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The role of social workers in preventing school dropout: an evidence-based review of interventions

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Abstract. School dropout remains an important problem for school systems worldwide, with extensive individual, social, and economic consequences. The present evidence-based narrative review examines the role of the school social worker in preventing school dropout by merging intervention methods documented in the international and Romanian literature. Interventions that were valued were thematically structured along four areas: individual-level support (such as mentoring and counseling), family-based engagement (such as home visiting, parenting courses), community-based partnerships (such as interagency networks and outreach initiatives), and school-wide system changes (such as inclusive policy and early warning systems). Results indicate that dropout prevention requires successful early identification, relational trust, interdisciplinary collaboration, and institutional support. The school social worker is also found to be the key facilitator in the bridge between students' needs and resources within the school, family, and community. The review is on salient factors enhancing intervention effectiveness as well as discusses issues to implementation, particularly within Romania's education sector. Practice, policy making, and research suggestions are also considered.

Keywords. school dropout, social work intervention, school social worker, student engagement, dropout prevention

1. Introduction

School dropout is one of the most critical issues affecting education systems in modern times, with far-reaching implications not only for individual learners but also for society as a whole. The premature withdrawal from formal schooling before achieving the minimum or anticipated levels of schooling is how dropout has been defined. Dropout is a multi-determined issue based on personal, institutional, and societal factors. Globally, dropout rates vary extensively by country and geography but are uniformly high among poor and marginalized communities and vulnerable populations, including those experiencing poverty, discrimination, or family instability (De Witte et al., 2013; Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2007).

The drop-out experience is rarely a momentary decision but is evolved, guided over the course of time by an involved complex dynamic between emotional disconnection,

behaviorally disturbed tendencies, school failures, and challenging circumstances (Archambault et al., 2009; Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Rumberger & Rotermund, 2012). Early warning indicators like habitual absenteeism, poor academic achievement, and disrupted peer or teacher relationships can build up over time and undermine a student's sense of belonging and motivation (Contreras et al., 2022; Ogresta et al., 2021). The COVID-19 crisis has further increased the dangers of dropping out, reinforcing current educational disparities and disproportionately impacting students from underprivileged families, as recent worldwide evidence testifies (Moscoviz & Evans, 2022).

In the Romanian example, dropout continues to be a chronic issue despite targeted policies and programs. Studies at the national level suggest that Romania boasts one of the European Union's highest dropout rates, with significant variations between rural and urban regions, ethnic minorities, and socio-economic status (Alexa & Baciú, 2021; Serban, 2024). Recent data also indicate the necessity of combined interventions moving beyond crisis-oriented solutions, focusing on early detection, prevention, and support for systems (Miron, 2023; Stancu et al., 2022). Bibliometric analyses emphasize growing interest in the topic among Romanian educational research, but there are loopholes in the involvement of non-teaching professionals, especially social workers, in preventing dropout (Profiroiu et al., 2024).

The consequences of school dropping out are short-term and profound. At the individual level, early school leavers have an increased likelihood of unemployment, social exclusion, reduced incomes, and mental illness conditions (Christle et al., 2007; Cairns et al., 1989). Social and economic consequences include the aggravation of longer-term costs through reinforcing poverty cycles, increasing welfare reliance, and restricting civic participation (Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2007; Buzgar et al., 2021). Preventing dropouts is not only an educational imperative, but a matter of social equity and public health as well.

Within this multi-layered context, school social workers have emerged as instrumental agents for working on the root causes of dropouts. With their training in both psychological and systemic assessment, social workers are positioned at the nexus of school, family, and community. Their interventions, ranging from individual case management, psychosocial counseling, and crisis intervention to coordination by multidisciplinary teams—offer a clearly holistic approach to student retention (Kurtayılmaz & Başak, 2023). But despite their widespread presence in schools, there remains a lack of comprehensive evidence on what types of social work interventions are most effective in preventing early school leaving, particularly in Eastern Europe and Romania (Călin et al., 2024).

This article aims to give an overview of current interventions in which the school social worker plays a key role in preventing dropout based on evidence. By bringing together international and Romanian literature, the review seeks to establish evidence-based interventions, identify common mechanisms of success, and examine contextual factors for influencing intervention effectiveness. Moreover, the review will emphasize the practical and policy implications of improving the social work function in schools, with the ultimate goal of promoting student engagement, resilience, and long-term academic persistence.

2. Methodology

The article adopts an evidence-based narrative review strategy, which combines systematic searching for relevant empirical studies with a flexible and critical synthesis of the narrative. Unlike systematic reviews, the narrative approach allows more integrated examination of the topic area, particularly where interventions vary significantly in context,

target population, and delivery. This structure is well suited to the interdisciplinary topic area, which spans educational, psychology, and social work domains.

The review of literature was done on five major academic databases that offer comprehensive coverage in education and social sciences: ERIC (Education Resources Information Center), Web of Science (WoS), PubMed, Scopus, and PsycINFO. The databases were selected on the basis of their relevance and coverage of high-quality, peer-reviewed journal articles in education, psychology, and social work practice. The search approach was based on a set of keywords and Boolean operators to achieve maximum retrieval of relevant studies. The key words used were: "school dropout", "social worker", "intervention", "school-based support", and "at-risk students". The keywords were combined in various permutations to achieve a broad but focused set of studies examining the contribution of social workers to dropout prevention.

Several inclusion criteria guided the selection process. Selection was restricted to publications between 2000 and 2024, so that the review would encompass both earlier and later work in the field. Publications were included if they were reporting empirical studies—qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods—that were focused on dropout prevention interventions involving school social workers. Studies needed to be disseminated in either Romanian or English and needed to report evidence-based interventions, i.e., described and successfully implemented interventions aimed at at-risk student groups. Studies describing only overall school climate, teacher-student relationships, or other indirect factors, without reference to social worker intervention, were excluded.

The selection process followed several stages. Initially, titles and abstracts were screened to exclude irrelevant or duplicate entries. The full texts of the remaining articles were then assessed to ensure they met the predefined inclusion criteria. In doing so, care was taken that there was an intervention that was well defined, that there was explicit inclusion of a school social worker or multidisciplinary team with a social worker, and measurable outcomes as measured by school dropout, student engagement, retention, or re-enrollment. Articles were coded thematically and common patterns were categorized to allow for the identification of the major types of intervention and best practice. In the following sections, results will be reported based on the prevailing forms of intervention recorded in the literature.

3. Results: categories of interventions

The literature review of the selected works revealed many intervention approaches to school dropout prevention, with the school social worker often playing the role of key facilitator, connector, or support provider. The works reviewed were thematically categorized into four general kinds of interventions: individual-level, family-focused, community-based, and school-wide interventions. Each exhibits a specific orientation toward confronting dropout risk, yet they often work synergistically in practice environments.

Individual interventions form the basis of the majority of dropout prevention programs, particularly those implemented by school social workers. They are typically directed at students who have been identified as being at risk due to poor grades, emotional problems, absenteeism, or behavioral problems. Counseling, motivational interviewing, mentoring, and individualized support plans are a few of the common practices within this category. For example, Iachini et al. (2016) investigated the use of motivational interviewing as an early intervention approach and found that it was both feasible and well-accepted by students, facilitating their agency and participation. Similarly, Jozefowicz-Simbeni (2008) stressed the developmental importance of building trusting relationships with students and tailoring interventions to their emotional and

psychological needs. These individualized approaches help promote resilience and increase school connectedness, an important protective factor for dropout (Vargas-Madriz & Konishi, 2021).

Family-oriented interventions recognize the inherent role of home environments and parental involvement in sustaining student engagement. Studies consistently show that effective collaboration between social workers and families can decrease dropout risk by addressing such issues as neglect, domestic instability, or lack of educational support in the home (Wilson et al., 2011; Franklin & Streeter, 1992). Interventions commonly cited in this realm are home visits, psychoeducational counseling with parents, and family therapy. Rusmaniah et al. (2021), for instance, highlighted the effectiveness of social service models involving family outreach within communities where early school leaving was prevalent. These kinds of interventions not only directly help students but also strive to enhance parental competencies and create more stable, supportive environments conducive to educational persistence.

Community-based interventions emphasize the necessity of an ecological and systems approach, in which schools are not isolated institutions but components of broader social networks. Interinstitutional collaboration among child protection services, youth centers, mental health services, and local NGOs increases the scope and longevity of dropout prevention programs. Dupper (2002) and Allen-Meares et al. (2013) both highlight school social workers' functions as liaisons between schools and community-based services. Programs that involve community mentors, extracurricular participation, or after-school support have shown promising outcomes in enhancing academic identity and preventing school dropout (Ramsdal & Wynn, 2022; Blount, 2012). Ingholt et al. (2015) provide compelling evidence from Denmark where efforts to strengthen peer relationships and community belonging significantly raised student retention, particularly in vocational education settings.

School-wide interventions comprise the creation of inclusive, responsive, and compassionate institutional cultures that pre-emptively deal with risk factors before they lead to disengagement. These include the implementation of school policies for equity and inclusion, psychosocial care systems, early warning systems, and restorative discipline. Christenson and Thurlow (2004) argue that a whole-school approach, in which all staff are actively involved in retention, maximizes the impact of targeted interventions. Social workers are often at the forefront of creating, advocating for, and evaluating such system-level policies. Freeman and Simonsen (2015) found in their review that schools that codified data-driven dropout prevention frameworks experienced substantial declines in early school leaving rates. Furthermore, studies such as Sabatino et al. (2013) and Graeff-Martins et al. (2006) illustrate how Response to Intervention (RTI) models infused with social-emotional components provided by social workers can create long-term pathways for student success in low-resource school environments.

Figure 1 shows the four general categories of interventions planned by school social workers in school dropout prevention, according to a thorough analysis of the scientific literature. These categories—individual, family, community, and school-wide interventions—are distinct yet related levels of intervention. Each one operates on a specific axis of influence, although in reality, they cross and reinforce one another, creating more effective and lasting outcomes.

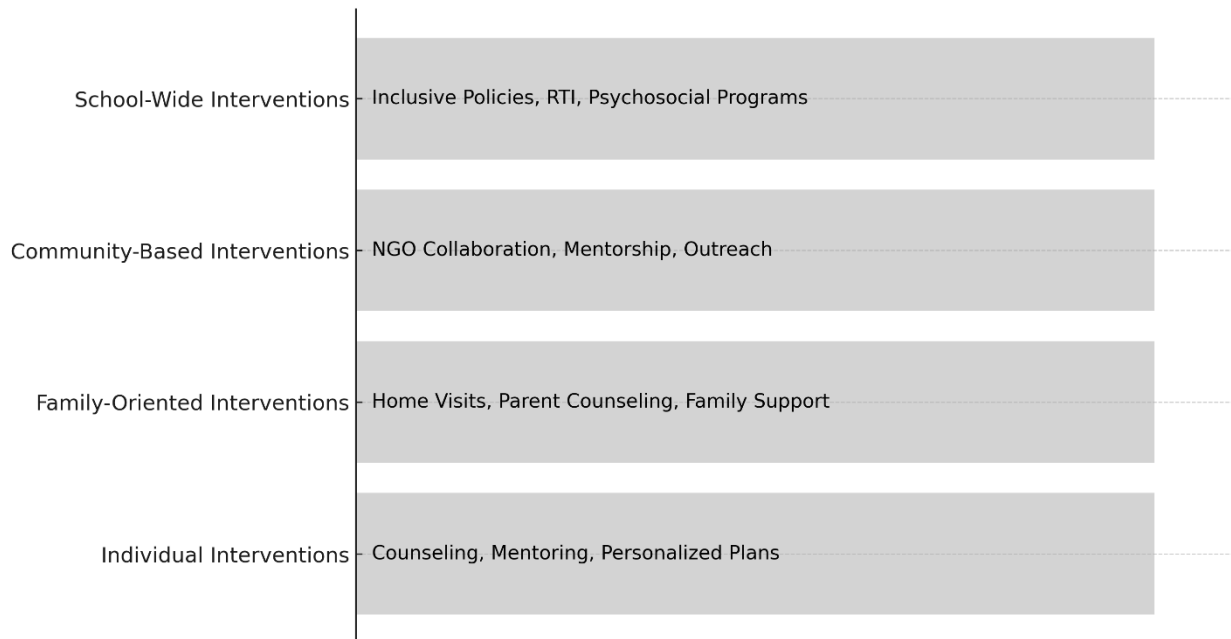


Figure 1. Categories of interventions to prevent school dropout coordinated by school social workers

Individual-level interventions are the most student-centered and most direct interventions, and they often form the foundation of dropout prevention activities conducted by school social workers. These interventions center on identifying and intervening with individual, emotional, academic, and behavioral risk factors that are likely to lead to disengagement. Individual counseling, motivational interviewing, and personalized support plans are often the tools employed through these interventions. Iachini et al. (2016) demonstrated that motivational interviewing was viable within the school setting and emphasized the potential of the intervention in enhancing students' intrinsic motivation and feelings of self-agency. Jozefowicz-Simbeni (2008) also emphasizes the potential for developing through individually designed interventions and finds that assisting in establishing emotionally safe relationships with students can enhance their engagement and resilience. Such efforts are particularly important when working with students who exhibit chronic absenteeism, conduct disorders, or internalized distress. This is corroborated by Vargas-Madriz and Konishi (2021), who find a strong correlation between school belonging, academic motivation, and social support—factors that can be directly addressed through individual social work interventions.

Family-based interventions are centered on the student's family life and home environment as critical components in the continuation or loss of school participation. The majority of at-risk students experience unreliable parental participation, family crisis, or lack of educational support in the home environment. In such cases, social workers act as home-school liaison by using methods such as home visits, parent education, and family therapy to address problems at their origin. Wilson et al. (2011) provide empirical evidence for the impact of parent-inclusive programs, while Franklin and Streeter (1992) emphasize the psychological benefits of family participation in dropout prevention, particularly in middle-class communities. Rusmaniah et al. (2021) document the success of social service programs that utilize family

outreach in poor communities, noting improvements not only in school attendance but also in family stability and cohesion. These interventions not only reduce the risk of dropping out by addressing family-related risks but also allow parents to become active agents of change for their children's educational trajectory.

Community-based interventions encapsulate an ecological and systemic approach to dropout prevention. These approaches are based on the assumption that academic achievement is influenced by some broader social determinants like access to community resources, neighbourhood setting, and youth people's support networks. Social workers have a significant role in enabling interagency alliances with child protection agencies, public health agencies, youth centres, and NGOs. Dupper (2002) and Allen-Meares et al. (2013) highlight the importance of community integration in effective school social work, with multi-sectoral collaboration enhancing both the breadth and quality of provision on offer. Interventions like those outlined by Ramsdal and Wynn (2022) utilize group-based peer approaches to re-engage disaffected youth, while Blount (2012) proposes community mentoring as a way of reintroducing students' educational aspirations. Within vocational education contexts, Ingholt et al. (2015) found interventions designed to foster peer affiliation and community belonging were found to result in significant declines in the number of dropouts, especially among socially disconnected students.

School-wide interventions are systemic efforts aimed at improving the overall school climate and institutional responsiveness to student needs. The majority of the strategies have a tendency to operate through the development and implementation of inclusive policy, data-driven early warning systems, and integrated psychosocial programs. Christenson and Thurlow (2004) argue that institutional level interventions—given that they are accompanied by committed leadership and shared vision—amplify the impact of individual and family support mechanisms. Social workers become engaged in the work not simply as service brokers but also as policy advocates, team leaders, and evaluators. Freeman and Simonsen (2015) found schools with robust, evidence-based systems of dropout prevention had increased graduation rates and student success. Sabatino et al. (2013) recommend the use of social-emotional learning and behavior monitoring under Response to Intervention (RTI) systems, particularly when staffed by social work professionals. In addition, Graeff-Martins et al. (2006) demonstrated the effectiveness of bundled psychosocial interventions in under-resourced schools to reduce dropout and increase school engagement.

Taken as a whole, the interventions studied highlight a multilevel and dynamic model of school dropout prevention, in which school social workers function not only as direct providers but also as strategic coordinators of larger education networks. Success of such interventions often depends on their capacity to integrate personalized help, parental participation, organizational transformation, and community involvement.

4. Discussion

The conclusions of this evidence-based review highlight the complex nature of school dropout and the ability of school social workers to slow down this process. To know what works and why requires an integrated perspective, one that engages the nexus of individual risk, family life, school climate, and broader community organization.

At the individual level, strategies like motivational interviewing, individualized support plans, and school counseling are observed to be especially effective at stimulating at-risk youth's sense of belongingness and interest in education (Iachini et al., 2016; Jozefowicz-Simbeni, 2008). These approaches are guided by ecological and developmental theories,

recognizing that the motivation, agency, and emotional well-being of adolescents are most central to their ability to remain interested in schooling (Archambault et al., 2009; Rumberger & Rotermund, 2012). The research consistently shows that students who have more internal assets, better self-control, and higher academic self-efficacy are less likely to drop out of school (Kurtuyılmaz & Başak, 2023). But these are not invariable and can be maximized with well-targeted interventions from well-trained experts such as social workers.

Family interventions provide a second protective buffer. Families cushion or reinforce school disaffection based on the level of involvement, stability, and communication within the home environment (Franklin & Streeter, 1992; Wilson et al., 2011). Interventions that involve home visits, psychoeducational sessions, and family therapeutic engagement record promising rates of success, especially where social workers assume the roles of cultural mediators and trust facilitators as well. For example, Rusmaniah et al. (2021) reported institutional outreach programs that included families from socioeconomically disadvantaged communities, which led to attendance and motivation enhancement. These interventions work in part by overcoming immediate barriers to learning but also by establishing the long-term capacity of parents to assist in educating their children.

Community-based intervention is particularly critical in settings where systemic deficits—such as poverty, discrimination, or limited availability of services—combine with family and individual-level risk factors. School social workers are optimally positioned to connect students and families with external support systems, such as mental health professionals, NGOs, and community mentorship schemes (Allen-Meares et al., 2013; Dupper, 2002). Projects like Guttas Campus in Norway (Ramsdal & Wynn, 2022) or peer-to-peer relationship-building programs in Danish vocational schools (Ingholt et al., 2015) are excellent examples of how social inclusion and identity building via engaging the community can serve as a protective shield against dropout. Similarly, the works of Blount (2012) and Balenzano et al. (2019) illustrate how uniting school- and community-based support creates a collective ecosystem of responsibility and care.

Most important, perhaps, are interventions within schools, designed to change institutional culture and structural conditions that precede disengagement. These might include inclusive school policy, early-warning systems, restorative discipline, and integrated psychosocial programming. When they are effective, these interventions both prevent dropping out but also construct a safer, more equitable school experience for all (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004; Freeman & Simonsen, 2015). The role of school social workers in this context is critical—they not only work to provide services but also as system-level change agents, advocating for student-centered practice and breaking down interdepartmental collaboration. Sabatino et al. (2013) and Graeff-Martins et al. (2006) provide compelling evidence that integrated models such as RTI, when implemented to include emotional and behavioral health, greatly enhance school retention.

The characteristics of effective interventions, either category A or category B, share certain similarities. They are initially preventive rather than reactive and act on the early risk detection and response. Second, they are relational as they work based on trust, empathy, and relationship continuity. Third, they are context-specific, addressing culture, socio-economy, and institutional contexts. Fourth, they are collaborative, engaging not only school personnel but also schools, families, and external agencies. Finally, they are evidence-informed, relying on empirical research yet practicing-based modifications.

This value of collaboration is most clearly evident in the interprofessional role of the school social worker, who works at the intersection of student psychology, family systems,

pedagogic goals, and community outreach. As compared to counselors or teachers, social workers operate with greater mobility and broader authority to address the social determinants of education (Allen-Meares et al., 2013). They provide school capacity to respond to complexity, particularly where the scenario is traumatic, poor, neglected, or systemically excluded.

Though these interventions have shown promise, there are several challenges and limitations. The majority of schools, especially low-resource schools, lack qualified social work staff or possess staff members who are spreading their know-how across various institutions. Further, the implementation of interventions could be hindered by institutional opposition, insufficient training, fragmented financing, or resistance from unexposed staff (Christle et al., 2007; Miron, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic has also disrupted many school-based services, exacerbating inequalities and generating new forms of educational precarity (Moscoviz & Evans, 2022).

In terms of Romanian applicability, existing literature reveals both imperative need and untapped potential. Romania continues to experience high rates of early school leaving, particularly in rural and excluded communities (Alexa & Baci, 2021; Serban, 2024). Institutional reforms, curriculum rigidities, and unbalanced teacher-student relationships are found to be responsible by a variety of studies (Stancu et al., 2022; Călin et al., 2024). Although national strategies for preventing school dropout exist, the role of the school social worker is yet to be maximized, undefined, and sparsely supported (Buzgar et al., 2021). Profiroiu et al. (2024), in their latest bibliometric study, identified a lack of cohesive research clusters relating social work to dropout prevention in Romanian literature and hypothesizing a substantial knowledge and policy deficit.

Still, the diverse range of interventions discussed in foreign-language literature is easily replicable to diverse life situations of Romanian listeners, if not localized, but culturally adapted, and supported by intersectoral collaboration. For example, early-warning programs and case management patterns exercised by Western countries are readily translatable in Romanian schools by establishing suitable infrastructures and orientations. Besides that, family involvement methods enhanced through neighborhood-based outreach projects are equally adoptable in terms of Romanian students who face financial or emotional challenges.

Preventing school dropout, in short, requires more than one actor or intervention type. It requires an ecosystem of aligned, contextually tailored interventions, with the school social worker as the linchpin. By combining psychological insight, systemic integration, and human relationship, social workers can help schools become inclusive institutions in which all students can succeed and complete their education.

5. Conclusions and implications

This evidence-based review has highlighted the key role of school social workers in preventing early school leaving through a variety of individualized, family-focused, community-based, and school-wide interventions. While the pathways to school dropout are varied and complex—ranging from emotional disengagement and socio-economic disadvantage to institutional shortcomings—what is clearly evident from the literature is the need for holistic, coordinated, and relational responses. Flexible, culturally sensitive interventions grounded in students' life experiences work most effectively at preventing dropping out.

Perhaps the most resilient finding across the studies is the importance of early, preventative intervention. Often, it is the school social workers who are the first professionals

to recognize signs of academic disaffection, emotional distress, or family instability. Their unique function allows them to deliver direct help as well as systemic alignment, considering not only the immediate needs of students but also situation factors resulting in long-term risk. Additionally, effective interventions are rarely used alone. The best approaches are multidisciplinary programs—teachers, counselors, administrators, families, and external service providers—working together in concert in an effort to ensure academic continuity.

The review also stresses the importance of institutional commitment and system reform. Those schools that make dropout prevention integral to their mission and structure—through equitable policy, data-driven practice, and specialized psychosocial staff—are more likely to reduce early school leaving and establish a culture of engagement and concern. School social workers in this regard are not merely service providers but organizational change agents, capable of influencing school climate, policy-making, and inter-agency coordination.

Policy-wise, the results of this review have some implications for school systems, especially in settings like Romania, where high dropout is an issue and services to support the at-risk are patchily distributed. To begin with, there is an urgent need to institutionalize the availability of school social workers, so that they are well trained, well resourced, and well integrated within school teams. Second, policy structures need to delineate the role of social workers in dropout prevention, moving beyond a remedial or medical model to a relational, developmental, and community-oriented paradigm. Third, models of intervention need to be tested and refined locally, with input from students, families, and professionals, in an effort to evaluate relevance and feasibility.

As for directions for future study, the review recommends some of the following. There is a need to create longitudinal designs assessing the long-term impact of school social work interventions on student retention, mental health, and academic performance. Cross-cultural comparison studies can help inform us, as well, regarding how school social work practice adapts in addressing various institutional and cultural environments. Finally, greater practice-based evidence—derived from social workers themselves—should be gathered, analyzed, and disseminated with a view toward maintaining a sound professional knowledge base.

In summary, avoiding school dropout is not just a matter of education but also moral and social justice. By appreciating the role of school social workers and investing in systemic, evidence-based answers, we can move toward an education system that is more inclusive, compassionate, and fair—that is, where all students have a real opportunity to remain, grow, and flourish.

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