



## CASE STUDY: SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS

**Lower Kuskokwim School District (LKSD)** serves students across a massive 22,000 square miles and has the largest student enrollment among Alaska’s rural off-road school districts. The school sites are in southwest Alaska along the Kuskokwim River and Bering Coast and are only accessible through air, boat, or snowmachine travel. The school district office is in Bethel.

### PROGRAM OVERVIEW

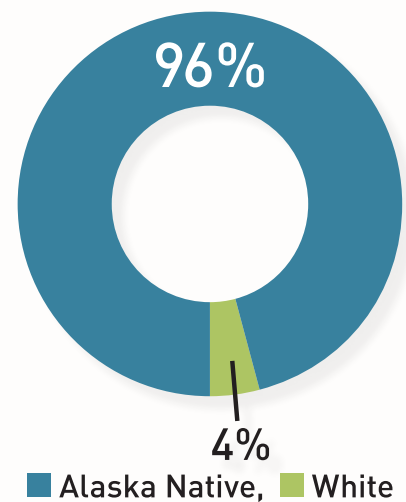
The LKSD school social work program is a long-standing mental health program. Staffed by itinerants and funded by the school district’s general funds, the social work team provides each of LKSD’s remote school communities with access to in-person supports and services at each tier of the MTSS framework. Community-based partnerships provide connections to mental health training opportunities and a growing statewide network of school social workers.

### Lower Kuskokwim School District

- » 3,963 students
- » 29 schools

### Demographics

- » 96% Alaska Native, 4% White
- » 91% free and reduced lunch
- » 13% students with disabilities



## A DECADES-OLD PROGRAM DRIVEN BY FAMILY SUPPORT

LKSD has had a [school social work program](#) for more than three decades. The program started within the Special Education Department, where the social workers focused on providing counseling services as part of student Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). Families began to seek services for students without IEPs, and school leadership responded by moving the social workers into the Student Services Department. The program continued to expand and has become a highly valued, permanent part of LKSD’s school communities.

## WRAPAROUND SUPPORTS TEAM

Today, LKSD's school social workers serve in primarily itinerant roles, except for Bethel Regional High School, Gladys Jung Elementary School, and Mike Inguut Elitnaurviat School, which each have a full-time social worker on site and are all Bethel-based schools.

### The social workers provide services at all tiers of the MTSS framework, including:

- » Prevention education
- » Individual counseling
- » Group counseling
- » Case management
- » Crisis intervention

Outside of the large school sites in Bethel, the schools do not have a formal student support team. Instead, school staff and families identify students more informally for the program. Teachers are the first line of contact with families before services begin. Ongoing individual counseling or group work requires parental consent.

The social workers refer to and coordinate with community agencies, including building and maintaining relationships with community partners like tribal organizations and law enforcement. They occasionally partner on prevention education with their local community clinics, local community partners, and tribal health corporations and also rely on these groups for referrals for more intensive Tier 3 services. This support for Tier 3 services, including crisis intervention, is important to help maintain the boundaries set forth by the social work team as a school day role. Ensuring that their social workers are not on-call positions has helped with the program's sustainability and avoiding provider burnout.

### School counselors and school community advocates

LKSD also has itinerant school counselors and locally-based school community advocates that work closely with the social workers. The school counselors focus on academics and career-readiness services and some short-term mental health services. For ongoing needs, they will refer to the school social workers.

*"Something that LKSD is excellent at . . . is providing a strong student support network outside of the classroom."  
– LKSD social worker*

*"We have found in the school social work . . . that when we are not onsite, the school community advocates tend to be the safe place in the school where a student might take a break to self-regulate."  
– LKSD leadership*

The team also has a classified position called a school community advocate at most of the school district's sites except for some of its smallest schools. The school community advocates support student attendance, family engagement, and student self-regulation.

### Measuring program success

Despite the long tenure of the program, evaluating and measuring program outcomes is still challenging. A school social worker noted that this is partly because of the nature

of social work services. For example, an increase in reports of suicidal ideation, while concerning, could be seen as an indicator that people are aware of and accessing support services. The social work team keeps data on the types of interventions they provide to identify year-over-year themes.

## LONG-STANDING DISTRICT ENDORSEMENT

Staffing and supporting an itinerant workforce have required school district leadership’s ongoing vision and commitment. Three school board policies guide the social work program and services elements, including policies on [at-risk youth](#), [intervention for early warning signs of violent behavior](#), and [guidance and counseling services](#). LKSD leadership consistently prioritizes flying their itinerant workforce to the school sites, which can require significant funding. LKSD funds the program through the school district’s operating budget, Title I funds, and Indian Education funds. Previously, the school district has used grant funds to expand its school counseling services. LKSD later incorporated funding for school counselor roles into the operating budget.

The school social work program has always been supported, even during challenging budget periods. Years ago, there was a time when LKSD considered drastically reducing the number of social workers to accommodate budget cuts. The school communities—including families, students, and social workers—rallied in support of the program and its added value to the lives of students and their families. LKSD recognizes that funding could be a challenge for smaller school districts. They also noted that alternatives outside of general funds, such as billing Medicaid for services, can be challenging to implement due to the staffing expertise required and working within the confines of reimbursable mental health services.

For school districts considering a similar approach, LKSD recommended starting by obtaining support from the school board. If a school district lacks relevant data, they recommend conducting a needs assessment to collect information to establish a vision for the program. They also recommend considering staffing structures and sustainable funding models beyond initial grant dollars.

### The importance of spending time onsite

The ability to consistently travel to spend time onsite in school communities is central to the relationship-building aspect of the program. School social workers can attend community events and build personal connections with community members.

Six of the nine school social workers have been in their roles for more than five years. With the longevity of the program and the consistency of the in-person visits, families and students seem to value the relationship building with the school social workers and appreciate the opportunity to receive services in-person in their communities.

*“There’s that expectation now that people are waiting for you at the door when you get there.”*  
– LKSD social worker

*“Many of us live here, and this is home, and [we’ve] raised families here.”*

– LKSD social worker

For community-based behavioral health services, families typically must fly to Bethel and be away from their homes for days or weeks. With the onset of COVID-19, community providers started offering more services in the villages via telehealth.

LKSD has also introduced telehealth services for its most remote village school sites. The social workers started weekly telehealth meetings with students, which has facilitated the ability to provide services more frequently to those remote school sites.

## **BUILDING THE WORKFORCE AND TRAINING SUPPORT**

LKSD has built multiple partnerships with state education programs that support the skill-building of current and new staff serving in mental health positions.

### **Training their existing workforce**

Some of the LKSD support staff are going through the University of Alaska Fairbanks [Rural Human Services](#) (RHS) program. A cohort of school staff comes to Bethel for weeklong monthly RHS training. The school district pays staff for their time, and UAF has a grant to cover all other program-related expenses for the cohorts. Most of the staff members who have gone through the RHS program are the school community advocates, but the school district is considering opening it up to more roles. The social work team also leverages their expertise to provide ongoing training for their school community advocates.

### **Fostering new mental health expertise in the state**

LKSD also has a relationship with faculty at the [University of Alaska Anchorage \(UAA\) School of Social Work](#). UAA has connected new social workers with the LKSD team to work through the supervision requirements for recent social work graduates entering the workforce. The school district expanded their social work position to individuals with a Bachelor of Social Work, a career path two of their school community advocates have pursued. Part of the intent for hiring individuals with a bachelor's level degree is to bring more locals into their workforce and reduce the barriers associated with obtaining a Master of Social Work.

Collaboration across school districts is also valuable. For example, LKSD offered supervisor support for a new school social work role in another district. The other school district was able to hire for the role but did not have a clear outline or support system for the position. The new hire was able to connect with the LKSD team to fulfill supervision requirements and establish a peer support system. The LKSD team is also engaged with the new Alaska school social work chapter under the [School Social Work Association of America](#) and hopes to facilitate more shared support and learning through this network of statewide social workers.

