School social work, as it is known today, evolved in Baltimore city from a series of events that transpired in the early 1930s. Dr. Harry S. Latshaw, director of special education in the Baltimore City Public Schools, hired Helen Louise Armstrong, a teacher in the field of special education, to be a visiting teacher for the program. Her job was to assist students who were having adjustment problems in school. Dr. Latshaw arranged to send her to the mental hygiene clinic at the University of Maryland for a year in order to receive on the job training in psychiatric social work.

Children experiencing a variety of behavioral, emotional, mental, and physical problems with social environmental components were referred to Dr. Latshaw by the schools, and he assigned these cases to Miss Armstrong. She had an office at the mental hygiene clinic where a psychiatric social worker provided training and supervision, as well as a cubby-hole space at the special education office, where she would go weekly to pick up her referrals and do necessary administrative work. Regular case conferences were held regarding the students who were referred. Dr. Latshaw would attend some of these conferences at the University Hospital clinic site. Clinic psychologists, psychiatrists and the supervising psychiatric social worker collaborated with Miss Armstrong in these case discussions, diagnosing the problems and recommending treatment. Prior to that time, some children were referred to the Phipps Clinic at Johns Hopkins Hospital for psychiatric evaluations. Miss Armstrong served in this capacity from approximately 1932 until 1936 before she left to study at the New York School of Social Work—a highly regarded institution which later became the Columbia University School of Social Work.

Miss Armstrong's sister, Elizabeth Armstrong, had been a teacher in the city's elementary school since October 1, 1926 and was an elementary counselor at the time that her sister left. Elizabeth applied for the vacant position as a visiting teacher, was accepted by Dr. Latshaw, and began her new role on November 16, 1936. The emergence of school social work as a professional service is generally credited to Elizabeth Armstrong's legacy in promoting the need for professional training of staff and the delineation of a professional knowledge base, function, and structure for the service. She also was instrumental in promoting the value of the service in supporting the school system's efforts to provide "a fruitful educational experience" for all children.

Elizabeth Armstrong continued the practice of training at the University of Maryland's mental hygiene clinic for only six months, as the visiting teacher service was well established by that time, and the work load was such that she was needed on a daily basis at the central office. Students' case conferences continued to be held at the clinic.

When Dr. Arthur Lichtenstein was brought in as a supervisor of the Child Guidance Service in 1941, the visiting teacher position held by Miss Armstrong was transferred from special education to the clinic. Thus,
on September 1, 1941, she resumed her job under the supervision of Dr. Lichtenstein. Dr. Lichtenstein eventually was called to serve his country and Miss Armstrong was made acting supervisor of the clinic, a position she held in the acting capacity from January 1, 1946 to 1952 when she was made the supervisor of the school social work service.

During those early years, Miss Armstrong recognized that she needed additional training if she was to function effectively as a service provider to troubled children and their families, and later as a supervisor of visiting teachers. During the summer of 1937, she trained at Smith College School of Social Work, but was not able to complete her education until the 1949-50 school year when she attended the New York School of Social Work and earned her master's degree in social work.

The Middle Years 1950-1967

Returning to her job as supervisor of a staff of twenty-one visiting teachers in 1950, Miss Armstrong felt she could not perform adequately her multi-faceted administrative, management, and supervisory responsibilities. Her staff turned to the psychologists, the psychiatrists, and to each other for help. Miss Armstrong realized that the schools were not receiving the organized, professional services they deserved. Some of the twenty-one visiting teachers had professional social work credentials. Others had taken courses and participated in professional development workshops, and worked on committees to develop needed knowledge, skills, and standards.

In 1951-52 Miss Armstrong recommended that a skilled, experienced professional be brought to the service from New York to help reorganize the visiting teacher role. Mildred Sikkema is credited with working tirelessly with the staff in training seminars, and with four staff members selected for their social work knowledge, experience, and skills to develop a sound basis for practice. Operational issues of philosophy, form/structure, function, and procedures based on sound practice principles, were developed during this time. Miss Sikkema was not replaced at the end of the year as the superintendent of public instruction decided to develop the service's own potential for leadership. It was during this school year (1952-53) that the Visiting Teacher's Service became the School Social Work Service and Miss Armstrong was appointed supervisor.

Four school social workers, experienced in casework and supervision, were assigned to provide supervision to the other staff. Three of the supervisors had worked closely with Miss Sikkema. Despite persistent efforts by Miss Armstrong and her superior to rectify this situation, for the next three years, until the 1954-55 school year, these social workers performed management and planning tasks and supervised their peers without official change in status or monetary recognition. In one of the several memoranda written by her to Dr. Lichtenstein, who was by then the director of special services, she wrote of the supervisory social workers:
Without them we would not have the recognition we now enjoy, in many of our schools and in the social work community, for sound practice and for professional ability to develop this even further. It is significant that schools of social work consider our supervising social workers capable of student training on a third year graduate level...With the continuous professional industry of these important members of our staff, we have been able to develop... (and record in manual form) sound school social work procedures (resulting from supervisor's knowledge of sound practice) and to implement the worker's effective practice in the schools. Gradually, this is bringing about improved school-division relationships, as shown in the reports of a number of elementary school principals.

Probably the most significant factor in bringing about our improved relationship with schools is the supervising school social workers' constant emphasis on improving collaborative work with the schools and emphasis on the continuous development in the worker of the increased professional skill that enables the worker to provide in the school a quality of service that helps children and schools more and more effectively.

In school social work there is so much more to be known and done that we have scarcely begun. We will be able to go much farther as a resource to schools for helping them with troubled and troubling children. I am sure that our supervising school social workers will continue to give of themselves as they have in the past, but I believe that their morale and the morale of the whole department will be improved if they are given some official recognition of the especially high caliber of service they are rendering.  

Miss Armstrong wrote a supplementary memorandum on July 22, 1955 to Edward Stein, an administrator to whom Dr. Lichtenstein submitted the previous memorandum. In 1956 favorable action was taken and the matter was resolved. Additional supervisors eventually were added as the social work staff increased. Supervisors and staff worked closely in projects within the schools as well as on practice issues. Revisions were made in the policy and function statements during the 1960s, and emphasis on new service delivery methods, such as group work and interdisciplinary teaming resulted in staff development programs to increase knowledge and skills. With increased governmental interest in social issues, and the War on Poverty, an influx of federal funds created new projects in the schools, involving school social workers. The service flourished and social work staff numbered in the sixties at that time.

On January 31, 1967, Miss Armstrong retired from the Baltimore City Public Schools, having left a rich heritage of accomplishment and pride in a truly professional school social work service.

1 Memorandum from Elizabeth Armstrong to Dr. Arthur Lichtenstein, Baltimore City Public Schools files, 13 July 1955

Note: Miss Armstrong was interviewed by Joan Y. Harris, who also prepared (wrote) this early history, as well as the Epilogue.
Catherine E. Armstrong, 95, schools social worker

Catherine Elizabeth Armstrong, a retired city schools social work supervisor, died Saturday of heart failure at Charlestown Retirement Community in Catonsville. She was 95.

Born in Baltimore, Miss Armstrong was raised on South Ellwood Avenue. She was a 1924 graduate of Eastern High School, graduated from what is now Towson University, and later earned a bachelor's degree from the Johns Hopkins University and a master's degree from the New York School of Social Work, now part of Columbia University.

She began her career as a teacher in 1926, and a decade later joined the school system's Child Guidance Service. In 1941 she was named its supervisor, and five years later became the city's acting supervisor of school social work.

She was supervisor of social work services for city schools from 1952 until her retirement in 1967.

A memorial service will held at 1 p.m. today at the retirement community's Our Lady of the Angels Chapel, 711 Malcom Choice Lane.

She is survived by a nephew, Frank Vargish of Lancaster, Pa., and a niece, Madelon V. Stewart of Princeton, N.J.