Local child welfare agencies partner with the McMaster University School of Social Work to advance education and practice in child welfare

The provincial government, the public, and the child welfare sector have recognized a need for the child welfare system to address persistent dilemmas and adapt to evolving societal needs and realities. The need for change is not just an Ontario phenomenon. Child welfare systems across Canada and around the world are being challenged to change and adapt.

The child welfare sector cannot change alone— the post-secondary institutions in which social work is taught have to change too. In response, McMaster University has partnered with six child welfare agencies to pilot a specialized child welfare stream, also known as the child welfare pathway, as part of the Bachelor of Social Work degree (BSW).

Social Work students who follow the child welfare pathway are taking part in a specialized curriculum with learning goals based on what families and youth receiving child welfare services say is important, what child welfare agencies have found works for the communities they serve, and what research has identified as effective. Coursework brings into the classroom child welfare managers, workers, lawyers, and people who have received child welfare services, to teach students and to also evaluate their progress. As well, the class goes out into the community to visit sites where innovative approaches to child welfare are being used.

“Our goal is for graduates to have an enhanced readiness for work in the child welfare system, along with the critical thinking needed to be innovative and think outside current systems and boxes” says Gary Dumbrill, Associate Professor who is leading curriculum development for the child welfare pathway. “Our goal is to also produce graduates with a critical understanding of the issues children and families involved with child welfare face, including the societal inequalities that cause and contribute to troubles that result in the need for child welfare involvement,” says Chris Sinding, Director of the School of Social Work. “The enhanced curriculum will expose students to the realities and complexities of child welfare work, and will better prepare them to do good work in the field” says Rocco Gizzarelli, Executive Director of the Catholic Children’s Aid Society of Hamilton, “our hope is that this initiative sets students on a pathway for long term careers and future leadership in child welfare.”

The child welfare pathway is a 3-year pilot educational program with an associated research project that will evaluate and compare pathway student outcomes with a control group of BSW students not in the pathway. If this study demonstrates effectiveness, the School will look for ways to expand this model across Canada, and internationally.

The School of Social Work’s partners include the Catholic Children’s Aid Society of Hamilton, the Children’s Aid Society of Hamilton, Family and Children’s Services Niagara, Brant Family and Children’s Services, the Children’s Aid Society of Haldimand-Norfolk, and the Family and Children’s Services of the Waterloo Region, all of which have contributed funding to support the initiative, as has McMaster’s Faculty of Social Sciences. Ogwadeni:deo (Six Nations Child Welfare) and the Ontario Association of Children’s Aid Societies (OACAS) have also played a collaborative role in advising the initiative.

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