



NATIONAL
ASSOCIATION OF
SCHOOL
PSYCHOLOGISTS

Supporting Student Success: Remediating the Shortage of School Psychologists

There is a growing need for school psychological services. Students come to school with complex and diverse learning and developmental needs that often create barriers to learning. Family issues, poverty, peer conflicts, disabilities, stress, grief and loss, domestic and community violence, substance abuse, and mental health problems all affect a student's ability to focus and learn in school. The U.S. Surgeon General (1999) reported that one in five children and adolescents will experience a significant mental health problem during their education years. Because of this link, as well as educators' daily access to children and their families, schools have come to play a crucial role in promoting students' mental health as well as achievement. If we are truly to raise the bar, close the achievement gap, and ensure that no child is left behind, there must be an adequate supply of personnel who can address both the individual needs of students and the systemic needs of schools and districts.

School psychologists play a vital role in students' success in school. They provide:

- Assessment and intervention services that help identify student learning and behavioral needs.
- Mental health prevention and intervention services including counseling, behavioral supports, and skill development that promote students' healthy social, emotional, and behavioral development and lower barriers to learning.
- Individual, classroom, and school-wide consultation and prevention strategies that improve classroom climate, reduce risk behaviors and violence, improve crisis response, and contribute to safe, positive school environments in which all children can learn.
- Culturally competent services that meet the learning and mental health needs of culturally and linguistically diverse student populations and their families.
- Research-based practices and evaluation skills that enhance intervention efficacy, school accountability, and improved student outcomes.
- Support to families in accessing school and community resources necessary to meet student needs.

School psychologists work in both the general education and special education

environments. Although historically most school psychologists have worked with students in special education, their assessment, prevention, intervention, and consultation services are employed increasingly in general education as well. The expanding role of school psychologists encompasses school climate issues, classroom management, violence prevention and crisis response, staff training, pre-referral interventions, counseling, and program evaluation. This expanded role is made more critical with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002) and the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), both of which emphasize accountability, student achievement, the implementation of early intervening services, and the need to provide comprehensive research-based interventions that are accessible to all students.

Schools need adequate numbers of highly trained school psychologists and other pupil

service personnel. Teachers are the foremost professionals in students' school experiences. However, school psychologists, social workers, and counselors provide services that enable teachers to teach and students to learn more effectively. Even the most gifted teacher may struggle to effectively serve students with learning disabilities; to support students experiencing emotional crises that disrupt learning; to decrease disruptive classroom behavior; or to help a homeless student access food, shelter, and basic health care. At these times, the expertise of school psychologists and other pupil service/student support personnel is crucial.

There is a shortage of school psychologists serving student and system needs. This shortage includes both a diminishing pool of trained school psychologists to fill existing positions (supply and

demand) and an inadequate number of school psychology positions in many states and school districts. Supply and demand data from the American Association for Employment in Education indicate that school psychologists have consistently had “considerable” or “some” shortage over the last 10 years. The current crisis is complicated by the fact that about 4 out of 10 current school psychologists are predicted to retire between 2003 and 2010, more than half by 2015, and 2 out to 3 by 2020 (Curtis, Grier, and Hunley, 2004). In addition to the supply versus demand shortage, there is a shortage of positions, creating high case loads for practitioners and making it difficult for school psychologists to offer the necessary comprehensive academic and school mental health services or the prevention services that ultimately reduce the needs of individual students. While NASP recommends a maximum student-to-school psychologist ratio of 1,000 to 1 in the general population, a recent study revealed a national average of 1,653 students per school psychologist. Similar shortages exist for school counselors and social workers. The attached table provides a state-by-state comparison of student to school psychologist ratios.

There are a variety of factors contributing to the shortage of school psychologists. Some of the key reasons for personnel shortages include:

- Budget cuts to pupil service programs due to a need for school districts to meet the growing expenses associated with implementing the NCLB mandates.
- Lack of funding for programs designed to help remedy shortages such as loan forgiveness programs and personnel preparation grants that provide direct assistance to students and incentives for universities to create new innovative and alternative programs.
- Limited capacity of existing training programs to meet the demand for new professionals due to increasing higher education costs and the limited capacity of universities to expand existing programs due to the shortage of qualified faculty.
- Personnel attrition in special education and related services in the first five years of employment due to poor supervision and mentoring programs, poor working conditions, and growing pressures on teachers and other professionals due to the NCLB penalties levied on schools failing to meet all of the requirements of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP).
- Personnel attrition due to retirement rates exceeding the supply of new university graduates eligible for employment.
- Limited supply of qualified professionals willing to work in certain communities (rural, high poverty, high crime) or with specific populations (minorities, socially or economically disadvantaged) due to the personal and professional risks.
- Restrictive roles (e.g., testing for special education eligibility) that limit school psychologists' ability to use their expertise to address systemic issues (such as low achievement and bullying) that in the long run reduce the need for one to one services.

Elected officials can help address the shortage of school psychologists through public policy that supports personnel allocations and comprehensive services that remove barriers to learning and promote student success. Recommendations include:

1. Provide loan forgiveness and tax credits for people who successfully complete accredited training programs and then agree to work in communities with demonstrated shortages (rural, low income).
2. Fully fund the Elementary and Secondary School Counseling Program that allows local school districts to use program funds to hire new school psychologists, counselors, and social workers.
3. Restore full funding to the Safe and Drug Free Schools program that seeks to provide comprehensive mental health supports for students.
4. Create innovative, flexible grant programs that improve student outcomes associated with the services of professionals experiencing chronic shortages
5. Create programs that recruit graduate candidates from specific under-represented and under-served populations for future work in those communities or with those populations (such as inner city, rural, and minority populations).
6. Provide incentives for universities that expand their school psychology training programs, as well as incentives for individuals who elect to take teaching positions in areas with shortages.