



## **The Challenge in Supporting Students' Social Emotional Needs Online: From a School Social Worker's Perspective**

Alison Onofrio

### **ABSTRACT**

*For a school social worker, the 2019-2020 school year was a year in which there were many challenges and barriers with supporting social emotional learning due to the COVID-19 crisis. During this school year student learning became remote learning for both academics, behavioral and social emotional needs. This school year, more than ever, was a time to address social emotional learning needs as top priority, but unfortunately it was the most challenging of years to address those needs. In the role of a school social worker during a "normal" year, many hats are worn in order to support the needs of the school community. This year, with a national crisis, I have encountered a new set of challenges, that now requires a whole new set of hats to wear.*

**Keywords:** Community-related risks, Family Violence, High School students, Low-income families, Quarantine-associated risks, Remote Learning School Social Worker, Social-emotional-behavioral needs.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Due to COVID-19 many students have shared with me that they don't feel safe, are nervous to leave their homes, anxious to watch the news, feel more isolated than ever not seeing friends and are uncomfortable to hug loved ones. In my role over the past years as a school social worker, I have taught, promoted and encouraged ways to solve problems, reduce anxiety and help diminish fears, however during this national crisis a lot of the skills that students have gained have been lost.

On a regular basis I support students with their development on concepts such as self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making skills, relationship skills and social awareness. But remote learning has made it more challenging to teach and reinforce these skills that we expect our students to know.

It is very concerning that the students will not have the skills that are ideal to function well in society- demonstrating empathy, getting a job, establishing positive relationships and managing stress. In the remote setting additional challenges have made it even more difficult to support the students' needs. Such challenges are lack of student engagement, heightened anxiety due to COVID-19, technology issues, the heightened need to support families both financially and emotionally and parentified student roles.

## **REMOTE LEARNING BARRIERS**

The 2019- 2020 school year has been a year in which students and staff have transitioned to remote learning, but as a professional it has felt more defeating than positive. I have talked on the phone for countless hours with students who are overwhelmed, confused, lonely and missing the overall school climate. Students miss seeing their smiling teachers, the principal waving hello in the morning, meeting their friends at lunch, being a part of group projects, hearing the daily gossip and meeting with their school social worker to discuss any school, home or personal problems they face.

Learning loss will most likely be greatest among low-income, black, and Hispanic students. Lower income students are less likely to have access to high-quality remote learning or to a conducive learning environment, such as a quiet space with minimum distractions, devices they do not need to share, high-speed internet, and parental academic guidance (Dorn, Hancock, Sarakatsannis, & Viruleg, 2020).

As a school social worker, who works with student in a city where many students are black and Hispanic from low-income families, how do I help in an environment so out of my control. In the school building I can support the teacher, support the school community, support the overall climate etc., but when a student is home there are now so many more struggles and obstacles that are out of my control. Due to all these remote learning barriers, students are unable to process their own emotions and anxieties with their usual trusted supports, often resulting in students feeling lonely and isolated.

## **SOCIAL EMOTIONAL REMOTE LEARNING BARRIERS**

Community-related risks for mental health, challenges within the families, domestic violence, child maltreatment and quarantine-associated risks are always of high concern. The focus on high-risk children during this present time resonated with me, as a social worker, because it goes into detail on how this pandemic has underreported the possible amounts of domestic violence and child maltreatment cases (Fegert, Vitiello, Plener, & Clemens, 2020). This is very alarming because school buildings and community supports used to provide opportunities for students to interact with trusted adults. Now students cannot access community and building supports as they once were able to. Remote learning does not provide the same access and opportunity for school staff to interact with students for six plus hours in a day to build that comfortable connection/atmosphere. Another key point of the article was that students are starting to normalize the online interactions and are not socializing the same way they used to. This is problematic because socialization is a critical aspect of life function and success.

Another research discusses how isolation puts children at greater risk of neglect as well as physical, emotional, sexual, and domestic abuse. In the school setting, school social workers utilize the limited time we have in order to build relationships and help teach school wide SEL skills, which helps students to feel comfortable in opening up about the possibility of abuse or neglect in their lives (Usher, Bhullar, Durkin, Gyamfi, & Jackson, 2020). During remote learning students often have family members in the same room as them, which makes it even more challenging to disclose personal information.

## **CONCLUSION**

The challenge in supporting students' social emotional needs through remote learning has felt defeating, but I remain positive in making strides to impact my students so they feel more successful. My district has been proactive in providing professional development to teachers and staff to encourage student engagement. I am hopeful that as we start the 2020-2021 school year, I will be able to help support students through a remote learning platform more effectively. As a school social worker, I feel it is imperative that my role change, as the needs of my students have changed due to the COVID-19 crisis. Some changes I will make is operating outside the scheduled "school hours" to increase student engagement, co-teaching with teachers to incorporate more SEL work within google classrooms, providing more SEL material to families, students and staff, making more daily calls to our families and not

just checking in on the student- but the family as a whole too. I also will make sure to increase self-care for myself as well as educating my students more often about the importance of self-care.

## References

- Dorn, E., Hancock, B., Sarakatsannis, J., & Viruleg, E. (2020). COVID-19 and student learning in the United States: The hurt could last a lifetime. McKinsey & Company. Retrieved from <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/publicsector/our-insights/covid-19-and-student-learning-in-the-united-states-the-hurt-could-last-a-lifetime>
- Fegert, J. M., Vitiello, B., Plener, P. L., & Clemens, V. (2020). Challenges and burden of the Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic for child and adolescent mental health: a narrative review to highlight clinical and research needs in the acute phase and the long return to normality. *Child and adolescent psychiatry and mental health*, 14, 20. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13034-020-00329-3>
- Usher, K., Bhullar, N., Durkin, J., Gyamfi, N. & Jackson, D. (2020). Family violence and COVID-19: Increased vulnerability and reduced options for support. *Int J Mental Health Nurs*, 29: 549-552. <https://doi.org/10.1111/inm.12735>

### ***About the Author:***

*Alison Onofrio, LMSW*, is a School Social Worker for New Haven Public Schools, SEL Coach and a Part-time Faculty at Southern Connecticut State University. She graduated from Eastern Connecticut State University with her Bachelors in Social Work as well as a minor in Criminology and received her Masters in Social Work from Southern Connecticut State University.