Within many rural school districts, students and teachers have access to limited resources and services. As a result of this lack of resources, the literature shows that these resources are often supplied to more intelligent students, typically with higher socioeconomic status relative to the general school population (McLaughlin, Shoff, & Demi, 2014).

Small, rural communities differ from many urban areas in that there is a foundational sense of community present. The level of community attachment experienced by youth has been shown to influence both education and migration plans of youth (Theodori & Theodori, 2015). Studies have also indicated that adolescents highly desire a rural environment in which they are valued and have access to quality education and job opportunities (McLaughlin et al., 2014). In turn, a lack of opportunity or strong sense of community is enough to motivate youth to leave their community. Individual residents of rural areas will vary in their own personal motivations to migrate; yet, the presence of relational community factors is highly valued.

Youth in rural areas perceive certain values as more important within their respective communities (Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016). Many adolescents believe it is important to live close to family (McLaughlin et al., 2014). Also, rural communities have unique, interconnected ties between family and the remaining members of the society that influence the manner in which the community functions (Nelson, 2016). In general, family-centered approaches are the most accepted form of assistance within the community (Starobin & Bivens, 2014).

One of the primary concerns faced by rural communities is emigration from the community (McLaughlin et al., 2014). As a result, rural areas often encourage students to

remain in the community (McLaughlin et al., 2014). In fact, the research has shown that current and future residential plans of students are dependent on their perception of available jobs or educational opportunities within their community (McLaughlin et al., 2014). Ultimately, there is a significant appeal of opportunities and resources available outside the rural community that may contribute to emigration plans of youth.

However, though there are several factors influencing students to leave these rural areas, the research shows that there are also many features encouraging them to stay. To begin with, the relationships that youth have with their family and friends are related to higher retention within rural communities (McLaughlin et al., 2014; Nelson, 2016). The presence of these strong familial and relational bonds found in many rural communities is often a major reason why students choose to live in rural areas. Moreover, community attachment and an overall sense of community is a strong motivator attracting rural retention (Theodori & Theodori, 2015). Though both rural and urban communities face a variety of similar challenges, there are many challenges in rural environments that are specific to this population.

Characteristics and Risk Factors of Youth

The environmental systems and characteristics specific to rural communities greatly impact the education and overall well-being of rural students. As a result of distinctive size and geographic characteristics, culture, and available resources present in rural areas, students are subject to a variety of risk factors which increase the likelihood of negative outcomes in school (Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016).

In general, students may be at an increased risk of dropping out of school when the following risk factors are present: poverty, low socioeconomic status, abuse, familial

conflict, lack of parenting skills, few opportunities for education or employment, discrimination, or medical health concerns (Early & Vonk, 2001). Student achievement and externalizing behaviors at school are influenced by problems within the home, academic and social challenges, and problem behaviors as early as middle school (Jozefowics-Simbeni, 2008). Use of weapons, drugs, or alcohol have also shown to be significant risk factors contributing to low educational attainment and other negative outcomes for rural youth (Smokowski et al., 2013).

While in the school environment, student behavior is influenced by a variety of internal and external risk factors contributing to both positive and negative outcomes. Students who are bullied, experience rejection by other students, are in conflict with parents, or show aggressive tendencies show an increased risk for low self-esteem and internalizing problems (Cicchetti et al., 2014). In fact, internalizing the problems faced within the home and school environment most often occurs among rural students who have multiple suspensions, high levels of peer pressure, need an increase of teacher support, and come from low socioeconomic status families and neighborhoods (Cicchetti et al., 2014).

The presence of these risk factors increases likelihood of aggressive and negative external behaviors in school. According to a recent study, "parent–adolescent conflict, school hassles, friend rejection, peer pressure, delinquent peers, and internalizing symptoms" (Smokowski, Guo, Cotter, Evans, & Rose, 2016, p. 105) predicted an increase in student aggression, including external behaviors. In other words, the literature suggests that socioeconomic, relational, and internal factors put rural students at

increased risk of negative behaviors that do not promote achievement or success within the school environment (Cicchetti et al., 2014; Smokowski et al., 2016).

Though students in both rural and urban school districts have access to education through the public school system, there are many additional factors that that serve to differentiate education levels between rural and urban students. For instance, urban students are two times more likely to get a Bachelor's degree than students in rural communities (Byun et al., 2012). Some scholars attribute this difference in educational attainment to low socioeconomic status given that although the high school graduation rate of rural students is comparable with that of urban schools, rural students are less likely to attend college (Byun et al., 2012; Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016; Starobin & Bivens, 2014).

Socioeconomic Status

The research is largely in agreement that low socioeconomic status is a prevalent risk factor within rural communities (Byun et al., 2012; Cheung & Pomerantz, 2015; Cicchetti et al., 2014; Jozefowics-Simbeni, 2008; Khanh & Rush, 2016). Not only are socioeconomic factors correlated with school dropout rates (Jozefowics-Simbeni, 2008), but students attending low socioeconomic status schools have significantly higher rates of depression and lower rates of self-esteem than students at schools with high socioeconomic status (Cicchetti et al., 2014). One potential hypothesis for this occurrence is that students in low socioeconomic status environments are influenced by the perceived lack of resources available to them, thus leading to feelings of hopelessness for future opportunities (Cicchetti et al., 2014).

Several studies suggest that low socioeconomic status directly influences education, achievement, and parental expectations (Cheung & Pomerantz, 2015; Khanh & Rush, 2016). Due to the higher poverty rates in rural schools, students often have less access to programs and counseling resources than students in urban schools, which in turn reduces the potential for high academic achievement (Byun et al., 2012). In one study, researchers found that students receiving free or reduced lunch while at school had a greater propensity for anxiety (Smokowski et al., 2013). Given that most students are almost entirely dependent upon their family for financial support, students with poor family support are at risk for further negative outcomes.

Family

While family socioeconomic status plays an integral role in access to resources and opportunities for rural students, the relational condition of the family environment also has a strong impact on risk factors experienced by youth. In one longitudinal study, researchers found that a positive relationship between students and parents was positively correlated with higher self-esteem and fewer internalizing problems for students; however, high levels of conflict with their parents increased the likelihood of risk-taking behaviors, poor self-esteem, and anxiety (Cicchetti et al., 2014). Overall, conflict between students and parents is associated with an increase in negative behaviors and reduced development, which may lead to greater involvement in unhealthy peer relationships (Cicchetti et al., 2014; Cotter, Smokowski, & Evans, 2015). In fact, students who have high levels of conflict with parents are ten times more likely to display aggressive behavior at school and subject to higher levels of anxiety (Smokowski et al., 2013).

Parent-student conflict has further implications for mental health of students as well. Minority and disadvantaged students are at an even greater risk of mental health challenges when conflict is present within the home environment (Smokowski et al., 2013). Given that there is often a strong stigma associated with mental health services within rural communities (Smokowski et al., 2013), students are especially vulnerable to conflict within the home and a diminished access to mental health resources. Habitual engagement in conflict within the home normalizes aggressive and conflict behaviors, making students more likely to engage in similar behaviors outside of the home environment (Smokowski et al., 2016). Ultimately, increased conflict levels within the home result in greater probability of mental health and behavior issues while at school.

The familial structure of rural families has a further impact on student outcomes in the school environment. Students in rural areas are less likely to live in a two-parent home than students in urban areas (Byun et al., 2012). In fact, students who live in single-parent families in which parents have divorced or remarried are more likely to drop out of school than students from two-parent families (Jozefowics-Simbeni, 2008). On the other hand, students living in two-parent homes are significantly less likely to engage in aggressive behavior than students who live in other family environments (Smokowski et al., 2016). In a study comparing college expectations for rural and urban students, researchers found that family structure, rather than family income, predicted college enrollment for rural students (Byun et al., 2012). In essence, the structures and dynamics present within rural families have a greater effect on student achievement in school than finances alone.

Not only does the condition of family relationships affect student outcomes in school, but the expectations and involvement of rural parents greatly differs from parents in urban areas. To begin with, parents in rural communities receive fewer bachelor's degrees than those in most urban areas, resulting in both lower expectations and less involvement in their student's academic achievement (Byun et al., 2012). This lack of involvement, experience, and expectation results in lower student achievement in rural areas and minimizes the value of education in many communities, which puts students who wish to go to college at a disadvantage (Byun et al., 2012). Ultimately, when youth are not held accountable by parents who also value education, students are less committed to school and more likely to exhibit behaviors that demonstrate their lack of commitment.

Peers

While the influence of familial relationships has been shown to have a strong effect on mental health and behavior of rural youth, peer relationships also have the potential to influence these outcomes as well. In fact, the impact of peer support on students is almost equivalent to the effects of parent support, suggesting that positive and negative peer relationships have the ability to affect student mental health (Cicchetti et al., 2014).

On a positive note, students who engage in positive peer relationships have higher levels of self-esteem and reduced risk for internalizing problems than those influenced by negative peer relationships (Cicchetti et al., 2014). Furthermore, students who have strong friendships in high minority school districts have lower levels of anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues (Cicchetti et al., 2014), suggesting that

minority students feel more comfortable in school when engaged in positive relationships with other minority students. A strong sense of ethnic identity within the school environment results in higher self-esteem for minority students as well, which is positively correlated with religious identity, school satisfaction, and hope for the future (Cicchetti et al., 2014).

Though positive peer relationships serve as protective factors against negative outcomes, unhealthy peer relationships have the ability to negatively influence desired outcomes. Students who engage in negative peer relationships are more likely to have elevated levels of aggression, which can result in a range of unwelcome behaviors at school and home (Smokowski et al., 2013). Likewise, students who observe inappropriate behaviors of peers are more likely to engage in similar behavior regardless of gender (Cotter & Smokowski, 2016). Peer pressure and the awareness of poor behavior by peers serves to increase negative behavior, which can increase students' perceptions of danger in the school environment (Cotter et al., 2015). In one study, researchers found that peer hassles and bullying were positively related to the presence of internalizing symptoms, which led to lower self-esteem and mental health issues that were still present after two years (Cicchetti et al., 2014). Unsurprisingly, both negative and positive peer relationships result in behavior and mental health outcomes that impact student experiences in school and at home.

Ethnicity

Ethnicity has been shown to have an influence on mental health and behavior of youth. Hispanic and mixed-race students are more likely to experience depression, anxiety, and other affective disorders than students of other races (Cicchetti et al., 2014).

Though some research has shown that Hispanic students have higher rates of aggressive behavior and internalizing problems than Caucasian and African American students (Cicchetti et al., 2014), the literature is does not fully support this claim. One recent study by Smokowski et al. (2016) determined that Hispanic students were less likely to engage in aggressive behaviors than Caucasian students.

Despite differences within the literature, aggression levels are lower in schools with high percentages of Hispanic students with resilient ethnic identities (Smokowski et al., 2013). Moreover, ethnic identity reduces the prevalence of aggression within school districts, which is also consistent with previous findings on peer relationships (Smokowski et al., 2016). This suggests that schools may see a decrease in negative behavior and mental health concerns in high-minority populations of students who form strong connections with other minority students. School districts experiencing high levels of aggression and behavior problems may benefit students by offering opportunities to solidify positive ethnic identity within the student population.

School Environment

While strong ethnic identity serves to unify students within the school setting, the condition of the school environment also has a strong capacity to affect behavioral and psychological outcomes in students (Cicchetti et al., 2014; Nelson, 2016; Smokowski et al., 2013; Smokowski et al., 2016). Ultimately, the literature shows that school climate, extracurricular activities, size, composition of school, and student relationships with teachers influence students' sense of connection to their education (Nelson, 2016).

Given that the climate of the school environment has the ability to impact students in school (Nelson, 2016), student satisfaction within this context has the potential to

result in significant behavioral and mental health outcomes. In one recent study, Smokowski et al. (2013) found that students who report higher levels of school satisfaction are less likely to experience anxiety and demonstrate aggressive behaviors. In fact, researchers found that increases in school satisfaction were associated with a 23% decrease in the probability of anxiety and a 58% decrease in the probability of aggressive behavior (Smokowski et al., 2013). The literature implies that students who have a positive perception of their school environment are at decreased risk of exhibiting undesired behaviors and mental health outcomes, which has the capacity to lower the effect of risk factors present in rural areas. When students feel welcome at school, they have a more positive self-image and have the ability to regulate aggressive tendencies (Smokowski et al., 2016).

However, the literature also suggests that negative school and neighborhood environments have a comparable ability to affect student success in the school environment. In school districts with high violence rates and large percentages of families with low socioeconomic status, students are at increased risk of internalizing symptoms including low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and other mental health challenges (Cicchetti et al., 2014). In most cases, these internalizing symptoms also may result in problem behaviors such as aggressive tendencies, which further contribute to the original issue of school violence and poor school climate (Smokowski et al., 2016).

A major indication of school climate within a school district is teacher turnover rate. Schools with high percentages of teacher turnover may suggest that not only is the condition of the environment undesirable for students, but also for supporting teachers and staff (Smokowski et al., 2013). High turnover rates and reports of discrimination

have been shown to increase levels of anxiety and aggression in students as well, which further contributes to a deteriorating school environment for students and staff (Smokowski et al., 2013). In essence, students and teachers are greatly affected by a toxic school setting, thus contributing to an ongoing cycle of increasing internal and external problem behaviors in school.

Resources

The distinctive size and geographic characteristics of rural communities impact the opportunities, resources, and expectations of students in these areas. Overall, smaller communities often have fewer opportunities available to students resulting from a combination of many factors including cultural expectations, lack of funding, and reduced physical access to resources (Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016). Moreover, these rural families often encounter community stigma and stereotypes which may reduce acceptance of mental health services (Smokowski et al., 2013). Given that many rural areas have low socioeconomic status, these populations are in need of additional assistance for basic needs and resources (Nelson, 2016).

However, what rural students may lack in physical resources they gain in social capital. Students connected to social relationships within their religious or cultural communities also have been shown to have higher levels of self-esteem, stronger social support, and lower likelihood of demonstrating aggressive behaviors (Cicchetti et al., 2014; Smokowski et al., 2016). Rural students typically benefit from greater access to social resources, including parents who communicate with church members and students' friends and parents. These resources produce a small but significant increase in the probability of higher educational attainment for rural students (Byun et al., 2012). While

the literature reveals that urban students are twice as likely to complete a bachelor's degree than rural students due to reduced access to crucial resources essential for scholastic success, some researchers assert that the lack of resources in rural areas may help maintain lower rates of anxiety and depression in students (Cicchetti et al., 2014). However, this conclusion is not prevalent in the research and merely offers a potential theory.

Resources for Rural Students

According to recent literature, students in rural schools do not all receive equal access to resources and connections, even within the school population (Hutchins & Akos, 2013; McLaughlin et al., 2014; Nelson, 2016). With a limited availability of resources, only certain qualifying students are eligible to receive assistance. As a result, students in rural areas experience a growing gap in services accessible to all students. For the purposes of this study, the resources available to rural students have been classified into two categories: internal and external resources.

Internal Supports

For this study, an internal support can be defined as any opportunity or support system available to students within the school district setting to help respond to the effects of mental, social, and behavioral needs. Specifically, students in rural school districts generally have two primary internal support systems available to them: teachers and school counselors. Though the primary role of a teacher is to provide instruction through classroom teaching, the quality of student-teacher interaction present in the classroom also has an effect on student development (Berzin et al., 2011). Likewise,

students also have access to school counselors, who are most commonly utilized for semester scheduling and degree planning (Starobin & Bivens, 2014).

Nevertheless, one of the most important indicators of any effective, school-based intervention is the presence of a strong, intentional school counselor who supports students and creates vital connections within the community (Cross & Lauzon, 2015; Griffin & Galassi, 2010; Nelson, 2016; Starobin & Bivens, 2014). Given that effective school counselors have a primary responsibility to support students, it is imperative that every rural school has a school counselor who is dedicated to providing the best opportunities for students using available resources beneath an umbrella of caring, intentional student relationships (Starobin & Bivens, 2014). While school counselors may be an underutilized resource for students internally, many students benefit from the wealth of knowledge and commitment to education provided by their school counselors in the school setting.

Though interventions developed by external sources may be evidence-based and effective with students, teachers have largely been overlooked for intervention support historically (Berzin et al., 2011). In fact, the majority of interventions conducted in schools greatly benefit from direct implementation by teachers at the classroom levels (Berzin et al., 2011). Though the assistance of school counselors, social workers, and other professionals is highly beneficial to students, some of the greatest influences on student success outcomes are teachers.

Not only do teachers have the opportunity to see their students every day consistently, but they are often the primary referrers for behavior incidents and mental-health response within the school district (Berzin et al., 2011). Because teachers are often

the first to notice signs and symptoms of mental health, behavior, or other concerns within the classroom, both internal and external resources must learn to respond to these signals and use teacher support more effectively. For this reason, the research suggests that professionals implementing interventions internally should closely integrate teacher involvement within the intervention plan in order to better empower their students to make positive changes (Berzin et al., 2011).

External Supports

While many students with mental, social, or behavioral needs benefit from internal access to teachers and school counselors, the integration of external support is very essential to the health of the overall school system. Understandably, teachers and school counselors do not always have the training, time, or resources needed to serve students with greater need. Therefore, many rural school districts utilize external community partnerships and education service centers to provide additional student support (Ausburn, 2010; Sheldon, 2007).

Though not every rural school district will have strong pre-existing partnerships within the community, there are many benefits to those who do. According to Sheldon (2007), "schools with higher quality partnership programs report greater parent volunteerism and attendance at school events, more parents involved in the decision-making process, and more widespread use of homework that requires student–parent interaction than do schools with lower quality programs" (p. 269). As is consistent with previous findings, not only do high levels of parent engagement in school better equip students academically, but it also increases self-esteem, decreases internalizing behaviors, and improves overall development (Cheung & Pomerantz, 2015; Cicchetti et al., 2014;

Sheldon, 2007). One study also found that schools that chose to implement a community partnership program saw a statistically significant improvement in attendance rates overall (Sheldon, 2007). Ultimately, parent and community partnership programs in rural school districts act as an important foundation of student support available to students.

Some of the most foundational governing support systems available to school districts across the state of Texas are Education Service Centers. According to Ausburn (2010), the goal of Education Service Centers is to provide outside support to public school districts in order to meet the needs of every district and campus within their designated region. These regional Education Service Centers are responsible for providing school districts with opportunities for professional development and certification as well as maintaining compliance with special education and state-mandated guidelines (Ausburn, 2010). In Texas, the initial implementation of Education Service Centers occurred in 1967 when the Texas Legislature established 20 Education Service Centers across the state to assist school districts in improving student performance and compliance to Texas Education Code standards (Region 14 ESC, 2016).

The two school districts examined within this study are served by the Region 14 Education Service Center. Comparable to other Education Service Centers within the state, Region 14 is composed of the following six departments that provide assistance to school districts: Curriculum Integration and Support, Instructional Improvement, School Operations, Teaching and Learning, Technology Services, and Young Learners (Ausburn, 2010; Region 14 ESC, 2016). Region 14 serves approximately 58,000 students within 42 school districts. Of this total, about 53% of these students are considered

economically disadvantaged and 36% are at-risk of dropping out of school (Region 14 ESC, 2016).

Though students are not provided direct services through their respective Education Service Center, rural school districts greatly benefit from this external resource. Social work services are not currently provided through Region 14; however, social work is itemized under the Curriculum and Instruction category for Education Service Centers, which suggests that social work has an important role within the growing education system (Ausburn, 2010).

Role of a School Social Worker

According to the National Association of Social Work standards for school social workers, the primary role of school social workers is to help students make healthy and appropriate changes while collaborating with the school, family, and community (Lloyd, 2013). To accomplish this goal, the School Social Work Association of America developed the following three practice goals: "to provide evidence-based educational, behavioral, and mental health services; to promote a school climate and culture conducive to learning; and to maximize access to school-based and community based resources" (Kelly et al., 2016, p. 1). Within this model, school social workers use evidence-based intervention methods to focus on student social, emotional, mental, and behavioral health by forming connections between home, school, and community as well as through advocacy efforts in order to foster holistic wellbeing (Kelly et al., 2016; Lloyd, 2013).

Though school social workers cover a wide range of roles within school districts, the primary purpose of this role is to enrich the school environment for students and staff

through the implementation of intervention plans, advocacy, and connections (Alvarez, Bye, Bryant, & Mumm, 2013; Berrick & Duerr, 1996; Kelly et al., 2016). Ideally, school social workers serve to bridge the gap between resources and student needs by involving both internal and external supports to foster a school environment where students can overcome barriers to success (Alvarez et al., 2013).

To do this, school social workers typically provide services and interventions using a tiered-system approach (Alvarez et al, 2013; Kelly et al., 2016). Because human behavior and student issues are rarely influenced by only one variable, a multi-level intervention approach is essential. School social workers initiate research-supported intervention strategies at individual, group, and school-wide levels to combat the effects of negative micro and macro influences (Alvarez et al., 2013). Both prevention and intervention efforts are addressed by social workers using the three-tiered approach, which may be used for educational, mental, social, and behavioral issues (Kelly et al., 2016). In a survey of school social workers, researchers found that these practitioners spend approximately three times more time providing services at the tertiary level, or individual level, than they do providing school-wide services at the primary level (Kelly et al., 2016).

While school social workers may function in many roles, most social workers have school-specific target areas for micro, mezzo, and macro level growth due to time and resource constraints. Of the services provided, school social workers spend most of their time on student assessments, individual and group counseling and case-management, behavior management, crisis involvement, and interaction with teachers, families, and outside agencies (Allen-Meares et al., 2013; Jozefowics-Simbeni, 2008;

Lloyd, 2013). In addition to providing direct services to students, school social workers help train and equip teachers, staff, and parents to incorporate evidence-based strategies and approaches for their interaction with students (Allen-Meares et al., 2013; Kelly et al., 2016). Staff and parent education is a key component of effective school social work given that this primary-level approach serves to prevent and correct many social, emotional, and behavioral issues before they require intensive interventions.

Although school social workers typically intervene in situations with existing obstacles, these professionals are highly equipped to use prevention measures to impact students at-risk of dropping out of school. Because social workers are skilled in using a systems approach through intervention, they are better able to develop and maintain effective drop-out prevention programs, thus counteracting the effects of negative risk factors before they become major issues (Jozefowics-Simbeni, 2008). By using the foundational skills of social work practice including program development, assessment, intervention, and evaluation, school social workers are highly equipped to use existing strengths, connections to accessible resources, and advocacy to positively affect school-wide outcomes for those students who may qualify as at-risk of dropping out of school (Jozefowics-Simbeni, 2008).

School Social Work Focus Areas

Though school social workers often focus on issues such as bullying, attendance, unemployment, gender identity, self-esteem, abuse, family issues, substance use, peer relationships, anger management, adoption/foster care placement, single parent household, academic problems, low socioeconomic status, emotional or behavioral issues, mental illness, or special education (Lloyd, 2013), school social workers are not

limited to these areas. In fact, many school social workers tailor their roles to focus on the most prevalent issues within their specific school community to provide more effective services in the following broad areas: attendance, behavior management, and crisis situations.

Attendance

One of the main issues affecting schools today is the issue of truancy and poor student attendance (Strand & Lovrich, 2014). Nationally, approximately 11% of students have unexcused absences in one month and continue to miss school, resulting in increase of high-risk behaviors and poor academic outcomes (Eaton, Brener & Kann, 2008; Vaughn, Maynard, Salas-Wright, Perron & Abdon, 2013). Current literature defines truancy as a pattern of unexcused absences in which students are consistently missing school (Dembo & Gulledge, 2009; Flannery, Frank & Kato, 2012; Zhang, Katsiyannis, Barret & Willson, 2007). When students are not present at school, they are unable to receive class instruction or an assignment, which often has an effect on academic outcomes (Dalun et al., 2010; Gage, 2013; Holtes et al., 2015; Vaughn et al., 2013). At the high school level, students with over ten unexcused absences are at risk of not receiving class credit for all classes that semester and are often required to repeat the current grade (Texas Association of School Boards, 2015).

Moreover, truancy has been shown to have a relationship with a student's level of academic engagement, defined as "work completion and accuracy, class preparation, eagerness to learn, and persistence" (Anderson, Christenson, Sinclair & Lehr, 2004, p. 109). One developing truancy theory hypothesizes that the relationship between habitual

problem behavior responses and disengagement at school leads to an increase in truancy behaviors, which all mutually influence one another (Vaughn et al., 2013).

Though many factors have been shown to influence student outcomes at school, the issue of truancy serves to compound the effects of these other risk factors in negative ways (Vaughn et al., 2013). As a general trend, truancy has been shown to increase with age among high school students, predominantly for students who have limited supervision, low educational goals, and who have parents with low educational attainment (Gage, 2013). Additionally, students with high levels of school absences are at increased risk for dropout, failure to progress to the next grade, and lower grade point average (Schoeneberger, 2012). Moreover, these students are also at increased risk for outcomes such as "low educational attainment, poor economic prospects, drug use, and increased likelihood of criminal activity and incarceration" (Strand & Lovrich, 2014, p. 139). Fortunately, high levels of student attendance may also serve as a protective factor against delinquent and destructive behaviors (Sheldon, 2007).

Problem Behavior

According to Corcoran (2006), problem behavior can be defined as "aggression toward peers or parents, defiance toward teachers, and conduct problems at school", including but not limited to incomplete assignments, arguing back, distracting other students from instruction, or impulsive behavior (p. 72). Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), a behavior modification approach currently used in over 23,000 schools, defines a problem behavior as any "behavior that may disrupt quality of life across multiple domains including school, home, and the community" (PBIS, 2016, p. 3). Essentially, problem behavior within the school system is any

behavior that prevents one or more students from learning and accomplishing the desired objectives.

According to the PBIS organization, most school districts categorize problem behavior into minor and major behavior violations. Minor problem behaviors may include the following: inappropriate verbal language, low intensity physical aggression, disrespect, small disruption, dress code violation, minor violation of technology rules, inappropriate use of property, or habitual tardiness (PBIS, 2016). Major problem behaviors may include inappropriate/profane language, alcohol/drug/tobacco use or possession, any threats to public safety, defiance and disrespect, major disruption, dress code violation, fighting/physical aggression, theft, harassment, inappropriate contact with another student or adult, violation of technology rules, lying, cheating, property damage and vandalism, truancy, weapon use or possession, or leaving school boundaries (PBIS, 2016).

Crisis

For the purpose of simplification, the crisis category includes any issue other than attendance and behavior that serves to impact academic, social, emotional, or educational outcomes of students. Specifically, school social workers dealing with crisis-like issues may address homelessness, abuse (physical, sexual, or emotional), family conflict, sexual behavior, grieving and loss, body image and identity, and a variety of mental illnesses such as anxiety, depression, and suicidal thought (Allen-Meares et al., 2013; Cronley et al., 2015). Because student educational outcomes are so closely tied to holistic wellbeing of students, school social workers must be prepared to address any issue that impedes growth and success at school.

Physical needs. As is consistent with the principles of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, students must have their physical needs met before they can address any higher-level needs, including education (Maslow, 1943). Therefore, student homelessness is a crisis issue that must be addressed quickly by school social workers. In a study on the effect of homelessness later in life, researchers found that those who experience homelessness during adolescence and early adulthood are at increased risk of persistent criminal behavior (Cronley et al., 2015). In fact, "participants who experienced homelessness by age 26 were 1.6 times more likely to commit violent crimes in adulthood and almost 30% more likely to commit property crime" (Cronley et al., 2015, p. 1). Before students can prioritize learning, it is important that their basic needs are met, which falls under the role of a school social worker.

Food insecurity, or inconsistent access to nutritious food, is yet another factor that contributes to lower academic outcomes in students (Fram, Frongillo, Fishbein, & Burke, 2014). According to recent statistics from 2014, approximately 13.1 million children live in food insecure households in the United States, and 15.4% of households in Texas experience food insecurity (Feeding America, 2014). Though schools may provide opportunities for students to receive access to food including weekend Backpack programs, free and reduced lunch, or morning breakfast, students may not voluntarily communicate their physical needs at home due to stigma and fear of judgment from peers (Fram et al., 2014). Therefore, it is up to school social workers to receive feedback from teacher observation as well as conversations with the student to ensure that every student's physical needs are met.

Abuse and neglect. Within the context of the school environment, social workers and other mental health professionals serve on the front lines of abuse prevention and intervention (Allen-Meares et al., 2013; Armbruster & Lichtman, 1999; Berrick & Duerr, 1996). School social workers are responsible for ensuring that there are policies and procedures in place for reports of suspected abuse as well as a system for immediate referrals to the school social worker (Berrick & Barth, 1991). As a key collaborator with local agencies, school social workers incorporate community-wide abuse prevention efforts within the school as well as train school staff to be vigilant in reporting any suspected abuse.

Additionally, school social workers use their knowledge and training to recognize signs of abuse that teachers and educators may not recognize. For instance, a study by Cronley et al. (2015) showed that sexual abuse was associated with increased violence in youth. Though school social workers cannot assume that every student demonstrating violent or aggressive behavior has been sexually abused, school social workers have the ability to recognize signs of abuse that may not be apparent to teachers and school staff.

Mental health and suicide. In 2015, approximately 12.1 of every 100,000 people between the ages of 15 and 24 committed suicide in Texas (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2015). Because youth suicide is becoming increasingly more prevalent in the United States today, it is imperative that schools address this issue and incorporate prevention efforts in the classroom context (Schmidt, Iachini, George, Koller, & Weist, 2015). Though causes of suicidal thought are unknown and vary from person-to-person, many students attribute family problems, bullying, and grief as major factors in contemplating suicide (Schmidt et al., 2015). More recently, cyber bullying is quickly

becoming a major influence of suicidal thought for middle and high school students (Slovak & Singer, 2011). As mental health practitioners, school social workers lead prevention efforts and implement programs to reduce suicide rates for students in school by helping to identify and provide services for youth who may be contemplating suicide (Schmidt et al., 2015).

School social workers help to increase awareness of suicide in schools through assessment, identification, and intervention on both individual and school-wide levels. Results of a Yellow Ribbon Ask for Help suicide prevention program implemented in a rural school district showed increases in student knowledge and peer support regarding suicidal thought (Schmidt et al., 2015). After implementing this program, not only were the school social workers able to identify 9-12% of the school population experiencing suicidal ideation within the past year, but they also provided services to all of these students and their families (Schmidt et al., 2015). Overall, suicide prevention and intervention is an important role of school social workers and should not be taken lightly.

In general, school social workers have the unique capacity to integrate and implement mental health programs and services within the context most accessible to students: school. Because mental illnesses have been shown to impact personal, social, emotional, and educational outcomes, incorporation of mental health services is crucial in practice (Berzin et al., 2011). In a study comparing the effectiveness of school-based and clinic-based mental health services, researchers found that school-based mental health programs are more accessible and more cost-effective due to availability of grants and funding (Armbruster & Lichtman, 1999). School-based mental health services allow children of any background or socioeconomic status to receive diagnosis and treatment in

the location that is most familiar to them. Though not all school social workers have the clinical license required to provide therapy and diagnose mental illnesses, school social workers have the capacity to recognize symptoms of student mental health issues in school and refer students to outside agencies.

School Social Work Interventions

Though school social workers have the ability to apply a wide range of evidence-based interventions and strategies, the majority choose from Attendance Charting, Behavior modification, Brief Therapy, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Mentoring, Case Management, Goal-setting, Solution-focused Therapy, Crisis Management, Mindfulness, or Motivational Interviewing (Allen-Meares et al., 2013; Early & Vonk, 2001; Corcoran, 2006; Lloyd, 2013; PBIS, 2016). While many intervention methods utilize school social workers as the primary interventionist, there are many interventions which emphasize involvement of teachers, mentors, families, or other supports in the student's life (Berzin et al., 2011). The literature strongly asserts that an effective intervention must involve both community and school support systems to effectively address student problems (Dalun et al., 2010; DeSocio et al., 2007; Strand & Lovrich, 2014).

Typically, school social workers provide these interventions to at-risk students exhibiting one or more attendance, academic, emotional, behavioral, or psychosocial problems and have been identified by the school district (Allen-Meares et al., 2013). The following sections address three specific intervention strategies commonly used by school social workers: Case-Management and Mentorship, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy.

Case-Management and Mentorship

According to the Case Management Society of America (n.d.), "case management is a collaborative process of assessment, planning, facilitation, care coordination, evaluation, and advocacy for options and services to meet an individual's and family's comprehensive health needs through communication and available resources to promote quality, cost-effective outcomes" (p. 1). In social work practice, case-management is commonly used as a foundation for further intervention (Allen-Meares et al., 2013).

In a study conducted by Early & Vonk (2001), a year of case-management as a part of social work services was shown to significantly decrease bullying, stealing, fighting, drug use, and absenteeism in addition to increasing overall teacher morale. Furthermore, both mentoring and case-management interventions have been shown to decrease absences, with up to a 1.9% reduction for case-managed, at-risk students (DeSocio et al., 2007; Thomas, Lemieux, Rhodes & Vlosky, 2011). Students assigned to case-management are also less likely to drop out of school (Dembo & Gulledge, 2009; Strand & Lovrich, 2014).

Check and Connect, a research-supported mentorship and case-management approach used nationally to decrease truancy and behavior issues, is an intervention model with the goal of promoting student engagement through positive relationships (Anderson et al., 2004; Dalun et al., 2010; Strand & Lovrich, 2014). This program emphasizes personal accountability for grades, attendance, and behavior goals using case-management and positive relationships with mentors. Though this intervention is the most strongly supported in the literature, the trust level and quality of the mentor relationship is vital to the success of its implementation (Anderson et al., 2004). For any

mentorship intervention, the frequency of interaction necessary for the case-management approach to be effective is dependent on the severity of existing risk factors (Strand & Lovrich, 2014). Students at higher risk require a more comprehensive, case-management approach in order for mentorship and case-management to be effective (Strand & Lovrich, 2014).

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports

In Texas, Positive Behavior Intervention Strategies (PBIS) is an increasingly growing approach to reduction of problem behaviors of students in school. Though it is not an intervention in itself, the framework of strategies serves to strengthen and support existing interventions to make them more effective in practice (Anderson-Ketchmark & Alvarez, 2010). School social workers are especially equipped to implement behavior interventions beneath a framework of PBIS given their experience and training in assessment, data-collection, brokering, and evaluation methods (Anderson-Ketchmark & Alvarez, 2010; Harrison & Harrison, 2009).

Structurally, PBIS is set up as a three-tiered, pyramid of services provided to students on the following three tier levels: (1) school-wide, (2) group/classroom, and (3) individuals (Anderson-Ketchmark & Alvarez, 2010; PBIS, 2016). This three-tiered approach is also utilized by another widespread intervention used primarily for learning, academics, and behavior called Response to Intervention (Anderson-Ketchmark & Alvarez, 2010). Though school social workers have the capacity and skill to implement PBIS on all three tiers, they are most commonly used for therapeutic and intensive individual interventions for students with chronic behavior problems within Tier Three (Anderson-Ketchmark & Alvarez, 2010; Harrison & Harrison, 2009). For social workers,

the PBIS process involves assessment of function of behavior, observation of classroom environment, use of research-supported social skills interventions, data documentation, team collaboration, and evaluation of outcomes (Anderson-Ketchmark & Alvarez, 2010).

If the strategies and supports implemented on both Tier One and Tier Two do not successfully eliminate or reduce a student's chronic behavior problems, the student is in need of more intensive support individually to determine the function of the behavior (i.e. escape, control, avoidance, and attention), remove antecedents or consequences that trigger negative behaviors, and to replace these antecedents or consequences with those that result in the desired behavior (Anderson-Ketchmark & Alvarez, 2010; Harrison & Harrison, 2009; PBIS, 2016). Overall, the primary goal of PBIS is to cultivate "personal, health, social, family, work, and recreation changes for all students by making targeted misbehavior less effective, efficient, and relevant, and desired behavior more functional" (PBIS, 2016, p. 1).

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy is a widely used clinical technique that is gaining traction within the school setting for a variety of behavior and mental health issues experienced by students and their families (Allen-Meares et al., 2013). The Beck Institute (2016), also known as the Foundation for Cognitive Therapy and Research, defines cognitive behavioral therapy as "a time-sensitive, structured, present-oriented psychotherapy directed toward solving current problems and teaching clients skills to modify dysfunctional thinking and behavior" (p. 1).

Though this psychotherapy is typically used in a clinical treatment context, the basic concepts and techniques of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy are used heavily by

school social workers (Lloyd, 2013). In fact, the use of this therapeutic model is encouraged given that it helps to increase optimism, decrease aggressive behavior, and improve overall school satisfaction (Cicchetti et al., 2014). This therapy has also proven to be effective for behavior problems in children, thus having greater implications for the school setting (Bennett & Gibbons, 2000; Corcoran, 2006; Serketich & Dumas, 1996).

By using a Cognitive Behavioral approach to understand student mental health and behavior, school social workers can help students discover how dysfunctional thoughts toward themselves or others may contribute to internal emotions and external outcomes. Because social relationships are so vital to youth in rural areas, student problem behaviors may be more likely to be affected by the perceived negative behaviors of peers; therefore, a cognitive behavioral approach can be used to restructure the way students think about the behaviors of others and make conscious decisions to modify their own behavior (Cotter & Smokowski, 2016). Additionally, school social workers can use Cognitive Behavioral Therapy to educate and train students about social norms, emotional regulation, and self-perception (Cotter & Smokowski, 2016). Overall, the use of evidence-based interventions allows school social workers to be more effective in reducing attendance, behavior, and crisis issues faced by students.

Effectiveness of School Social Work

Though many studies have been conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of specific interventions used by social workers, very little research has been published regarding the impact of school social work services on student outcomes (Alvarez et al., 2013; Mishna, Muskat, & Cook, 2012; Staudt, Cherry, & Watson, 2005). Nevertheless, existing literature suggests that school social work is effective in cultivating desired

outcomes when evidence-based intervention strategies and techniques are in place (Alvarez et al., 2013; Berzin et al., 2011; Early & Vonk, 2001; Franklin, Kim, & Tripodi, 2009). Results from a dissertation evaluating the impact of a community-school social work model also showed student improvements in interpersonal, intrapersonal, and academic performance (Diehl, 2003). Likewise, students receiving social work services have experienced improved problem solving skills, peer relationships, and intrapersonal functioning (Early & Vonk, 2001). Existing studies typically evaluate the effectiveness of school social work based on two main groupings: intervention-specific factors or professional and environmental factors.

Intervention Factors

Surprisingly, researchers suggest that school social work is more effective when applied to internalizing symptoms such as anxiety, depression, and other mental health concerns than with externalizing issues of aggression and problem behavior (Franklin et al., 2009). A possible explanation for this outcome is that many internalizing issues are more responsive to therapy and counseling techniques provided by the school social worker, whereas externalizing issues are not easily addressed through therapeutic approaches. The most effective outcomes of mental health services to students have led to increases in academic performance, family functioning, and self-esteem with decreases in anxiety and depression (Franklin et al., 2009; Franklin & Streeter, 1991).

Furthermore, existing research suggests that school-based mental health service outcomes are comparable to those experienced in external mental health clinics (Armbruster & Lichtman, 1999; Berzin et al., 2011). The incorporation of mental health services in the school setting has led to significant improvements in student functioning,

attendance, behavior, and academic performance according to school staff; plus, students with mental illnesses who previously encountered barriers to treatment experienced greater access to services when located in their school building (Armbruster & Lichtman, 1999). While school social work services may initially be more effective for mental health issues, the school social worker can also partner with the school to effectively address behavior management and attendance using research-supported interventions (Franklin et al., 2009).

In the literature, there are several intervention methods implemented by school social workers that have shown to be effective for improving student outcomes. To begin with, social work services utilizing positive reinforcement, case-management, and family/community-based partnerships have been shown to improve or maintain student attendance over time (DeSocio et al., 2007; Sheldon, 2007; Sutphen, Ford, & Flaherty, 2010; Thomas et al., 2011). In fact, family and community partnership building alone increased student attendance by 0.5% in one year while student attendance in comparable schools decreased from year to year (Sheldon, 2007). In general, attendance outcomes have shown to be more significant when school social workers utilize strong, evidence-based interventions in practice (Alvarez et al., 2013; Franklin et al., 2009).

Professional Role and Environmental Factors

While the outcome of school social work interventions is largely dependent on the intervention itself, there have been several studies confirming that characteristics of the social worker and school environment have an impact on effectiveness of school social work practice. To begin with, perceived effectiveness of social work services is highly dependent on the outcomes expected by both administrators and school social workers

(Bye, Shepard, Patridge, & Alvarez, 2009). In a survey comparing perceptions of the school social work role completed by administrators and school social workers, the most prevalent expected outcomes were decreases in truancy and discipline problems; however, administrators did not believe that school social workers were effectively communicating key outcomes and results to school board members and administrators (Bye et al., 2009). When school social workers do not report and communicate the results of their services, perceptions of effectiveness decrease and school districts lose funding for these positions (Alvarez et al., 2013).

Additionally, intervention outcomes are influenced by barriers experienced by the school social worker and school environment. Of the most commonly reported barriers in practice, time constraints and caseload sizes have been shown to affect school social work practice the most; however, social workers in urban schools have reported a greater presence of these barriers compared to those in rural schools (Teasley, Canfield, Archuleta, Crutchfield, & Chavis, 2012). Also, an analysis of self-reported effectiveness in school social work practice suggests that perceived differences in social work licensure, ethnicity, and geographic location may impact the perceived success of interventions (Teasley, Randolph, & Cho, 2008). This implies that self-perception of roles and effectiveness may be influenced by both personal and professional characteristics equipping professionals for social work services.

Moreover, school social work success may also be affected by significant differences in grade and age of students served. A social worker serving elementary, middle, and high school campuses may not be as effective as a social worker serving only one or two main campus levels where they are able to provide more specialized

interventions for a primary age population (Jonson-Reid, Kontak, Citerman, Essma, & Fezzi, 2004).

Even more simplistically, research indicates that the mere presence of school social workers in a school district may affect school-wide outcomes. In a study conducted by Alvarez et al. (2013), results showed that student enrollment numbers, poverty rate, and the number of school social workers in the district significantly predicted high school completion. Interestingly, as the number of school social workers in the district increased, the graduation rate increased as well (Alvarez et al., 2013). These findings may imply that when students have consistent access to school social workers available as a support system, these students are more likely to fulfill the requirements needed to graduate high school. Likewise, the presence of school social workers in a school district may indicate a school district's dedication to the holistic wellbeing of students beyond academics.

Unsurprisingly, not only does the school environment serve as a risk factor for students, but it also has the capacity to influence the effectiveness of social work services. Because social work services are incorporated into the basic fabric of the school environment, the general attitude and vision of the administrative team has a powerful influence on the delivery of services on school-wide, classroom, and individual levels (Berrick & Duerr, 1996). In school districts with high turnover, low morale, and negative attitudes, the effectiveness of school social work services may be negatively impacted by these macro-level factors. After all, both students and staff alike are influenced by the culture of their environment (Smokowski et al., 2013), and school social workers must carefully navigate their approach within the existing state of the overall system.

If lead staff members and administrators are consistently reluctant to support the integration of social work interventions in the school, it can take more than one school year to begin shifting any negative perceptions or resistance; meanwhile, the effectiveness of implemented interventions will be compromised by organizational factors (Berrick & Duerr, 1996). Within school social work practice, the best facilitators of effective service are positive staff collaboration, communication, cooperation, and positive attitudes (Teasley et al., 2012). If these traits are not prevalent within the school environment, social work will be less likely to be effective in improving the academic, social, emotional, or behavioral outcomes of students. To conduct effective social work interventions, school social workers must be able to rely on collaboration with administrators, teachers, parents, students, and community agencies (Berzin et al., 2011).

Conclusion

Though the literature reveals substantial evidence to support the value of social work services within the school environment, there are still large gaps regarding the effectiveness of school social work, particularly in rural schools. Limited budgets, resources, and availability of professionals in rural areas often serve as barriers to implementation of social work in rural communities (Nelson, 2016). It is important for policy-makers, educators, and administrators to understand the effectiveness of school social work within rural environments in order to determine if limited resources are best spent on providing these services to students.

This study looks at the impact of social work services on two rural school districts located in Texas: School District A and School District B. According to the Texas Education Agency (2016), School District A is composed of 49.3% economically

disadvantaged students and includes an ethnic distribution of 62% Hispanic, 32% white and 2.1% African American students. Approximately 1% of high school students dropped out of school in the 2014-2015 school year compared with a Region 14 Education Service Center average of 2.2%. The 2014-2015 attendance rate was 95.4% and the percentage of students with discipline placements was 2.4%. The teacher turnover rate in 2015-2016 was roughly 30% compared to the state average of 16.5%.

School District B is composed of 68.3% economically disadvantaged students and includes an ethnic distribution of 53.1% Hispanic, 38% white and 6.2% African American students (Texas Education Agency, 2016). Approximately 2.3% of high school students dropped out of school in the 2014-2015 school year compared with a Region 14 average of 2.2%. The 2014-2015 attendance rate was 95.5% and percentage of students with discipline placements was 1.3%. The teacher turnover rate in 2015-2016 was roughly 26% compared to the state average of 16.5%.

Hypotheses

This study evaluated the effectiveness of a pilot social work program in the above referenced rural school districts in West Texas by addressing the following research question: What is the impact of social work services on attendance, behavior, and crisis situations of adolescents in rural school districts? The following hypotheses were based on findings of existing studies:

> Hypothesis (a): Students receiving social work services at school will see a significant increase in attendance during the six-week period following the start of intervention as compared to baseline data obtained during the six weeks prior to intervention.

Hypothesis (b): Students receiving social work services at school will see a significant decrease in behavior referrals during the six-week period following the start of intervention as compared to baseline data obtained during the six weeks prior to intervention.

Hypothesis (c): Students receiving social work services at school for crisis situations (anything that negatively impacts a student's academic and social success and overall well-being at school) will see a significant increase in their average progress improvement rating during the six-week period following the start of intervention compared to baseline data obtained during the six weeks prior to intervention.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This study used a pre-experimental pretest-posttest design to examine aggregate, coded de-identified data collected to examine outcomes of attendance, behavior, and crisis interventions utilized with rural students. Existing data maintained on Skyward database at both school districts and progress data collected by the school social worker were used to compare attendance, discipline incidents, and intervention outcomes consistent with student progress before and after intervention. The data selection only referenced records from the 2016-2017 school year.

Variables

This study evaluated the effect of school social work service interventions on attendance, behavior, and crisis/mental health issues experienced by rural students in each school district. Evidence-based interventions supported by the literature were used for this study. Attendance interventions used included Case-Management, Self-Monitoring/Graphing, Motivational Interviewing, Goal-Setting, and use of positive reinforcement and incentives. Behavior interventions used were consistent with Positive Behavioral Interventions and Strategies approaches including Case-Management, Behavior Contracts, Functional Behavior Assessments, Check-in Check Out, Cognitive-Behavioral workbooks, and skills instruction. Finally, crisis interventions used included referrals to Child Protective Services, MHMR mental health resources, and local agencies. Additional intervention methods included Motivational Interviewing,

Goal Setting, Mentorship, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Anger Management Workbook Curriculum, Mindfulness Training, Emotional Regulation skills, Academic Self-Monitoring/Graphing, connection to food and housing resources, and support for job application and driver's license pursuits.

Sample Population

The sample population included both male and female students of any ethnicity between grades 6-12 who were receiving social work services in each rural school district during the 2016-2017 school year. Only students referred by administrators, teachers, parents, or other school or community personnel were eligible for social work services for the following three categories: attendance, behavior, and crisis situations. Only students who received consistent social work services at each school district were included in this study. Students who were referred for services during the data collection period or students who received less than two case-management sessions were excluded from the study; however, these students still received services outside of the study. The sample group contained 10 students from School District A and 13 students from School District B with a combined total of 23 students.

Procedure

School District A and B provided consent for data collection and access to student records for evaluation purposes. ACU's Institutional Review Board approved the study as a non-human research study (Appendix). Data provided from each district included student files with attendance and behavior referral information in the form of attendance for each reporting period and office referrals and suspensions. Data was collected for each case-management session to measure completion of goals and student progress.

Descriptive statistics were collected to describe characteristics of students receiving services. Baseline data were collected for 6 weeks prior to the beginning of a student's intervention as part of the social work program practice. Post-intervention data were collected for a minimum of 6 weeks following the beginning of student case-management. De-identified data were entered into SPSS for statistical analysis.

Human Subjects Protection

To certify that all data were not individually identifiable by the researcher, all student records provided from each school district were de-identified and coded by a district representative. This study was minimal risk given that the data and information used in this study were not collected for the sole purpose of research, and the researcher did not interact with students for the purpose of this research outside of routine intervention practices and procedures. As noted above, ACU's Institutional Review Board has approved the study (Appendix).

Measurements

Attendance

The Skyward database at each school district supplied official attendance records for all students. For the purpose of this study, only student absences labeled as "unexcused" counted as an official absence. As stated in Chapter 129 of the Texas Administrative Code (2016), students are counted absent if they miss one or more periods during a school day; therefore, partial absences were counted as unexcused absences. For analysis, data was compared between the six-week baseline period prior to intervention and the following six-week periods after the start of intervention.

Behavior Referrals

Each school district provided suspension, behavior incident, discipline placement, and office referral data for each student receiving social work services on the Skyward database system. This data included in-school suspensions (ISS), off-campus suspensions or placements, and reported office referrals by teachers or administrators. Suspensions and referrals were operationalized according to the number of behavior incidents recorded in database records. The number of behavior referrals and incidents were compared between student baseline data six weeks prior to the behavior intervention and for the following six-week periods following the start of intervention.

Progress Improvement Rating Scale

To measure the perceived level of improvement between each case-management session, the researcher used a progress improvement rating scale to evaluate desired outcomes. This measurement scale is a modification of Goal Attainment Scaling, an evaluation method established by Thomas J. Kiresuk and Robert E. Sherman in 1968 to evaluate specific and individualized progress of patients with mental illnesses (Kiresuk & Sherman, 1968).

Though the rating scale was utilized with all case-managed students, this measure was mainly used to identify progress for students referred for crisis situations. Given that the crisis referral category encompasses a wide range of issues, interventions, and desired outcomes, the effectiveness of crisis management services was measured based on progress and improvement observed by the practitioner in student sessions.

The progress improvement rating was defined using the following 1-5 Likert scale format: 1- Significantly Worsened, 2- Slightly Worsened, 3- No Change, 4- Slightly

Improved, and 5- Significantly Improved. The progress improvement rating was determined at the conclusion of each session after the social work intern evaluated completion of short-term goals, indications of progressing change, and evidence of desired outcomes.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data collected for attendance, behavior, and crises were analyzed using SPSS software. Descriptive analyses of student demographics within the sample were performed and paired-sample t-tests were used to analyze unexcused absences, discipline referrals, and progress improvement data collected prior to and during case-management. All of the data analysis methods were used to evaluate and compare the effect of social work services on one sample group before and during case-management interventions.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

To determine the impact of social work services on student attendance, behavior, and crisis situations in two school districts, data collected before and after the start of interventions were compared for the entire sample. Student data were analyzed for descriptive data in order to provide a comparison of the student sample with overall district demographics and to allow comparison between districts. Hypotheses were tested using paired-sample t-test analyses.

Description of Sample

This study compared data from students receiving social work case-management services from one school social work intern during the 2016-2017 school year in School District A (n=10) and School District B (n=13). The total sample size contained 23 students (Table 1). The students at School District A represent the total number of students receiving consistent services in one high school who have two or more case-management sessions following their referral to social work services. The students at School District B represent the total number of students receiving consistent services on one middle school and one high school campus in this district; all included students had two or more case-management sessions following their referral to social work services. For the purposes of this study, the effects of social work services were determined using the total sample of students (n=23).

Table 1

Student Sample Demographics

			Total
School Districts	School District A	Count	10
		%	43.5%
	School District B	Count	13
		%	56.5%
Gender	Male	Count	16
		%	69.6%
	Female	Count	7
		%	30.4%
Crisis	Yes	Count	13
		%	56.5%
	No	Count	10
		%	43.5%
School Enrollment	Active	Count	20
		%	87%
	Withdrawn	Count	3
		%	13%
Total		Count	23
		%	100%

Of the total students in this sample (n=23), 69.6% (n=16) were male and 30.4% (n=7) were female (Table 1). This sample proportion was not representative of an expected proportion of 50 females per 50 males in the overall school district populations. Additionally, 56.5% (n=13) of the students in this sample also had an additional crisis situation although they may not have been referred specifically for a crisis intervention (Table 1). Finally, 13% (n=3) of students in the total sample were withdrawn during some point in time following the six weeks of intervention. However, these three students

had more than two case-management sessions and had received services during the six weeks of intervention (Table 1). Table 1 presents demographics of the total student sample (n=23).

Both school districts were comparable in regards to overall demographic characteristics present in each district. According to the Texas Education Agency (2016), School District A is composed of 62% Hispanic, 32.6% white and 2.1% African American students. School District B has an ethnic distribution of 53.1% Hispanic, 38% white and 6.2% African American (Texas Education Agency, 2016). The ethnic distribution of students within School District A and School District B are very similar in regards to ethnicity, with Hispanic students composing the majority of the overall school population. District-wide ethnicity demographics are presented in Table 2.

In the overall sample containing students from both school districts, 43.5% (n=10) were Hispanic (Table 2). All Hispanic students were also categorized by another race or ethnicity. In the overall sample, 17.4% (n=4) were African American students and 82.6% (n=19) were white. Some African American and White students were also Hispanic, indicating that several students were two or more races.

Table 2

Student Demographics: Ethnicity

		School District A	School District B	Study Sample
African American	Count	62	135	4
	%	2.1%	6.2%	17.4%
White	Count	946	825	19
	%	32.6%	38%	82.6%
Hispanic (two or more races)	Count	1,798	1,153	10
	%	62.0%	53.1%	43.5%
Other Race	Count	79	59	0
	%	3%	2.7%	0%
Student Total	Count	2,885	2,172	23
	%	100%	100%	100%

All students between grades 6-12 were eligible for social work services, but there were not any students in grades 7 and 8 in this sample. The distribution of grade levels in the total sample (n=23) is presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Student Grade Distribution

		Grade Level				
	Total	6th	9th	10th	11th	12th
Count	23	2	9	6	1	5
% of Sample	100%	8.70%	39.10%	26.10%	4.30%	21.70%

Effects of Social Work Services

As previously stated, this study analyzed student outcomes before and after the implementation of the intervention. Student data were analyzed to determine the effect of school social work services on student attendance, problem behavior, and crisis situations in two rural school districts.

Hypothesis (a): Attendance

The first hypothesis predicted that students receiving social work services at school would see a significant increase in attendance during the six-week period following the start of intervention as compared to baseline data obtained during the six weeks prior to intervention. A paired-samples *t*-test analysis was conducted to compare unexcused absences six-weeks prior to intervention and six-weeks after the start of any intervention. Table 4 demonstrates that a one-tailed test of the difference in unexcused absences for pre-intervention (M=7.350, SD=7.755) and post intervention (M=5.565, SD=6.352) six-week periods was not statistically significant, (t (22) = 1.315, p = 0.101 (one-tailed), Table 4) at an alpha level of .05. Though differences in unexcused absences were not statistically significant for the total sample (n=23), student attendance increased with a mean increase of 1.78 days during the six weeks following the start of any school social work intervention. Because these results were not statistically significant, this hypothesis was not supported by the analysis.

Table 4

Student Unexcused Absences

		Mean	*N*	*SD*
Average absences per six weeks	Pre-Intervention	7.350	23	7.755
	Post-Intervention	5.565	23	6.352

t (22)= 1.315, *p* = 0.101 (one-tailed)

Hypothesis (b): Problem Behavior

The second hypothesis predicted that students receiving social work services at school would see a significant decrease in behavior referrals during the six-week period following the start of intervention as compared to baseline data obtained during the six weeks prior to intervention. A paired-samples *t*-test analysis was conducted to compare number of behavior referrals six-weeks prior to intervention and six-weeks after the start of any intervention. Table 5 demonstrates that a one-tailed test of the difference in number of behavior referrals for pre-intervention (M=1.674, SD=2.363) and post intervention (M=1.001, SD=1.543) six-week periods was found to be statistically significant, (*t* (22) = 1.798, *p* = 0.043 (one-tailed), Table 5) at an alpha level of .05. The number of behavior referrals received by the total sample of students (n=23) decreased by a mean of 0.667 during the six weeks following the start of any school social work intervention. The hypothesis was supported by this analysis.

Table 5

Student Behavior Referrals

		Mean	*N*	*SD*
Average referrals	Pre-Intervention	7.350	23	7.755
per six weeks*	Post-Intervention	5.565	23	6.352

**t (22)*= 1.798, $p = 0.043$ (one-tailed)

Hypothesis (c): Crisis

The third hypothesis predicted that students receiving social work services at school for crisis situations (anything that negatively impacts a student's academic and social success and overall well-being at school) would see a significant increase in their average progress improvement rating during the six-week period following the start of intervention as compared to baseline data obtained during the six weeks. The progress improvement rating was defined using the following 1-5 Likert scale format: 1- Significantly Worsened, 2- Slightly Worsened, 3- No Change, 4- Slightly Improved, and 5- Significantly Improved.

A paired-samples *t*-test analysis was conducted to compare average progress improvement ratings six-weeks prior to intervention and six-weeks after the start of any intervention. Table 6 demonstrates that a one-tailed test of the difference in progress improvement rating averages for pre-intervention baseline (M=3.375, SD=0.387) and post intervention (M=3.877, SD=0.665) six-week periods was found to be statistically significant, (t (15) = -3.747, $p = 0.001$ (one-tailed), Table 6) at an alpha level of .05. The average progress improvement rating received by the total sample of students (n=23) increased by a mean of 0.502 during the six weeks following the start of any school social work intervention. The hypothesis was supported by this analysis.

Table 6

Student Progress Improvement Ratings

		Mean	*N*	*SD*
Average Rating per Six Weeks**	Pre-Intervention	3.375	16	0.387
	Post-Intervention	3.877	16	0.665

** t (15) = -3.747, p = 0.001 (one-tailed)

Breakdown of Results by School

For the overall sample (n=23), the implementation of school social work services resulted in statistically significant decreases in behavior referrals and increases in average progress improvement ratings; however, attendance increases were not statistically significant for the overall sample group. To better ascertain the impact of social work services at each district separately, the following analyses were conducted to demonstrate the effect of social work interventions on overall attendance, behavior, and crisis outcomes of students in School District A (n=10) and School District B (n=13).

School District A

Attendance. To determine the effect of social work services on attendance at School District A (n=10, Table 7), a paired-samples *t*-test analysis was conducted to compare unexcused absences six-weeks prior to intervention and six-weeks after the start of any social work intervention. Table 7 demonstrates that a one-tailed test of the difference in unexcused absences for pre-intervention (M=12.20, SD=8.470) and post intervention (M=9.40, SD=7.827) six-week periods was not statistically significant, ($t(9)$= 1.135, p = 0.143 (one-tailed), Table 7) at an alpha level of .05. Though decreases in absences for students receiving any intervention at School District A were not statistically significant, there was a mean attendance increase of 2.8 days during the six

weeks following the start of social work services. This analysis does not support hypothesis (a) given that though attendance improved, this increase was not statistically significant.

Table 7

Student Unexcused Absences: School District A

		Mean	*N*	*SD*
Average absences per six	Pre-Intervention	12.20	10	8.470
Weeks	Post-Intervention	9.40	10	7.827

t (9)= 1.135, *p* = 0.143 (one-tailed)

Behavior. To determine the effect of social work services on decreases in behavior referrals at School District A (n=10, Table 8), a paired-samples *t*-test analysis was conducted to compare number of behavior referrals six-weeks prior to intervention and six-weeks after the start of a behavior intervention. Table 8 demonstrates that a one-tailed test of the difference in number of behavior referrals for pre-intervention (M=2.350, SD=3.206) and post intervention (M=1.200, SD=1.814) six-week periods was found to be statistically significant, (*t* (9) = 2.043, *p* = 0.035 (one-tailed), Table 8) at an alpha level of .05. The number of behavior referrals received by students in School District A (n=10) decreased by a mean of 1.15 referrals during the six weeks following the start of social work services. This analysis further supports hypothesis (b) given that results showed a statistically significant decrease in behavior referrals in the six-weeks following intervention.

Table 8

Student Behavior Referrals: School District A

		Mean	*N*	*SD*
Average Referrals	Pre-Intervention	2.350	10	3.206
per Six Weeks*	Post-Intervention	1.200	10	1.814

* t (9) = 2.043, p = 0.035 (one-tailed)

Crisis. To determine the effect of social work services on average increases in progress improvement ratings at School District A (n=10, Table 9), a paired-samples *t*-test analysis was conducted to compare average progress improvement ratings six-weeks prior to intervention and six-weeks after the start of any intervention. Table 9 demonstrates that a one-tailed test of the difference in average progress improvement rating for pre-intervention (M=3.250, SD=0.354) and post intervention (M=3.570, SD=0.569) six-week periods was found to be statistically significant, (t (9) =-2.083, p = 0.0335 (one-tailed), Table 9) at an alpha level of .05. The average progress improvement rating received at School District A (n=10) increased by a mean of 0.320 during the six weeks following the start of social work services. This analysis further supports hypothesis (c) given that results showed a statistically significant increase in average progress improvement rating in the six-weeks following intervention.

Table 9

Student Progress Improvement Ratings: School District A

		Mean	*N*	*SD*
Average Rating	Pre-Intervention	3.250	10	0.354
per Six Weeks*	Post-Intervention	3.570	10	0.569

* t (9) =-2.083, p = 0.0335 (one-tailed)

School District B

Attendance. To determine the effect of social work services on attendance at School District B (n=13, Table 10), a paired-samples *t*-test analysis was conducted to compare unexcused absences six-weeks prior to intervention and six-weeks after the start of any social work intervention. Table 10 demonstrates that a one-tailed test of the difference in unexcused absences for pre-intervention (M=3.620, SD=4.664) and post intervention (M=2.615, SD=2.518) six-week periods was not statistically significant, (*t (12)*= 0.655, *p* = 0.263 (one-tailed), Table 10) at an alpha level of .05. Though decreases in absences for students receiving any intervention at School District B were not statistically significant, there was a mean attendance increase of 1.00 day during the six weeks following the start of social work services. This analysis does not support hypothesis (a) given that though attendance improved, this increase was not statistically significant.

Table 10

Student Unexcused Absences: School District B

		Mean	*N*	*SD*
Average absences per six	Pre-Intervention	3.620	13	4.664
Weeks	Post-Intervention	2.615	13	2.518

t (9)= 0.655, *p* = 0.263 (one-tailed)

Behavior. To determine the effect of social work services on decreases in behavior referrals at School District B (n=13, Table 11), a paired-samples *t*-test analysis was conducted to compare number of behavior referrals six-weeks prior to intervention and six-weeks after the start of a behavior intervention. Table 11 demonstrates that a one-tailed test of the difference in number of behavior referrals for pre-intervention

(M=1.154, SD=1.360) and post intervention (M=0.859, SD=1.357) six-week periods was not statistically significant, (t (12) = 0.606, p = 0.278 (one-tailed), Table 11) at an alpha level of .05. Though decreases in behavior referrals for students receiving any intervention at School District B were not statistically significant, there was a mean decrease of 0.295 referrals during the six weeks following the start of social work services. This analysis does not support hypothesis (b) given that although behavior referrals decreased in the six-weeks following intervention, this decrease was not statistically significant.

Table 11

Student Behavior Referrals: School District B

		Mean	*N*	*SD*
Average Referrals per Six Weeks	Pre-Intervention	1.154	13	1.360
	Post-Intervention	0.859	13	1.357

t (12) = 0.606, p = 0.278 (one-tailed)

Crisis. To determine the effect of social work services on average increases in progress improvement ratings at School District B (n=13, Table 12), a paired-samples *t*-test analysis was conducted to compare average progress improvement ratings six-weeks prior to intervention and six-weeks after the start of any intervention. Table 12 demonstrates that a one-tailed test of the difference in average progress improvement rating for pre-intervention (M=3.231, SD=0.259) and post intervention (M=3.638, SD=0.569) six-week periods was found to be statistically significant, (t (12) = -2.659, p = 0.010 (one-tailed), Table 12) at an alpha level of .05. The average progress improvement rating received at School District B (n=13) increased by a mean of 0.407 during the six weeks following the start of social work services. This analysis further

supports hypothesis (c) given that results showed a statistically significant increase in average progress improvement rating in the six-weeks following intervention.

Table 12

Student Progress Improvement Ratings: School District B

		Mean	*N*	*SD*
Average Rating per Six Weeks*	Pre-Intervention	3.231	13	0.259
	Post-Intervention	3.638	13	0.569

* t (12) = -2.659, p = 0.010 (one-tailed)

Breakdown of Results by Intervention Category

As previously reported, the implementation of school social work services resulted in statistically significant decreases in behavior referrals and increases in progress improvement rating; however, attendance increases were not statistically significant for the overall sample group (n=23). However, the above results did not account for the effectiveness of social work services with regards to specific intervention categories. The following analyses demonstrate the effect of attendance, behavior, and crisis interventions on these specific desired outcomes for students targeted for each intervention.

Because some students received more than one intervention from the attendance, behavior, or crisis categories, the intervention count total was 28. All 23 students in the sample received at least one intervention from their respective intervention category based on an individual assessment. Table 13 illustrates the number of specific interventions implemented in each category with students targeted for these interventions.

Table 13

Student Intervention Category

		Intervention Totals
Attendance	Count	6
	%	21.4%
Behavior	Count	12
	%	42.9%
Crisis	Count	10
	%	35.7%
Total	Count	28
	%	100%

Attendance Interventions Only

To determine the effect of attendance interventions on attendance increases in the attendance group (n=6, Table 13), a paired-samples *t*-test analysis was conducted to compare unexcused absences six-weeks prior to intervention and six-weeks after the start of the attendance intervention. Table 14 demonstrates that a one-tailed test of the difference in unexcused absences for pre-intervention (M=15.00, SD=5.177) and post intervention (M=8.08, SD=7.800) six-week periods was found to be statistically significant, ($t\ (5)$= 2.754, p = 0.02 (one-tailed), Table 14) at an alpha level of .05. Increases in attendance for students receiving an attendance intervention were statistically significant with a mean increase of 6.92 days during the six weeks following the start of an attendance intervention. This analysis further supports hypothesis (a) given that results showed a statistically significant increase in attendance in the six-weeks following intervention.

Table 14

Student Unexcused Absences: Attendance Group Only

		Mean	*N*	*SD*
Average absences per six	Pre-Intervention	15.00	6	5.177
Weeks*	Post-Intervention	8.08	6	7.800

* *t (5)*= 2.754, *p* = 0.02 (one-tailed)

Behavior Interventions Only

To determine the effect of behavior-specific interventions on decreases in referrals for the behavior group (n=12, Table 13), a paired-samples *t*-test analysis was conducted to compare number of behavior referrals six-weeks prior to intervention and six-weeks after the start of a behavior intervention. Table 15 demonstrates that a one-tailed test of the difference in number of behavior referrals for pre-intervention (M=2.375, SD=2.524) and post intervention (M=1.097, SD=1.574) six-week periods was found to be statistically significant, (*t* (11) = 2.741, *p* = 0.0095 (one-tailed), Table 15) at an alpha level of .05. The number of behavior referrals received by the behavior group (n=12) decreased by a mean of 1.278 referrals during the six weeks following the start of a behavior intervention. This analysis further supports hypothesis (b) given that results showed a statistically significant decrease in behavior referrals in the six-weeks following intervention.

Table 15

Student Behavior Referrals: Behavior Group Only

		Mean	*N*	*SD*
Average Referrals	Pre-Intervention	2.375	12	2.524
per Six Weeks*	Post-Intervention	1.097	12	1.574

* t (11) = 2.741, p = 0.0095 (one-tailed)

Crisis Interventions Only

To determine the effect of crisis-specific interventions on average increases in progress improvement ratings for the crisis group (n=10, Table 13), a paired-samples *t*-test analysis was conducted to compare average progress improvement ratings six-weeks prior to intervention and six-weeks after the start of a crisis intervention. Table 16 demonstrates that a one-tailed test of the difference in progress improvement rating averages for pre-intervention (M=3.450, SD=0.438) and post intervention (M=3.859, SD=0.804) six-week periods was found to be statistically significant, (t (9) =-2.024, p = 0.037 (one-tailed), Table 16) at an alpha level of .05. The average progress improvement rating received by the crisis group (n=10) increased by a mean of 0.410 during the six weeks following the start of a crisis intervention. This analysis further supports hypothesis (c) given that results showed a statistically significant increase in average progress improvement rating in the six-weeks following intervention.

Table 16

Student Progress Improvement Ratings: Crisis Group Only

		Mean	*N*	*SD*
Average Rating per Six Weeks*	Pre-Intervention	3.450	10	0.438
	Post-Intervention	3.859	10	0.804

* t (9) =-2.024, p = 0.037 (one-tailed)

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

As the profession of school social work has continued to grow and develop within school districts across the United States, school social workers have been in high demand due to their ability to provide evidence-based interventions, promote positive school cultures, and maximize student access to internal and external resources (Kelly et al., 2016; Lloyd, 2013). However, there have been few studies conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of school social work on attendance, behavior, and crisis situations particularly in rural communities (Alvarez et al., 2013; Mishna, Muskat & Cook, 2012; Staudt, Cherry & Watson, 2005).

This study evaluated differences in student attendance, behavior, and crisis situations before and after the implementation of social work services and interventions in two rural school districts: School District A and School District B. The study examined three hypotheses consistent with three desired student outcomes: improved attendance, reduction in behavior referrals, and improved progress in crisis situations. Based on data collected at School Districts A and B throughout the 2016-2017 school year, the evidence suggests that school social work services have a positive effect on both behavior and crisis situations regardless of the specific intervention received. Moreover, the evidence also suggests that attendance, behavior, and crisis interventions targeting specific student needs have a positive impact on attendance, behavior, and crisis outcomes in the school environment.

Review of Findings

Attendance

Regardless of the applied intervention, the total sample of students receiving social work services in both school districts had an average of 24% fewer absences in the six-weeks following the start of social work services. Though this decrease was not found to be significant, this reduction in unexcused absences amounted to 1.78 more days in the classroom per six-week period after students began receiving social work services.

At School District A, all students receiving social work services had an average of 23% fewer absences, or 2.8 days, in the six-weeks following the start of social work services. Likewise, students in School District B had an average of 28% fewer absences, or 1 day, in the six-weeks following the start of services. Though both districts had a reduction in absences after intervention, School District A had an average of 6.8 more absences during the six-week period following the start of services than School District B.

Students who received an intervention specific to attendance had an average of 46% fewer absences in the six-week period following the start of their attendance intervention. This improvement in attendance amounted to an average increase of 6.92 days during the six weeks following the start of an attendance intervention. In other words, students who received an attendance intervention attended school approximately one week and two days more during a six-week period than they had prior to intervention, nearly cutting their unexcused absences in half.

These findings are consistent with those of previous studies suggesting that the mere presence of a caring, intentional adult at school helps to increase accountability and

support while at school (Alvarez et al., 2013; Berzin et al., 2011; Starobin & Bivens, 2014). Likewise, this data is supported by findings of Vaughn et al. (2013) which showed that truancy issues may compound the effects of other risk factors and student outcomes. As this study found, issues of truancy decreased once students began services, which suggests that truancy may be influenced simply by addressing other risk factors and negative outcomes.

Attendance interventions used in this study have been shown to decrease absences and increase student accountability in school using a case-management and relational-mentor approach (Anderson et al., 2004; Dalun et al., 2010; Strand & Lovrich, 2014). School social work services that utilize positive reinforcement, case-management, and family/community-based partnerships have been shown to improve or maintain student attendance over time, which was also consistent with the findings of this study (DeSocio et al., 2007; Sheldon, 2007; Sutphen, Ford, & Flaherty, 2010; Thomas et al., 2011).

Students receiving a specific, targeted attendance intervention showed significant decreases in unexcused absences after beginning case-management, which is consistent with the literature showing that case-management and mentorship increase student attendance (DeSocio et al., 2007; Early & Vonk, 2001; Thomas et al., 2011). If the intervention provided was specific to attendance issues, outcomes resulted in even greater changes in attendance compared to the overall group. Overall, the findings of this study are consistent with the literature, implying that social work services are effective in reducing school absences.

Behavior

In the overall sample, the results strongly supported the hypothesis that students receiving social work services would have a decrease in behavior referrals after beginning services. In fact, students receiving any intervention had an average of 40% less behavior referrals after beginning services, with an average of 0.67 less referrals during a six-week period. Overall, this decrease in behavior referrals was statistically significant which suggests that social work services are related to a reduction in behavior incidents.

At School District A, all students receiving social work services had a statistically significant average of 49% fewer behavior referrals, or 1.15 referrals, in the six-weeks following the start of social work services. Likewise, students in School District B had an average of 26% fewer behavior referrals, or 1.15 referrals, in the six-weeks following the start of social work services, though this reduction was not statistically significant. Though both districts had a reduction in referrals after intervention, it is important to note that School District B had an average of less than one behavior referral per student in the six-week period following the start of any intervention.

Students who received an intervention specific to behavior had an average of 54% fewer behavior referrals in the six-week period following the start of their behavior intervention. This reduction in referrals amounted to an average decrease of 1.3 referrals during the six weeks following the start of a behavior intervention. Students who received a behavior intervention cut their average number of behavior referrals in half after beginning a behavior intervention.

As is consistent with similar studies, the results of this study further support the impact of school social work interventions on student behavior and aggression (Bennett & Gibbons, 2000; Corcoran, 2006; Serketich & Dumas, 1996). These findings strongly support the literature which suggests that the PBIS approach is effective in reducing the average number of behavior incidents occurring at school (Anderson-Ketchmark & Alvarez, 2010; PBIS, 2016).

Particularly for students receiving a specific behavior-modification intervention, a PBIS approach and integration of evidence-based interventions based on Behaviorism and Cognitive-Behavioral theories was also effective in significantly reducing the number of student behavior incidents (Cotter & Smokowski, 2016; Lloyd, 2013; PBIS, 2016).

Though both school districts are in the process of implementing Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), it is important to note the status, or stage, of implementation at each district at the time of the study. School District A began implementing Tier One, or school-wide supports, during the current 2016-2017 school year. As is consistent with PBIS procedures, a school district must demonstrate that they have implemented Tier One with fidelity before beginning Tier Two. On the other hand, School District B has implemented both Tier One and Tier Two in their district, and the 2016-2017 school year is their third consecutive year of implementation.

Though the results of this study did not test to determine the relationship between years of PBIS implementation and behavior referrals, the differences in average number of referrals in each district prior to any intervention or social work services suggests that more years of PBIS implementation may have been related to the lower number of behavior referrals seen in School District B. As mentioned previously, School District B

had a baseline average of only 1.15 referrals per six weeks compared to an initial average of 2.35 referrals per six weeks in School District A. It is possible that this difference in number of behavior referrals at each district prior to social work services was related to the implementation status of PBIS in each district as well as the length of time implemented with consistency.

Likewise, the literature also suggests that the school social work role is best suited for Tiers Two and Three within the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports framework (Anderson-Ketchmark & Alvarez, 2010; Harrison & Harrison, 2009). However, as detailed above, School District A does not have Tier Two or Three in place and School District B has only had Tiers One and Two implemented within the past three years. Though the data shows that school social work targeted interventions are effective in reducing absences, referrals, and improving crisis situations, the full impact of school social work within a fully-implemented PBIS program is unknown. However, given that these services were effective even within a pilot social work program prior to the complete implementation of all PBIS tiers, it can be inferred that these services may be even more effective while in the context of a fully-implemented PBIS system. After all, the literature strongly asserts that an effective intervention must involve both community and school support systems to effectively address student problems (Dalun et al., 2010; DeSocio et al., 2007; Strand & Lovrich, 2014), and these support systems are integrated into the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports program.

Crisis

For the overall student sample, the results strongly supported the hypothesis that students receiving social work services would have an increase in average progress

improvement rating after beginning services. In fact, students receiving any intervention had an average increase of 13% on their progress improvement rating after beginning services, with an average progress improvement rating increase of 0.50 points during a six-week period. Overall, this increase in progress improvement rating was statistically significant which suggests that social work services do result in greater progress on goals over the course of intervention implementation.

At School District A, all students receiving social work services had a statistically significant average progress improvement rating increase of 9%, or 0.32 points, in the six-weeks following the start of social work services. The average student goal progress rating at School District A was low, which may be a result of outside factors. As previously reported, in 2015-2016, School District A had a turnover rate of roughly 30% compared to a Texas state average of 16.5% (TEA, 2016). Additionally, School District A only began implementing Tier One (school-wide) of the PBIS approach within the last year, which is not fully in place.

As seen in the literature, a major indication of school climate within a school district is teacher turnover rate. Schools with high percentages of teacher turnover may suggest that not only is the condition of the environment undesirable for students, but also for supporting teachers and staff (Smokowski et al., 2013). Moreover, high turnover rates have been shown to increase levels of anxiety and aggression in students as well, which further contributes to a deteriorating school environment for students and staff (Smokowski et al., 2013). Though social work services did have a significant effect on student goal progress in School District A, the average post-intervention rating of 3.57

indicates only slight improvement which may be impacted by outside factors such as school climate.

All students in School District B receiving social work services had a statistically significant average progress improvement rating increase of 12%, or 0.41 points, in the six-weeks following the start of social work services. Though the average student goal progress rating at School District A was low, student progress indicates that social work services impact student progress for goal completion.

Given that the Progress Improvement Rating measure was used to specifically measure improvement of students in crisis, rating improvements are most critical for students in this group. Those who received an intervention specific to crisis situations including abuse, homelessness, family conflict, sexual behavior, grief, body image, self-esteem, or mental health issues (i.e. anxiety, depression, or suicide) had a statistically significant average progress improvement rating increase of 11%, or 0.41 points, in the six-weeks following the start of social work services.

With a post-intervention rating average of 3.86, students receiving a crisis intervention had the highest progress improvement rating compared with the overall sample. This rating most closely translates to a score of "4", showing that students in crisis are consistently showing "slight improvement" after intervention.

Though this measure was based on the researcher's perspective at the conclusion of each session, this rating demonstrates student progress of short-term goals, indications of change, and desired outcomes specific to each crisis situation. This modified rating system supports the Goal Attainment Scaling approach of Kiresuk & Sherman (1968), which was created to measure individualized improvement for mental health patients.

As this study implies, school-based mental health services for students in crisis are effective in creating desired changes and outcomes. This finding is also supported in a study by Armbruster & Lichtman (1999) which showed that not only are school-based mental health programs just as effective as outside clinics, but they are also more accessible and cost-effective. Though only licensed clinical social workers can provide clinical therapies and services to students, these findings imply that even basic social work services and referrals for students with mental health issues are effective in producing improvements in these areas.

Comparable to the crisis outcomes determined in this study, studies have also shown that school social workers are effective in serving as an internal support system for students to improve access to outside resources and agencies who will further benefit students in crisis (Cross & Lauzon, 2015; Griffin & Galassi, 2010; Nelson, 2016; Sheldon, 2007; Starobin & Bivens, 2014). As the literature shows, rural students do not have readily available access to resources as a result of the limited number of external resources present in rural communities (Byun et al., 2012; Hutchins & Akos, 2013; McLaughlin et al., 2014; Nelson, 2016). Therefore, school social workers are able to fulfill the unique role of partnering with local agencies to secure resources to help students and families in crisis in rural communities. According to the results of this study, social workers are effective in generating improvements and changes for students in crisis.

Implications

As a pilot project evaluating the effects of school social work on student outcomes in rural school districts, this study has numerous implications for practice and policy within school districts. To begin with, the results of this study confirmed that school social work interventions are truly effective in increasing attendance, decreasing behavior incidents, and improving outcomes for students in crisis. Moreover, as a whole, school social work in these districts resulted in significantly improved behavior and crisis outcomes for all students meeting with their school social worker, not to mention slight overall improvements in attendance.

Practice

In regards to school social work practice, this study revealed that school social work is an effective and promising opportunity for school districts, particularly in rural communities. The time, money, and resources invested in this pilot initiative were well used as many significant improvements resulted in the lives of students, families, and district staff in the context of the overall school environment. In fact, this study also provided strong support for the evidence-based interventions used as a part of services including case-management, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, and basic Cognitive Behavioral Therapy techniques because these interventions were successful in achieving the desired outcomes. More than anything, this study provides strong evidence to support the implementation of school social work into both rural and urban school districts.

While school social workers have become more prevalent in larger, urban school districts, students in rural communities have continued to struggle with attendance,

behavior, and crisis situations, leaving administrators and teachers struggling to find solutions and resources for their students. However, the addition of a school social worker would allow administrators and teachers to better focus on their primary duties without needing to provide intensive interventions for attendance and behavior. As outlined in the review of literature, school social workers have the tools to work on school-wide, classroom, group, and individual levels and provide services specific to school and student needs (Alvarez et al., 2013; Kelly et al., 2016). As a result, students, staff, and families would benefit from the direct or indirect effects of the programs and initiatives of the on-campus social worker.

Policy

Undoubtedly, the knowledge that school social work services are effective in rural schools provides a strong foundation for policy changes on national, state, and local government levels in the upcoming years. Such policy changes could include national or state initiatives to increase the number of school districts with social workers on staff, especially in rural areas. As seen in the literature, rural communities are often lacking in resources and opportunities for local students and families (Byun et al., 2012; Hutchins & Akos, 2013; McLaughlin et al., 2014; Nelson, 2016). By creating and modifying policies, districts would be able to provide their students with additional support and services using on-staff school social workers.

The findings of this study also have several repercussions for district staffing and hiring decisions in school districts. Ideally, the knowledge that school social workers are effective in reducing truancy, problem behaviors, and mental health issues would lead to an increased demand for school social workers in school districts. This increase in

demand would lead to reprioritization of district funds and grant opportunities to enable districts to hire at least one school social worker. If results of this study had implied that school social work was not effective, then school districts with severe budget constraints would not fully benefit from the additional costs associated with adding social work services. However, the results of this study suggest that even school districts with budget constraints would be wise to make adjustments in order to add a social worker position and reap the benefits for years to come.

Moreover, this study provides substantial data to provide districts and administrators with effective solutions for growing truancy and behavior issues in their schools. One major implication of this study is the observed effect of attendance interventions on chronically truant students. Given that school districts receive or lose funding based on overall student absences, the addition of a school social worker would help to increase student attendance, which further increases the amount of funding received. Along with attendance, the implementation of behavior interventions would also serve to decrease the amount of funding spent on alternative discipline placements and the amount of time administrators spend overseeing student discipline consequences. Overall, successful school social work outcomes have the unique ability to both directly and indirectly influence funding and financial resources available to school districts.

As a critical note for educators and policy makers, it is important to note that while not all attendance outcomes were statistically significant, attendance did increase both overall and in each school district. From an educator's perspective, every day that a student is present at school is one more day that this student has the opportunity to learn and succeed. Though these improvements in attendance may have also been affected by

other factors outside of social work services, the bottom line for educators is that attendance did improve. And given that the literature shows that student truancy patterns increase and become more severe over time (Gage, 2013), any improvement in attendance is meaningful. After all, in this study, students on a downward spiral of truancy began to attend school more regularly throughout the study, thus increasing their opportunity to learn and pursue a diploma. Overall, implementing attendance interventions in schools would allow educators the opportunity to positively impact more students each day, reduce dropouts, and increase school funding.

Similarly, decreases in behavioral referrals have important practical implications for administrators and teachers in schools. For example, an average decrease of one behavior referral every six-weeks would result in six less behavior referrals per student over the course of the year. If each office referral took up to 20 minutes of an administrator's time, a reduction of six referrals over the year would yield two additional hours per student that could be used for other purposes. Hypothetically, if the combined impact of PBIS and school social work interventions resulted in these decreases for even 100 students, administrators would have an additional 200 hours to invest in other responsibilities over the course of the year, and teachers would have less disruptions to learning in the classroom as well. Ultimately, students receiving social work services would have fewer behavioral referrals; consequently, administrators would dramatically decrease the amount of time spent on office referrals and disciplinary assignments.

As mental health issues in schools particularly continue to receive public attention, educators and policy-makers have searched for solutions to provide support for students experiencing mental health crises. According to this study and similar findings

in the literature, school-based mental health services are a promising solution to the growing awareness of mental illnesses experienced by students and their families (Armbruster & Lichtman, 1999; Berzin et al., 2011). With this in mind, policy-makers affecting mental health services would benefit from a careful consideration of the impact of school social workers for students and families experiencing mental health issues and should support legislation that integrates mental health services into schools.

Considering the many improvements that resulted from the implementation of school social work in these two rural school districts, school district educators and policy-makers should advocate and take deliberate steps to integrate social workers into the very fabric of public education. Though this study was a pilot initiative, these outcomes are also strongly supported in the existing literature. The ramifications of these findings have the capacity to significantly impact micro, mezzo, and macro systems including families, districts, and overall communities if implemented efficiently.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS

As outlined in the current study, school social work interventions had a significant impact on attendance, behavior, and crisis situations of students in two rural school districts. There are several strengths and limitations associated with the findings of this study. However, this pilot study also provides many excellent opportunities for future research on this topic.

Strengths

One major strength of this study is that the same sample of students was used for comparison prior to and following the start of a social work intervention. Comparing pre-intervention and post-intervention data for the same students allowed for a greater control of extraneous confounding variables that could have impacted the intervention outcome. This repeated-measures design also allowed for more power in statistical analysis considering the small sample size included in this study. Additionally, the quantitative study design allowed for greater consistency and reliability of data for statistical analysis, particularly for attendance and behavior data. The attendance and behavior data utilized in this study was based directly on school records, thus reducing the impact of researcher/practitioner subjectivity.

Another major strength of the design was the availability of attendance and behavior data specific to the current 2016-2017 school year. Because the social work program implemented in each school district was a pilot initiative, services did not begin

with students until after the first two months of the school year. Therefore, the pre-intervention data was relevant to the students' current school year and further served as an external control for the study. This particular study also benefitted from reduced carry-over effects given that the students were not receiving any treatments or interventions previous to the beginning of social work services in the 2016-2017 school year.

Limitations

There were four primary limitations that should be taken into account regarding the findings of this study. First, the methodology of student selection did not allow for a random sample because students were referred for social work services by administrators and school staff based on severity of need. There were undoubtedly many students who would have benefitted from services who were not referred due to oversight or lack of understanding of the role of the new school social work intern.

Additionally, this study utilized a small sample size for a repeated-measures t-test analysis. Though paired t-tests are particularly applicable with small sample sizes, statistical breakdowns of school district data and intervention-specific data included samples sizes as low as n=6. Assuming normality, a paired t-test procedure was the best statistical test to use; however, the smaller samples sizes have little power and should not be generalized to larger populations. Therefore, the findings of these analyses must be interpreted cautiously.

The greatest limitation within this study was the availability of the school social work intern to provide services in each district. As is consistent with the role of a Master's level intern, social work services were only provided in each district two days a week. Districts with a full-time social worker present all five days each week would

better be able to provide consistent interventions and respond to immediate crisis situations within the district. Furthermore, a full-time social worker would be able to initiate relationships and partnerships with teachers and staff who are often the most underutilized resources for intervention management within schools (Berzin et al., 2011).

Of the services provided, this limitation most greatly affected attendance interventions with students. After all, if a student happened to be absent during the two days when the social work intern is on campus, the student was not able to receive services until the following week. Likewise, students receiving attendance interventions were also more likely to have low attendance to begin with, thus making it more difficult to meet with students. In this respect, the full effects of attendance outcomes were limited to the part-time status of the school social work intern. It is predicted that this limitation would be reduced if school districts had a full-time social worker on staff, and it is also likely that attendance interventions and case-management would be better implemented with fidelity.

Implications for Future Research

This study was a limited, narrow-scope exploratory project conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of new school social work programs in two districts. Consistent with the nature of pilot studies, there is currently little evidence of the longitudinal effects of school social work services in rural communities. Though it is likely that social work services would continue to provide more significant outcomes over time due to greater understanding of roles and more permanent connections within the district and community, this outcome is unknown. Future studies should consider the long-term impacts of school social work in rural school districts.

Additionally, further research should be conducted to compare the effectiveness of school social work in school districts that are currently using a school-wide program to create a positive, welcoming school culture with those that do not have a school-wide program in place. In the current study, one school district had been using a school-wide program for several years prior to the implementation of social work services whereas the other district began this initiative in the current school year. Though the effects of school-wide culture factors were not tested in this study, future studies should determine whether or not the outcomes of social work are significantly affected by the school culture.

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APPENDIX

IRB Approval Letter

ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY
Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
320 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29103, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103
325-674-2885

1/12/2017

Bre Heinrich
Department of Social Work
ACU Box 27866
Abilene Christian University

Dear Ms. Heinrich

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled Social Work in Rural Schools: An Evaluation of a Pilot Project for Social Work Services in Rural School Districts
(IRB# 17-001)is exempt from review under Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects as:

☐ Non-research (45 CFR 46.102(d))
☑ Non-human research (45 CFR 46.102(f)

Based on:
Researchers will not be able to identify research subjects based on the data

If at any time the details of this project change, please resubmit to the IRB so the committee can determine whether or not the exempt status is still applicable.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,
Megan Roth

Megan Roth, Ph.D.
Director of Research and Sponsored Programs