

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:00:01] And I everyone. And welcome to the In Social Work podcast. I'm Peter Sobota. It's great as always to have you while today on in social work summers off workdays over at 330 various built in paid time off during the holidays work with adorable children each and every day. Sounds pretty good. Where do I apply? Working as a school social worker no doubt presents some pretty nice benefits and can be a near perfect fit for social workers who are raising younger children. It's also a noble professional pursuit that presents social workers with ample opportunities to apply varied skill sets and work as part of an interdisciplinary team. As a faculty member, I meet plenty of folks beginning their formal social work education and who are expressing strong interest in pursuing employment as a school social worker. As a school board member in my own community, I was a vocal advocate for schools, social workers, nurses and psychologists in my own district. I also found while doing that, that many people's perceptions of school social workers were frequently not aligned with the reality of social work practice in those settings. Most of the time they didn't really know what social workers actually did, and when they did offer perceptions, they were often wildly limited. Today, we want to discuss perceptions and realities of school social work. We want to let folks know what social workers actually do and have to navigate in these settings and give an informed heads up to students and other professionals who are considering careers in school or social work. Our guests today are Alyssa Ernst and Stephanie Stoker, two experienced social workers who have worked in school settings. Allyson Stephanie bring added perspective as they both have worked in other more traditional social work settings and are currently employed in different kinds of schools and in different roles. We hope that you enjoy listening to these two committed social workers as they discuss the joy and the challenge of working as a social worker in a school setting. Alyssa Ernst Elam, S.W. is a school social worker in the Cheektowaga Sloan Union Free School District near Buffalo in western New York. Stephanie State Olcott Helen, this W is director and assistant principal at the Buffalo Academy of Science Charter School in Buffalo, New York. Hi, Alyssa. Hi, Stephanie. Welcome to In Social Work.

Alyssa Ernst [00:02:48] Hello.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:02:49] Great to see you.

Stephanie Stodolka [00:02:50] Nice to see you, too.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:02:52] It's great to have both of you. Thanks for taking the time. So how about this? If each of you briefly could talk about how you found your way somehow as social workers working in a school setting, how did that happen? And and maybe even like, why? I mean, who knows who could be good, So. Anybody want to go first? Take a crack at that.

Stephanie Stodolka [00:03:18] Yeah, I can go first. Hi, it's Stephanie. This is a loaded question here. You know, there's a lot. I do. Yeah. As far as deciding kind of where you want to focus on. Throughout my time in the social work field and even prior to being involved in social work, I had worked in different areas of the field foster care system. I had some internships with Rochester Psychiatric Center and just making sure that I had that experience prior to entering the field. I had worked in some schools and just clinical world, so I had some different experience that led me to realizing that social work was a really wonderful place to be. Specifically school was something that I felt I could be. And you can just reach kids on that micro, mezzo, and macro level. You have them for 8 hours a day in

your care right in front of you assessable. So it really in thinking about where you could really see these kids the most. I think the foster care world, depending on where you're at in that field and where you're. Where you're working. I think that that also opens a lot of doors, but school just gets a little different as far as how much you can do with kids and how much they can progress. And you just are exposed to so many different areas of their life. So that's a huge part of the work that I was planning to do in this realm of school social work. And I think it's there's a really cool component that, you know, you're able to provide psychoeducation and just really hit so many different areas within the education field with social work perspectives and theories. And although that's a very difficult task that I think we can talk about later on. But yeah, that's that. It's a really wonderful field to be in and just a focus really more self to be in.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:05:28] Okay. Yeah. Thanks, Stephanie. Let's see you take a crack at this one.

Alyssa Ernst [00:05:31] Yeah, sure. So I've actually answered this a lot when I talk to my interns and they ask me how I ended up there, and I actually. I never thought I would be in a school, to be honest with you. It wasn't my intention. I didn't love school when I was younger, So, I mean, I did, but I just like once I graduated, it was like, I'm done with school. I'm never going back, though I did not think I'd be in a school, but I knew that I really wanted to work with kids and the social work field and working with kids, and it's kind of limited. So you have like a clinic setting and foster care, which I also did. And you find that there's not too many places that you can go. And I knew I did not want to be in a clinic like, you know, seeing kids one after another was just not really what I wanted. And I wasn't sure. And I had a really great internship through. It was child medicine Treatment Services, which is now building brighter futures, where we pushed into the Boston Public schools and we did social emotional learning in the classrooms and we did after school programming, summer programs. And so I got a taste of like, okay, there's this other avenue of being able to work with kids. And I did that for a long time through that program. And then similar to what Stephanie said, I realized, like in a school, you just get to see kids, you get to see them grow, you get to see them over the years change and you get to see them in different facets of their life. So you get to go see their play or watch them in band or in chorus or play a sport. So you get a different it's different than being a clinician with the kids. You get to have this. In my opinion, I'd like a deeper relationship with them because you get to connect with them in all the different facets, as Stephanie said. And again, to watch them grow. When I was in a K State school, I'd get these kids at five and then I'd get to see them graduate eighth grade. And that was a really, really cool, rewarding experience. So it's kind of how I found myself there, you know, through the other, doing foster care and doing other things and then seeing that I really do love the school setting and I love that part about it. When I was with the Building Brighter Futures Program.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:07:46] Yeah, well, I mean, I think it helps if you white kids. You know what I mean? I don't think I don't. I'm not sure everybody does, but I it sure it helps. So when when you were talking it, it reminded me of, you know, you compared the clinical setting to the school setting and at least, you know, you two are the experts, not me. But it seemed like what's interesting about working in a school. Is that your kind of interacting with kids on their home field, not yours, as opposed to a clinic? You know, it's all set up. You know, it's kind of sterile and predictable. And in schools, I mean, you you can just come across a kid getting in trouble in the hallway for being or being a fantastic trumpet player. So I think that's that kind of diversity of experiences. I think I personally would be drawn to that. Okay. I think I know that you could go into school districts all over the country and find social workers doing very different things. There's not like this universal

job description that I'm aware of at your jobs. So I'm going to ask this question is not going to sound wonderful, but you'll understand the intent. You're both schools, social workers. You work in different settings. So. What do you actually do? This is day to day. How's that? And remember, we only have about an hour.

Stephanie Stodolka [00:09:21] So limit it, right?

Alyssa Ernst [00:09:24] Yeah. Yeah.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:09:24] Who wants to start with that one? Like, what do you do day to day at your places?

Alyssa Ernst [00:09:28] Like naked? Start lessons with that. So I every day is different, which is another thing in a job. What I love about being in the school, you kind of you don't always know what is going to fall into your lap that day. But my typical responsibilities are providing IEP counseling to kids that get special ed services and have counseling on their IEP. So I do individual, I do small group, and then I also will see kids for similar individual and group counseling from referrals that may come from a teacher or a parent or administration. So that's like my main duty is to provide that, but I will offer any kind of. Crisis support. If something if a kids having a difficult time in a classroom, I might have to go down there and either remove them or maybe calm the situation down and try and get them to remain in the class. You know, working really closely with admin attendance issues. Parent might call was something that had happened over the weekend and can you talk to my child about that could also be a conflict between friends things that are coming up that are causing a disruption. You know again which goes back to the learning environment when things are causing disruption to that point. And it typically comes to my level where I would intervene. So, you know, the day is always different most times, but I would say those are my typical responsibilities or what I do.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:10:55] Mm hmm. So, Stephanie.

Stephanie Stodolka [00:11:00] Yes. So in my experience at the site, I'm pretty untraditional over here. I did spend some time in maybe six years or so in a school social work role, varying grade levels throughout that time and responsibilities. And then I stepped into an assistant principal role and I was working as administration. And now I'm our director of social emotional learning for our district. I so I oversee seven of our schools and our social emotional learning program. A lot is kind of under that umbrella. So I'm constantly collaborating with outside agencies. Administrators are executive director or chief of academics on a regular basis. I'm developing programs within our school curriculum for school, which starts at pre-K through our 12th grade. So there are a bunch of different things and moving parts as far as what we're doing and how we're assessing students. And, you know, a lot of people want to quantify social emotional growth, which is a very difficult task. So figuring out how we can do that with with ease in a sense, if you will, overseeing our restorative justice program and social workers at all schools collaborating and planning with assistant principals for behavioral techniques and kind of our procedures and how we've run things with an ecological and in a holistic. Lyons Many of our social workers have stepped into assistant principal roles, and some of our principals are also within the mental health field. So it's wonderful to work with and it's very unique. You do not see that very often in schools, but I have been blessed with this wonderful experience of being able to work with some like minded people and individuals. It's it's very different, wonderful experience. And then I oversee our NSW program. We have affiliations with a number of universities within Buffalo and some of in Rochester.

We're growing in those schools. I work with our school safety coordinator with the mental health portion of our safety and our district, and we're working on grants to fund different areas of work, especially with our social workers, maybe bring on a few more in our buildings and capital campaigns for our school because it's growing. And we're we're trying to really do everything we can to give the best experience to our families and students. So there there's quite a bit of moving pieces there.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:13:56] Yeah, there's a couple experience. So, Stephanie, clearly you did not get the memo to stay in your social work lane. No, and I'm sorry to hear that.

Stephanie Stodolka [00:14:08] Yeah, no.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:14:09] Doubt. But but there was a really great example. Now, I didn't even know all of the things that both of you did. I had a sense. But I mean, that's just a great example of how dependent on the setting and of course, dependent on the social worker. There's just no common job description. It's kind of like as a social worker, you kind of got it in so many ways and make your own way. You got to just, you know, people don't know what we do, so you just have to move forth confidently about what social workers can do and the skill sets that we have because we're good at systems. So it's great to hear what both of you were doing. So wonderful. So. For me when social workers work in a school, and as you've alluded to, it's very different than working in an agency setting. When often you, if not almost always in an agency setting, you're surrounded by a bunch of social workers or at least a bunch of social workers and other people in like the, you know, the behavioral sciences or things like that who talk the way we do. But schools are not like that. So that's why I'm kind of wondering, you know, what is what's that like? How is that unique?

Alyssa Ernst [00:15:34] Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, I would say sometimes it can be a little bit isolating, even because you you have this like, delicate balance of. You're a support to the kids, but your support to teachers as well. Yes and yes. Pools can be. Trying to think how to word this I.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:16:05] I think this is why I asked.

Alyssa Ernst [00:16:08] Yeah.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:16:08] Not that easy. Go ahead of us.

Alyssa Ernst [00:16:10] I want to say it's almost sometimes it can feel like being back in school, Like people have their separate groups of friends. And because I don't know how to say this, I want to say how. It's like you have to just be careful sometimes who you're sharing things with or Yes, you know, because it can be very gossipy or, you know, as a social worker, sometimes you have to take a step back and be a little bit on the outside of the things that are going on within the school. I can't I don't really either want to have a better word for that. I don't know how to word it, but.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:16:47] Well, the word that came to my mind was was where it was a couple actually boundaries. Because not everybody is also bound in that in those kinds of settings, not everybody's bound by social work ethics or even social values. Right. So go ahead.

Stephanie Stodolka [00:17:04] I think that that's something that is truly a learning process as well. You have to make a few mistakes in order to truly understand how important those boundaries are. And then you recognize, oh, shoot, this is something that I need to I need to steer clear of, or this is something that I really need to draw awareness to moving forward. And I've mentioned psychoeducation before, and it really is because of that unique setting. You are in this constant state of having to either fight for what you believe in. Explain to people what our ethics are or why this may work. And it's never just I mean, once in a while it will be. And when I first started in this position, when there were less social workers in administration, it really did. It was exhausting as far as like, well, maybe this will be a great plan because of X, Y, and Z and you find yourself. Explaining to people different theories to practice and really kind of bringing in your education or bringing in examples of other cases or scenarios where it can click, you know, of why we're handling this student in a certain way.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:18:27] Mm hmm.

Stephanie Stodolka [00:18:28] I got sidetracked from boundaries, but in those conversations, it can be very difficult where you're you're almost oversharing to help someone understand or you're trying to help them understand the severity in a situation and why they need to do X, Y, and Z. And it's difficult. It's difficult managing that. It's difficult. Figuring out and navigating your way through through these trenches of. And a balance of what can I share? What can I not? How am I going to collaborate? And it's something that's a learned process over time, being in a school. And I for my from my perspective, I think that it it it does take time and it takes a few mistakes along the way there.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:19:14] Well, listeners can't see, but I can. And Alisa's nodding your head vigorously. It sounds like she knows what you're talking about.

Alyssa Ernst [00:19:21] Yeah. Yeah. Oh, yeah, totally. Yeah. And, you know, because we again, I think schools have done a better job of educating teachers on trauma and trauma, informed care and things like that. But, you know, even eight or nine years ago, it started out a lot of schools didn't. So, you know, to your point, when you had a kid that maybe triggered or had, you know, an extensive trauma history and teachers not understanding that maybe something that they're doing could be a trigger and things like that and having to explain that. Yeah, but they've come along. I do think that the school districts have come a long way and doing a great job of, you know, getting teachers educated and having and everybody kind of being on the same page to understand. So it's gotten easier. But I would say it was definitely a difficult, more difficult probably ten years ago.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:20:11] Well, I think it's the nature of the setting. I mean, there's no blame. There's no kind of judgment. I mean, we have different professional approaches and and educational systems and value systems. But I think that's the thing. You're truly multidisciplinary, but in a pronounced way in many circumstances. So we've dipped our toes into the challenges. So I'm you know, I'm going to share this strengths perspective on its ear. We'll we'll talk about the strings later, and we'll start with more of the challenges, if you will. So. We'll get to the joy later. How's that? So hold for joy.

Stephanie Stodolka [00:20:52] Great pleasure. Let's do it.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:20:54] I'd like to go a little bit further and feel free to set me straight or, you know, correct me because again, I'm not in the day to day, obviously, or

elaborate if you think that it makes sense. But I would argue that much like I think you've alluded to, is that social work practice in a school setting is probably way more challenging than I think people or even students are originally perceiving it. And it's far more challenging, I would argue, than working in a traditional human service agency or a clinic where everybody speaks your language. So if you could, I've made a list of some of the challenges that I think are out there and if you could comment on. Here's number one. My argument is that social work and I would say much like or even more than, for example, nursing and psychology in school districts is often considered and they occupy this kind of like ancillary status, Like they're they're almost secondary to the mission of education and educational achievement. And so and again, they're not always aligned with social values and even the mission of social work. Given that I think many of us are aware that in circumstances, for example, of tight school budgets. I don't think we need to remind people that, you know, public education and school districts are one of the few things that the voters and taxpayers get to vote yes or no on. And, you know, they exercise that in most cases. So whenever school budgets are tight. It's my take that social work. Arts programs. Music programs are always kind of like the low hanging fruit for cost savings. So that that's an assumption that I'm making. That may not be true if it's halfway true or true. What is it like to work in that kind of environment?

Alyssa Ernst [00:23:18] Well, I would say again, I would say that would be more true. Several years ago. I feel now what I've seen is we are really needed. And I think that schools are recognizing that a lot of districts are adding more and more social workers to their districts. Wonderful. And I think our partnership with the administration, you know, to help help the building run smoothly and to provide those support has become really valued. I feel like in my experience at the school that I've been in and the district that I've been in, I mean, I obviously can't speak at all, but I do feel like we are, you know, one of the positions that they really do not want to lose and that they, like I said, are looking to add more of.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:24:09] What do you think, Stephanie? Do you have a similar experience or different?

Stephanie Stodolka [00:24:12] I think that in my personal experience, there is a major value on social work, but there is also a misunderstanding. When you have we've had up to 24 MSW students working throughout our district, and sometimes there's a misunderstanding that they come in and they could even take the place of a of a concrete, full time social worker.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:24:38] Yeah.

Stephanie Stodolka [00:24:39] Same place, right? Yeah. Yeah. And how are we? Can't we get some more social workers and. I think that. It's a it's a common problem. And I do think so. I've had a personal experience of working at my school where, you know, it is valued and we want to add more and more. But there have also been times throughout the years that that conversation has come up, how can we cut these positions or how can we work with more MSW students and less social workers are full time and just working in the field, I think. From what I've seen, there is a continuing issue with this throughout some different districts or charters.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:25:26] Mm hmm.

Stephanie Stodolka [00:25:27] I do believe that social workers can be put on the low on the totem pole, and they think that a lot of the administrators can think that, you know, I'm just going to replace the social worker with second step, a program that can go in and teach students. We don't need that person. But then it's it's very interesting because if you think about losing a social worker, I think they very quickly recognize how much work and what was on that social worker shoulders that they did for their kids, how much they did for their school. I think social workers are the right hand man for administration. Very often you work so closely. So I think that there are many schools that are incredible and they're seeing this great dynamic and what social workers can do within their schools. How many hats they can wear, I think is a big perk sometimes and how capable we are as social workers. But then there's there's that other side where. There isn't enough knowledge and experience around what social workers can do to support the academic growth of a student.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:26:41] Yeah. How they work together that they're not distinct entities, that they really. They're really the same thing with a slightly different focus and Blurred Lines. Yeah. Well, that's actually really good to hear both of your stories. At least it sounds like social workers, at least in your experience, have ever really kind of made themselves indispensable in many ways. My home district is a rural one in southern Erie County. It's like a little small, I don't know, maybe 15, 1400 student place. But a couple of years ago, when they talked about cutting social work, the public came out and said, no way.

Stephanie Stodolka [00:27:25] That's incredible.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:27:26] Which is that's and that's a wonderful sign, I think is.

Stephanie Stodolka [00:27:29] It speaks volumes to what social work was doing for the community and for their kids. Right. It's yeah, that's great.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:27:37] Well, and also, it sounds like social workers have also dispelled the notion to the public that what social work does is take away people's kids and hand out, you know, welfare benefits, entitlement programs. So I think that's a great thing. Our ratios of social workers to students are still high. Is that fair to say? Way too high?

Alyssa Ernst [00:27:59] Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. I was to say, like, that's the other part when you're talking about being in a unique position is generally you are the only one, you're the only one in the building so you are the go to. So like things that pop up, like, okay, go to the social worker, talk to the social worker, and you're expected to have the answer for everything. So, you know, that can be another challenge as well. But yeah, like my school right now, we have like 280 kids and I'm the only social worker for the whole school.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:28:31] Right. You're what, 3 to 5? Yeah.

Alyssa Ernst [00:28:34] 3 to 5. Mm hmm.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:28:36] Right. All right. So thanks. Thanks for taking a crack at that one. While the two of you were talking and I was listening. One one thought that popped into my head again as distinct from agency practice. Schools. Social workers. Have to advocate for children, families. They support teachers. They support staff. They support admin. But here's what I heard. You also have to advocate for yourself and for social work.

That's a big difference. Interesting. Another question. I think a lot of social workers who maybe are finishing, for example, in MSW program or who have been out in the field for a while and who want to work in school or social work. I think a lot of them don't really realize that once they get there, it's fairly likely that they will not be supervised. By a social worker. And they will probably not receive what I'm going to refer to as the traditional social work supervision model. Where. You have dedicated time, you know, maybe once a week and you have a personal and professional development plan that you work on with your supervisor. I also think that a lot of people who are interested in in school social work, they also don't realize that their performance evaluation will probably not be completed by a social worker and might even be kind of shoehorned into a teacher's evaluation and might not even address most of what social work does. So what do you think about that? Am I off or is that kind of something that people should be thinking about?

Stephanie Stodolka [00:30:37] Absolutely. This is a huge concern that that school social workers should have going into the school setting and. Once again, I was just lucky enough to have a school bus that supported my ongoing continuing education of supervision and saw the benefit of that and taking that time and meeting and paying for those resources. But every school is not like that, right? More times than not, you are. You're there alone and you're paying out of pocket for supervision. If you want to work towards your clinical or any of those other things that you're working towards or need. So you're working with a team that just doesn't have those same perspectives and outlooks and and it's a difficult thing to do. You feel very isolated at times and you have to constantly just self-talk of this is, okay, we're going to get through this. Reach out to your peers within the social work field.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:31:41] Yeah, Your networks. Exactly.

Stephanie Stodolka [00:31:43] Yeah. Yeah. Making sure that you have a huge support group in that sense because you are isolated.

Alyssa Ernst [00:31:51] Yeah. Yeah.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:31:52] Alyssa, do you have thoughts on that?

Alyssa Ernst [00:31:55] Yeah, I was going to say, you know, that's a huge piece of advice that when I have social work interns that I tell them when they want to get into a school. Although there are so many wonderful things about being in the school once you graduate, I think it's so important to get out into a social work field. Whether it's a clinic or, you know, a non-for-profit where you do get that because those first couple of years out of school can be really crucial, I think, in the sense of learning what it's actually like in the field and getting a more well-rounded sense of different maybe areas that you're going to encounter as the school social worker. Because like I said, you generally are the go to. So in my experience, you know, I had the experience of working in foster care. So I learned the family court system, I learned about visitations, I learned about, you know, that that kind of world and then working in the community. Then I learned about different communities in Buffalo, all the different services and kind of what was out there. So then to be in the school, I felt more confident to have the answer, know if someone needed something or having that kind of experience under my belt. So. Obviously the supervision, you know, had three, four years of clinical supervision, which was so incredibly helpful. And yeah, once you're in the school, you don't get that at all. So it's really on you to find, you know, whether they're friends that you made to the program or however you have your social work network. But. Yeah, it's kind of our new to do that and so that it is difficult.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:33:32] Yeah. You know, it was just reading a lot of bills for me. I didn't work in schools. I worked, you know, in clinics and outpatient settings and in hospitals. And I always had supervision. So my learning. Continued after I finished my formal education. And I'd hate to think if I was left to figure I would have been eaten alive. I have a feeling or I would have been absolutely miserable. So maybe it sounds like, again, to go back to advocacy, it sounds like maybe people who are considering a school or social work career should be thinking about this beforehand and maybe thinking about, you know, am I going to stash some money away for private supervision or am I going to advocate for myself and for the profession within the school to say and literally to build that bridge like you were talking both of you were talking about earlier, that you get to say, hey, look, I got to continue to learn stuff. I need feedback on on what I'm doing from my own discipline and make an investment in me, make an investment in the of the children. And would you be even willing to pay for my private supervision or give me a stipend to seek that out and understand not only how that's going to help you, but what's going to help the district? It's back to that advocacy piece which you wouldn't have to do an image signal. Yeah. Thank you both for addressing that. All right. More challenges. Ready?

Alyssa Ernst [00:35:08] Yes.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:35:10] I'm really curious about this. How do you handle requests? From teachers. And administrators or anybody else? Staff, persons. Cool. And I think this is done. 90% of the time in a very well-intentioned and well-meaning way. I'm not claiming, you know, they're just they want all the dirt. I think they genuinely care. How did the two of you or each of you handle requests from teachers and administrators? When they ask about information about students and their families, when it's really not ethical or appropriate for you to disclose that. How do you navigate that? Because they don't know that necessarily, right? We're a team that's.

Stephanie Stodolka [00:36:12] That that's something that is difficult to navigate. And I think with time you kind of get used to talking to someone and telling them, you know, you just this this isn't something that I will be sharing with you and get a lot of kickback. At first.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:36:28] You do. I was wondering, how was that received?

Stephanie Stodolka [00:36:30] Yeah, that well, I know school. You are a team and everybody knows everything about the kids. And and when some things just can't be shared or even in the sense of progress notes or things like that. And they're cryptic notes and. They're not that information is not shared with with the admin. So it's difficult for them to kind of wrap their heads around why that would be something that I will say is in our school as well. Our school has created a really great community where our parents, our students and our families feel very comfortable. So something I will say is that during our parent meetings and in the culture that has been created here, parents and students often share throughout. Some things that would be rather confidential. They share those items with our admin, with our teachers. You know, it could be a room filled with ten people and they're disclosing information that they feel comfortable enough because they know that each of the staff in that room cared deeply about their student and are going to work as a team to give them everything and more as far as services opportunities. So that's just a really cool perspective and something that we've built over here. But I Roxi as far as making sure that our parents are, are feeling safe and heard and creating that that great platform for people to share. So I will say it is a tough road to navigate. But if you're in a

school that really has that that culture and. That close knit feel with families and students. Sometimes that's also the case. So it's a mix over here, I think.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:38:16] Well, that makes perfect sense, though, because I think. And especially in this setting, establishing boundaries, but then also explaining why the boundary is there and then being consistent, I would hope would lead to trust. Right. Because then people know, because it's transparent. You know, there are just some things I can't tell. Mm hmm. Alyssa, what's what's that like for you navigating that? Because I know this is dependent on the setting and the culture.

Alyssa Ernst [00:38:46] So, yeah, it is difficult. You know, in the school that we are, we don't operate under HIPA. We are covered under the FERPA. So, you know, there's some things that are important for teachers to know. So, like, if there's something, you know, for example, I might ask the parent, is it okay if I share this with the teacher? Or I might just allude to something, you know, like there's some big changes going on at home. Just so you're aware of, we see a change in the behavior. So maybe I won't give the details of something, but letting a teacher know there is some stuff going on, they are going through something. So to be aware of that. So that's kind of how I handle it and most teachers will accept. Some, like you said, do get a little bit upset or they want more detail on the situation. But a lot of times, if I do phrased it just in a way that, you know, there are some things going on and we've talked about it, you know, I'll keep you in the loop as much as I can. If there's anything I can share with you, I will. Most teachers do kind of accept that as an answer, and I think they feel, you know, then they feel that they are including they kind of know like, okay, something is going on. You know, I had a sense that they you know, because they have a feeling and they know the kids really well. So, you know, just not having to know all the details that time is okay, you know, except that.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:40:08] Yeah. So it's it's like a constant kind of navigation, really. It's a it's not like you're it's not a one and done.

Alyssa Ernst [00:40:17] Yeah.

Stephanie Stodolka [00:40:19] A nice balance.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:40:20] Yeah. Well a constant one too is what it sounds like. So more challenges, but now a bit from kind of a wider lens, a bigger picture. You know, we are social workers, so let's talk about the environment. I'm interested in each of your settings. And we'll just make a fundamental assumption here that. People were and especially children were impacted. How has COVID 19? And the aftermath. You know, schools shut down for a year, essentially. How has that changed or has it changed the landscape? For social schools, social workers, and what they end up doing in that setting. I mean, it's pretty well established that learning suffered tremendously, amongst other things. Any thoughts on this?

Stephanie Stodolka [00:41:24] So any thoughts?

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:41:26] Okay.

Stephanie Stodolka [00:41:27] So return. That is for sure. I think everyone felt that in our kids, our families, our teachers, it just it was a rough return and it's taken time. I truly believe that as a community, our school community, we have not fully recovered from that. Social workers especially, I will see, say, over the last few years of watching my team

specifically with this and our team within these schools. It's it's interesting to see because someone once told me and brought this to my attention that, you know, in school social work, it's a high burnout rate, teaching vacation as a high burnout, where if you put the two together, it's it's quite a match. So overall, thinking about that and now coming back from a pandemic. It was exhausting. There were so many services and so supports and outbursts throughout the day and drama that was being disclosed and brought back. Like once trusting relationships and bonds were kind of rebuilt in that way. And teachers who were trying to re navigate this new reality as well as like behaviors that came with it or family members that were coming on a little bit stronger. And being home with them and providing their education for that for that time. Yeah, it was difficult.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:42:56] And people died.

Stephanie Stodolka [00:42:58] Yes. Yes. Grief and loss.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:43:01] And it's it's it's just. I don't know. If we have stepped back enough to understand how disruptive. This has been.

Stephanie Stodolka [00:43:14] Absolutely. I truly don't. I think that. There's just been a lot there's been many learning curves from everybody within the. School community here. I think every single one of us felt that no matter where you were in the building or. Who you were working with, you know?

Alyssa Ernst [00:43:34] Yeah. And I would say in the moment of COVID, I remember feeling like a lot of my kids seemed to be doing pretty well. You know, in the midst of we're at home and meeting with them virtually. You know, it's like, wow, you know, kids really are really resilient and they're handling a lot of kids were handling it really well. But now I think that we're feeling it now. We're seeing it like a couple of years later. We're seeing that result where we have I've never seen so many little kids with anxiety and, you know, and depression and. The self-harm and things just at such a young age that I had not encountered. And such a high number until these last couple of years, you know, and even down to just being able to make friendships and playing games together and be able to organize a game outside, they just they could not do it. So they lost a lot of those social skills, again, like, you know, where our third graders last year, they were kindergartners. And so a lot of times we have to think about that and go back and be like, wow, when you really think about it, this is their first year in school and they're eight, you know, so they're stunted. And now we're seeing that a lot more and dealing with a lot more of those issues than we were, I think in the very beginning when they first came back.

Stephanie Stodolka [00:45:00] Yeah. Truly, it's going to have lifelong impacts. And I think that's a tough realization. These students, like you were saying there, they're lacking those problem solving skills and socialization skills, and they're expected to be performing at the level that they're supposed to be. Right. Or supposed to be, quote, unquote. And it's really kind of taking that back a notch and making sure that we're meeting the student where they are and we're assisting them in every way to meet those milestones and and grow in the right direction, if you will. But yeah, it's it's very it's heartbreaking.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:45:41] Well, you know, all of the challenges that we have spent most of the time talking together about were in place before the pandemic. And, you know, those are a lot of challenges and they were significant ones. And, you know, you pour. The pandemic and all of the consequences of it. And we know that. The pandemic exposed. More than ever before, the disparities in our society and in our culture to even a higher

degree. And again, I would think that this would be a massive lift for schools, social workers, because honestly, this is our wheelhouse, Right? You know. So all of the things, for example, like the child mental health crisis. Trauma. Self-harm. Suicidal ideation. Racism. All of that is present in excess. Is that fair to say in your school?

Alyssa Ernst [00:46:53] Yes.

Stephanie Stodolka [00:46:54] 100%.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:46:56] You know, the other thing that is really hitting me. About our discussion today. And again, you know, maybe unfairly comparing this to traditional social or practicing in, you know, host setting this is that, for example, if you're working at Children's Hospital, you know, child outpatient. Here in Buffalo, you're primarily operating in a clinical role. You know, you have a case and you work with children and families. But as a school social worker, your clinical ruleset is just one that includes, you know, broker, the advocate, mediator, probably case manager, educator. It's a heavy lift. All right. So we've covered all of the challenges. Probably too many. But I do know that the both of you, our guest by your work and that you enjoy it. So let's let's talk about what's really wonderful and and joyful about being a school of social worker. So I'll leave it up to you. You can pick and choose. I hope I ask a good question here, but if either of you would like to share either an individual or even a systemic success story, go right ahead. What happens as a school social worker that keeps you too excited and wanting to go to work the next day?

Alyssa Ernst [00:48:29] For me, it's definitely the not knowing what the day is going to bring. Like having I, I like that. I, like I said, for me clinic was not for me. I didn't I don't I don't like that I like to not know what's going to happen. How are things going to go, you know, what's going to pop up today. So that is something that I really love about being in the school. And another thing which I kind of previously mentioned is just getting to see the kids in all different settings. You know, there's several times throughout the day something will make me laugh because of something a kid did or said. You know, just seeing them in there, in their element and in their environment. You know, it's it's fun. Although there is a lot of tough stuff and, you know, we are dealing with the hardest things within the school day or finding out, you know, something that might be really hard for a family. But then you have the flipside of where you have a lot of really fun times and happy times and getting to see kids at their best.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:49:30] So. The unpredictability that might unnerve some people is actually that was your go to you didn't even think about that for 2 seconds. I like not knowing what's going to happen today.

Alyssa Ernst [00:49:41] And then I would like again, advice that I would give to my interns is you have to be flexible. If you are somebody that can't function like that, that you need to like, stick to your schedule. And a school is not for you because you have to be able to like, okay, I had this kid scheduled at nine, but this kid is buying the days out. I got to move you to 12:00 or whatever you have to do. You have to juggle and move it around and you have to be able and willing to do stuff like that.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:50:07] Yeah. And I would think it would just take like one crisis or semi crisis to have the wheels come off everything.

Alyssa Ernst [00:50:15] I mean, something I even tell my kids on my caseload is, you know, say here we went on like a letter. They scheduled to say it's like, okay, I'm going to

see you on e days at 1030. Just so you know, things can come up and I may not get to see you, but it doesn't mean I forgot about you. It's just that maybe something else came up because they do not forget. When they see you in the hallway, they will be like it is each day. And you're supposed to take me. You know, also setting the kids up for that flexibility, too, because it does happen a lot.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:50:46] Yeah. Thanks. Stephanie, you got to have a story or two.

Stephanie Stodolka [00:50:51] Yeah, I do. I couldn't agree more. It was I that flexibility, peace and just the unknown is a big part of it because it's so true. You just never know what is going to fall into your lap in a day. Seeing the kids everyday is something that's just so wonderful. Whether it's preschoolers or 11th graders. It's a really cool feeling to know that many students and be a part of things in their growth. It's just it's a wonderful experience. A lot of the team that I work with. I would say that's a huge part of it. Having a great team behind you that supports you is is a wonderful experience as well. But, you know, I would say the coolest thing is just developing these new programs to support our students and. New things, like even we touched on evaluations, our restorative justice specialists and our social workers are now being evaluated by myself and their administration, have their own evaluation. So being able to share those perspectives and work with my team and have them be so open and understanding to changes that may really benefit our social workers or just our department as a whole is really wonderful. So I just think that's such a cool piece of schools and hopefully the direction that we're all moving in and we see more of that throughout the years.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:52:23] Yeah, well, I think the landscape also, you know, given the things we've been talking about, the landscape is also making it in some ways easier for us to make our case because the impacts on learning are not necessarily the nuts and bolts of, you know, K through 12 education. They have ways of figuring that out, but it's really that whole kind of person in situation perspective, you know, that's kind of like the hallmark of our profession. So. Let's just assume that things aren't perfect yet. And that the two of you have magic once. Those are the fundamental assumptions here. If we were to transform social work services in our schools. What was that look like? For example, as opposed to what we do now. What could we put in place that isn't in place now? You know, because we can really if we wanted to, we really could. So. I don't know how that question is hitting the two of you, but I mean, if there was transformation rather than simply just doing the work to be had here, what would you wave and create?

Stephanie Stodolka [00:53:43] This is a great question and I love this and I wish it could be reality here for a while with this. Hmm. I think the first thing that I would do is there would be one social worker per classroom. And really having just that support throughout the day and someone to focus on the needs of that room. And really, I don't know how that role would then shift. You know, it would be almost part case work maybe, and connecting parents with resources. But how incredible would that be?

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:54:15] Yeah, I would think that having the time and part of that is time and part of that is focus. And part of that is literally body's social workers. I mean, obviously if you're interacting with a kid in a school. You know, you can do wonderful things, but if that child is going home to a family that's struggling or a caregiver or a parent that is struggling or they're living in poverty or they're dealing with racism. I just wonder, how much time do most schools social workers have? To even try and address. It's not that they don't want to, but I think it's just simply numbers in need.

Alyssa Ernst [00:54:59] Yeah.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:54:59] You know? You know, I think a lot of people who aren't people like us would scoff at a social worker for every grade. But, you know, I could. The three of us probably could make an argument that that might not even be enough for 20 kids in certain districts.

Alyssa Ernst [00:55:14] Yeah. Yeah. Say to your point, that's where my head goes and says something I've been saying forever. And our biggest, the missing link is the home. I mean, we you can do all the work that you want and yeah, you might make an impact, but they're still going home and there's still dysfunction. A lot of what we do can be undone. So I think that. The home, peace and getting to the parents and getting to the families is where we would make the biggest difference. But that is hard, I would say in my district, we're really fortunate that we do have a family solution center and we do provide, but it's only one day a week.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:56:01] So the that that's the rub, isn't it?

Alyssa Ernst [00:56:05] Yeah. So to your point again is time. So that would be like if we had a magic wand, it would be to have more support that could provide that net school and home lake, you know, to better to build those relationships and to really help the families so that when they do leave, you know, the support is really there in the home.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:56:25] It does seem like it's such a no brainer, doesn't it? I mean, it just.

Stephanie Stodolka [00:56:31] Yeah.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:56:32] Is how we spend money is a reflection of our values. You know, I think as a society, we need to look in the mirror a little bit and maybe, you know, the role of social work is sometimes to hold up that you're. Interesting.

Alyssa Ernst [00:56:46] Yeah.

Stephanie Stodolka [00:56:47] Let that. It's it's funny that you say that as well, because something else that popped into my head is a family support center for each district or each school, something of that sort that, you know, it's often seen in our suburbs that it's just a no brainer, that they have them, that their families can utilize those resources. There's constant trainings that are going out to parents so that they can be a part of virtual and in-person. But you don't really necessarily see any of that in our city schools. And there's in charter schools, there's a few that do have them, but we're lacking in that way. So I think that as a community as a whole, it would be really cool to see something like that. It just easy. Friendly face, know somebody that you.

Alyssa Ernst [00:57:36] Know.

Stephanie Stodolka [00:57:37] And a parent already knows. It's just. Yeah.

Alyssa Ernst [00:57:40] Yeah.

Stephanie Stodolka [00:57:40] It's a no brainer. It would just be so helpful.

Alyssa Ernst [00:57:43] That and I feel early intervention. You know, there's not enough value and money put into to the little ones and you know, really that's where it start if we can get them when they're really young. Better outcomes.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:57:57] Mm hmm. All right, So we're we're running out of time. And boy, it went fast. I think we're we're probably pushing an hour here, but thank you so much. But I have. One question that if both of you would be willing to take a crack at. We can end on this note. So given everything that we talked about. What would be your kind of maybe quick. Brief, brief ish, but really potent advice for any social worker that's considering working in a school setting, especially especially like early career professionals.

Alyssa Ernst [00:58:38] I would say you have to really figure out what your passion is like, what is your drive, why do you want to do this work and then let that guy do? Because, you know, the school, I think, to a lot of people seems really. It's great because you get the summers off and you get all these breaks and yes, all that stuff is great, but it's also much needed because you are so drained at the end of the school year. So you you have to really want to be in that setting of wanting to help kids and wanting to help families and work in that environment. And so no one let your passion and your drive is because you can get to a school. And if you don't have that, you're not going to be happy there. So you have to figure out why did you pick social work and why are you going in the field and what's going to make you happy on that day to day and try new to do the work? That would be that would be my advice.

Stephanie Stodolka [00:59:33] That's great advice. Yeah.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:59:37] Stephanie, any thoughts?

Stephanie Stodolka [00:59:40] Yeah, I would have to say. Once you're in it, don't be afraid to have a voice. Advocate for yourself. If you have ideas, don't let them sit. Get involved and in as many ways as you can and being as careful as you can be, but just making sure that your voice is heard and you're offering that piece of education and really just. Showing people and guiding them through our social work ways. And eventually, you know, people will hear you and people will understand. So I think that those were two really big pieces that would be helpful.

Prof. Peter Sobota [01:00:21] Well, thank you both. I'm so glad that we had a chance to talk with you and thank you for your willingness for sharing your experiences. I mean, obviously, you're two social workers out of many, so people need to keep that in mind. But but thank you. You spoke to some, I think, universal truths and dilemmas in our field and for school social workers. So thank you again for taking the time.

Alyssa Ernst [01:00:47] Thank you for having me.

Stephanie Stodolka [01:00:48] Thank you.

Prof. Peter Sobota [01:00:50] Thanks again to Alyssa Ernst and Stephanie Doka for joining us. The Social Work podcast is brought to you by the Cube School of Social Work. And our podcast team is Steve Sturman, chair and tech guru of our show. Nick dismissed our top notch G.A. production assistant and guest coordinator. Say Hi, Nick.

Alyssa Ernst [01:01:10] Hi, everyone.

Prof. Peter Sobota [01:01:12] I'm Peter Szabo to see you next time, everybody.