

Public Health Social Work & Schools

Thousands of children in Somerville, Massachusetts, have been touched by the work of public health social worker **Gretchen Kinder** (SSW '96, SPH '97). As the public school system's Coordinator of Research and Development, Public Information and Grants, Gretchen shapes policies, partnerships and programs of Somerville students, and reports no two of her days are the same. "My days are incredibly dynamic and I have the opportunity to influence a significant number of individuals through partnerships on a day-to-day basis."

While these partnerships may not be seen traditionally as part of the public health infrastructure, Gretchen explains that the well-being of the students and the schools are keys to the health priorities of the overall community. "Students can't learn and teachers can't teach if they don't feel safe. So much of social work is about building safe communities, and public health social work is about community health priorities and systemic change. My ability to leverage [our] programming is a part of my being a public health social worker."

In addition to forming partnerships and developing grant proposals, part of Gretchen's work is to help schools, parents and education advocates move beyond

seeing problems to finding solutions. The key to these solutions, Gretchen finds, is knowing why something isn't working and having hard information to back it up. "[Others] might be more affective [in their decision-making], driven by feelings or relationships. But in many environments, that just doesn't cut it for making an argument of choosing option A versus option B. I use data to drive program improvements, to understand what's going on behind the surface."

Relying on her MSW/MPH training, Gretchen most recently brought together individual, institutional and environmental stakeholders to develop a five-part strategic plan for the Somerville schools. Explaining why her role has been so valuable to the school system, she shares, "There's no one else in the district who could have done what I did. No one had the skill sets in community partnership, building and facilitation, and no one had the language for the grant program, which includes the language of education, social work and mental health services, early childhood and community-based environmental change. I hope 5,000 people in Somerville are going to have a better life because of a grant that I wrote or a partnership that I built."



Gretchen Kinder

The Campaign for Public Health Social Work

www.publichealthsocialwork.org

