

Welcome back Phil . Did you know you can always get the latest news from us on Twitter? Just follow 'GreenfieldDR.'

Introducing



NineStar
CONNECT

Formerly
Hancock Telecom &
Central Indiana Power

ninestarconnect.com



Social workers fill a vital role in schools: assuring children have a fighting chance to learn

By Derek Smith
Staff Writer

First Posted: March 09, 2011 - 9:06 am

Last Updated: March 09, 2011 - 9:15 pm

Share / Save

Photo Gallery:



Click to view (5 Photos)

GREENFIELD — Christy Harpold always knew she wanted to help students. Her first inclination involved child psychology, but in her days at Ball State University she discovered her true desire – becoming a school social worker.

Today, Harpold is a popular figure among the students at J.B. Stephens Elementary.

Visitors might see her walking the hallways on her way to a classroom – carrying the stuffed bunny Howard B. Wigglebottom. (It's not uncommon for a student passing by to ask if he or she can hold Howard next.)

Or you might find Harpold talking to a student in her office, where they sit near framed drawings of Dr. Seuss characters.

"Social work is a profession when you're in school that you really get to use a lot of specific skills," Harpold said. "Everybody knows I'll be here until they kick me out."

This week is National School Social Work Week, a time when communities throughout the country are encouraged to learn about and appreciate the efforts of the social workers employed in their local schools.

Harpold received a handful of crayoned thank-you cards when she visited a first-grade classroom on Tuesday. Later, an excited student grabbed Harpold's hand and asked her to walk down the hall so she could give her a picture she'd drawn.

Social workers serve an important function in local school districts. They can help students overcome a variety of obstacles related to poverty, emotional problems, or distractions at home that can make it difficult for them to concentrate in the classroom.



Community
Physicians of Indiana



Dr. Richard

Family Medicine of Greenfield

740 W. Green Meadows Drive, Suite 105

317.318.7777

We also have more stories about:
(click the phrases to see a list)

Left unaddressed, many of these problems can become longer-term barriers to student success.

"We identify ourselves as the vital link between children, families and communities," said Megan Thomas, the social worker at Fortville Elementary. "No day is ever the same. I'm always on call for students who may be having difficulties."

One responsibility of social workers is to help students develop coping skills when they're going through stressful situations like their parents divorcing or a death in the family, Thomas said.

Social work in American schools isn't a new development. The history of school social work dates to the early 1900s, according to the School Social Work Association of America, www.sswaa.org.

An essential part of a social worker's job is to develop rapport and trust with students. Developing this bond helps them not only understand students' underlying problems, but also what types of interventions can work for individual students, local social workers said.

"No two students are the same, so what works for one student and one family might not work for another student and their family," Thomas said.

Social workers in local districts often share experiences and insights about their work. Some are involved with the Indiana School Social Work Association. This statewide professional organization promotes the effective use of social work services for families throughout Indiana, according to www.insswa.org.

Just like their colleagues in the classroom, social workers face challenges related to tight school budgets.

Budget pressures led Southern Hancock to reduce the district's number of school counselors.

Tonya Wood now serves as school counselor for SH's three elementary schools. She works closely with principals in splitting her time among the buildings.

"The principals have been wonderful in changing some responsibilities in what they're wanting me to do," Wood said.

While she's a counselor instead of a social worker, there's not much of a distinction between the two positions at the elementary school level other than the professional degree, Wood said, adding the distinction becomes greater at the high school level. High school counselors are heavily involved with student scheduling and helping students chart a path for their future.

Wood serves as a liaison between families and the SH system, and she helps connect families with resources outside the school system.

Elementary school counselors need to be able to think on their feet.

Whether it's a crying child, a parent who needs to talk or a child who doesn't want to enter the school building, Wood said she has to be able to switch priorities quickly.

"So many family dynamics come into play," Wood said. "Kids sometimes because of that (situation outside

Greenfield Daily Reporter on Facebook

Like

Greenfield Daily Reporter

Ind. teen beaten by police faces new charges

INDIANAPOLIS - A biracial teenager whose beating at the hands of Indianapolis police spurred protests by community groups has been arrested on drug- and gang-related charges.

Source: GreenfieldReporter.com - Indiana News
Published: 2011-03-10 19:49:36 GMT

32 minutes ago · via RSS Graffiti

Greenfield Daily Reporter

Ind. judge grants stay of permit for ArcelorMittal

BURNS HARBOR, Ind. - An administrative law judge has granted ArcelorMittal a stay of a newly issued wastewater permit so the company can work with state regulators to try to resolve a disagreement over the permit.

660 people like **Greenfield Daily Reporter**.

Linda	Michael	Ryan	Troy	Crystal

school) have a hard time focusing on their education because things get in the way. I help bridge that gap.”

Part of bridging the gap comes from working with other professionals who face similar challenges.

Lora Bowling, school counselor at Eastern Hancock Elementary, stays in close contact with EH counselors at the middle school and high school levels.

Bowling’s office is full of games and toys. She said there’s a saying that young kids are much more willing to open up when their hands are busy with fun activities.

Her work involves creating a safe environment where students can share their emotions. Bowling often helps connect EH families with outside resources, depending on their situation.

“Time management is a huge challenge – just to try to meet all of the needs of the children,” Bowling said.

But in the end, it’s worth it. A hug or a high-five from a student can make Bowling’s day.

Thomas works closely with three other social workers in the Mt. Vernon system in sharing ideas and discussing best practices.

“We are constantly e-mailing each other, calling each other on the phone,” Thomas said. “We try to meet once a month.”

At the beginning of each school year, G-C sends out an updated list of school social workers and counselors, Wood said.

Harpold serves as part of Greenfield-Central’s team of social workers who work with kids in the elementary and intermediate grades. Other G-C schools employ guidance counselors who offer encouragement to students and help them plan an educational and career track.

While Harpold is in her seventh year as the school’s social worker, she’s affectionately known as “the rookie” by the district’s other social workers due to their lengthier tenures.

Like Thomas, Harpold says no two days are alike. Harpold gives classroom presentations to kindergarten and first-grade classrooms on social skills such as peer interaction and conflict resolution. She’ll also talk to older students about issues like bullying.

Harpold also works with small groups of students who are encountering similar challenges in their lives like their parents divorcing.

At other times, Harpold will meet with an individual student who needs to talk about something or who needs to calm down after acting up in class. Sometimes the calming comes from a walk around the school, or a visit to a sensory room filled with fun items, or maybe hugging a giant stuffed bear named Mr. Fuzzy.

Harpold’s various responsibilities can cause her to shift gears on the fly – such as when dealing with a student’s problem causes her to be late to a classroom.

“You kind of feel like you’re pulled in many different directions,” Harpold said.

But it’s apparent that social workers like Harpold fill an important role for young students.

Harpold’s presentations reflect monthly character traits that are part of the district’s character development initiative. On Tuesday, she visited a first-grade classroom to give a talk about the character trait of discernment.

It’s not a word your typical first-grader knows, yet the class listened attentively as Harpold described how the

word relates to building a friendship, and then read them a story called "The Very Cranky Bear."

In the story, three animal characters decide the bear's appearance is too plain, so they give him antlers and a mane. All the bear really wanted was a pillow; he becomes quite cranky when he discovers his unwanted additions.

Harpold related the story to her lesson about the importance of asking questions and not hastily judging a situation.

"Did any of them ask what would make the bear happy?" Harpold asked the students.

After the story, Harpold reinforced the importance of asking questions by having the boys and girls in the class compete in asking relevant questions as they tried to determine what she'd brought in a small box. The boys were gleeful to win the contest by determining it was a Matchbox-size car. Before Harpold left, she promised a new student that next time Howard the bunny would be hers to hold.

Details like a stuffed animal incentive or a lesson about discernment might seem small, but they can play an important part in capturing the attention and concentration of young students, social workers said.

"At the elementary level, it's a good starting time to build the right developmental foundation for kids," Wood said. "If we can create the positive character traits at the elementary level, they're more likely to carry them on when they're older."

Harpold has a personal goal of remembering the first name of each child at J.B. Stephens. That's more than 500 names.

"I've almost got it," Harpold said. "I think it makes them feel important."