

“There is immense power when a group of people with similar interests gets together to work toward the same goals.” —Idowu Koyenikan

[Specialized Instructional Support Personnel \(SISP\)](#) are staff such as **school social workers, school nurses, school psychologists, and school counselors** who provide social, emotional, physical and mental health intervention and prevention services for students and families. These staff support the success of a student beyond classroom instruction by addressing the environment of the school itself as well as factors outside of the school. Many children are affected by [social determinants of health \(SDIH\)](#) that influence their pathway to educational, health, and career success. A school’s SISP can help address barriers that help all students learn, thrive, and grow.

Long before the COVID-19 pandemic struck our communities, many students were struggling with mental and behavioral health. But since then, the situation has worsened in many critical areas. The Center for Disease Control’s [Youth Risk Behavior Survey Summary and Trends Report: 2011-2021](#) illustrates this alarming trend. While reported numbers of sexual partners, incidence of substance abuse and proportion of students reporting being bullied decreased, almost all other indicators of health and well-being in the report worsened significantly. These included experiences of violence, mental health, and suicidal thoughts and behaviors along with protective sexual behaviors (i.e., condom use, sexually transmitted disease (STD) testing, and HIV testing). These findings highlight the need for schools to have enough SISP to better address student needs.

The federally funded [American Rescue Plan](#) has provided critical funding to schools for SISP, but states and districts must find other ways to [address ongoing challenges](#) after the American Rescue Plan funds have been spent.

In NC, it is often difficult for school districts to find, hire and retain SISP because there are so many opportunities for higher salaries in the private sector. The ratio of SISP needed versus what is allocated or funded in a school district is When schools experience staffing shortages, added job demands lead to stress and burnout. In some areas, there are fewer students graduating from SISP credentialing programs than there are jobs available. To address these issues, districts are adopting various strategies. For example they contract for services with private service providers (e.g. psychologists) or other government agencies (e.g. county public health agency for nurses), and where possible, hire staff with provisional licenses.

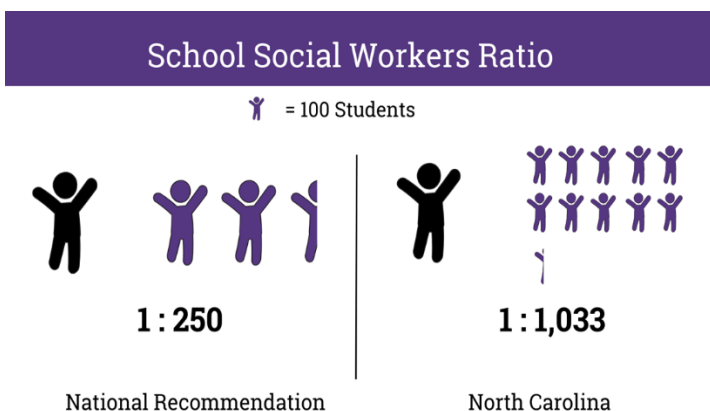
School Social Workers

[School Social Workers](#) help promote students’ academic and social success. They support students through family counseling, individual or small group counseling, crisis intervention, advocacy, consultation, and screenings. School Social Workers help a variety of students including but not limited to those in foster care, treatment programs, the juvenile justice system, or those affected by homelessness, violence and harassment, pregnancy, or at risk for dropping out of school. School Social Workers have [three crucial roles](#):

1. Provide “evidence-based education, behavior, and mental health services” in order to support academic and behavioral outcomes of a student.
2. Cultivate “a school climate and culture conducive to student learning and teaching excellence,” which is established through acting in an advocacy role between a student, family, school, and community.

3. Maximize accessibility “to school-based and community-based resources” by knowing which services are available within a community and making sure these services are accessible to everyone.

[Research has shown](#) that the presence of school social workers can help improve graduation rates, student mental and behavioral health, and reduce disciplinary issues and violence, within schools.



The recommended school social worker-to-student ratio is [1:250 students](#). North Carolina’s current ratio is around [1:1033 students](#).

The national annual mean wage for school social workers is \$54,880. In North Carolina the annual mean wage is \$51,060 ([U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](#)). Many counties in North Carolina are struggling to find qualified school social workers due to low pay and severe burnout. School social workers are paid according to the [NCDPI teacher salary schedule](#).


To become a [school social worker in North Carolina](#) candidates must earn a Bachelor’s Degree in Social Work (BSW) in addition to completed required school social work-specific courses. However, most districts **require** candidates to have a Master’s Degree in Social Work (MSW). The candidate must also be licensed by the Department of Public Instruction. School social workers are paid according to the same salary scale as teachers, which **does not provide additional pay for master’s degrees**, creating another barrier for hiring and retaining school social workers.

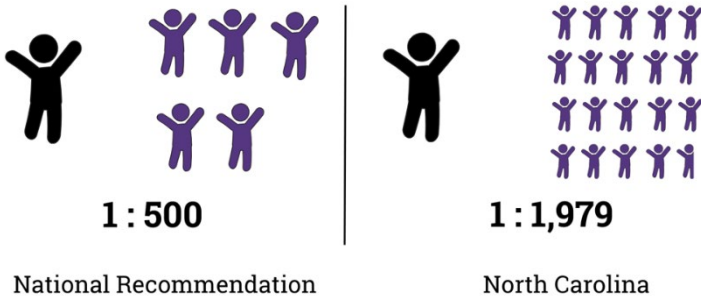
School Psychologists

[School Psychologists](#) are tasked with providing individualized counseling for students, developing school-wide screening systems in order to identify which students or student groups need support, leading school wide implementation efforts to help address mental health, and they are responsible for maintaining open dialogue with school staff, family members, and other professionals in order to help track student progress.

While school counselors act as the frontline mental health service for all students, School Psychologists help at-risk students in addition to students with disabilities. School Psychologists help students overcome trauma, grief, mental illness, stress, and other challenges they may face while trying to stay focused in school to become the best versions of themselves. [Research on the impact of school psychologists](#) have shown a wide variety of positive benefits including reduced high school dropout rates, improved student academics, fewer behavior problems, and also improved teacher effectiveness.

School Psychologists Ratio

 = 100 Students



The nationally **recommended ratio** of school psychologists to students is **1:500 students**. In **NC that ratio is 1:1979 students**.

Many psychologists are dissuaded from pursuing this career because in North Carolina school psychologists are paid far below the national average salary (\$65,110 compared to \$83,160) and their educational programs are rigorous, requiring “intensive supervision and years of work” when compared to other psychology programs. School psychologists are paid according to the NCDPI salary schedule.


To become a school psychologist in North Carolina, candidates must obtain an advanced degree in school psychology and also become licensed by the Department of Public Instruction.

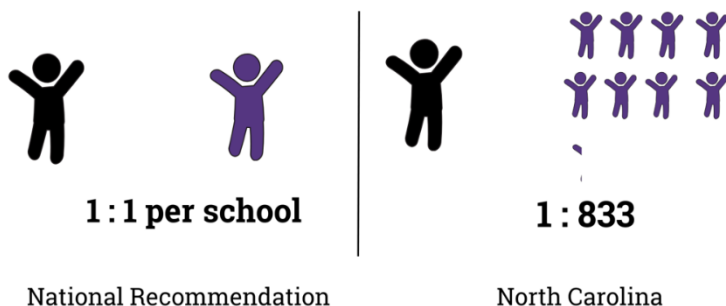
School Nurses

School nurses conduct a specialized practice of nursing that protects and promotes student health, facilitates optimal development, and advances academic success. They are directly responsible for responding to health related emergencies and injuries, developing individualized health care assessments for students, overseeing any medication administration processes at schools, developing disease control and outbreak responses within schools, providing screenings for conditions that could impact their education such as vision screenings, and the community health liaison.

The impact a school nurse has on a student can be life changing. In NC, on average 17%-19% of the K-12 student population receives services related to chronic health conditions such as diabetes, asthma, severe allergy each year. In the 2018-2019 school year through case management services led by school nurses, 6,553 students received care which resulted in positive impacts on their health, including an 90% improvement in asthma, 84% in diabetes, and 90% in severe allergies.

School Nurses Ratio

 = 100 Students



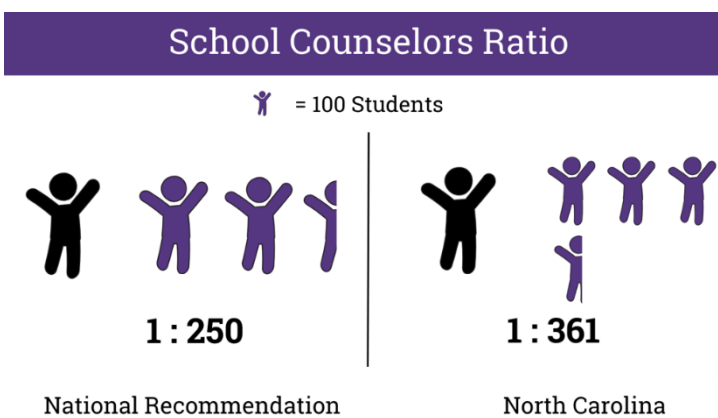
The nationally recommended ratio of school nurses is one per school. In North Carolina, **the ratio is 1:833 students** which results in many school nurses being required to **serve more than one school**. In the 2020-2021 school year 52% of all school nurses in North Carolina served at one school while 36% served at two schools, 10% served at three schools, and 2% served at four schools.

The annual average wage for school nurses nationally is \$54,012, dropping to \$51,528 in North Carolina.

To become a [school nurse in North Carolina](#) candidates must be licensed to practice as a Registered Nurse (RN) in North Carolina, obtain a Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN), and be certified by the [National Board for Certification of School Nurses](#).

School Counselors

[School Counselors](#) focus on helping students succeed academically while in K-12 and after they graduate. They support and implement career awareness/readiness, college awareness/readiness, course scheduling, emotional intelligence, preventive mental health services for all students, and short term counseling which include referrals to long term support if needed. School Counselors examine the specific needs of a school, implementing specific initiatives and collaboration with teachers, administrators, and families.



[Research on the impact of a school counselor](#) shows that they can help lower student absenteeism, improve standardized test scores, prepare students for life beyond K-12 education, and close racial/ethnic, socio-economic, gender achievement gaps seen in schools. Many studies have shown the greatest effects when school counselors are staffed at recommended ratios.

The [nationally recommended ratio](#) of school counselor to student is **1:250**. In North Carolina, **the ratio is 1:361** students. The annual mean wage for

school counselors nationally is [\\$61,379](#) and the average is [\\$58,555](#) for North Carolina school counselors. School counselors are paid according to the [NCDPI salary schedule](#).

To become a [school counselor in North Carolina](#), candidates must obtain a Master's Degree in School Counseling or a master's degree in another area of counseling while taking school counselor-specific courses and be licensed by the Department of Public Instruction.

All SISPs are vital components of a healthy school. They help students with their mental, social, and physical health, while also preparing them for successful futures. Our SISPs are experiencing shortages that will have direct negative effects on students' physical, mental, and behavioral health, their academic performance and their future outcomes. It is vital that SISPs get the financial, professional, and academic support they need so our students get the help they deserve.

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