



Executive Summary

The “State of the State” regarding School Psychological Service Provision in North Carolina January 23, 2015

Developed by: North Carolina School Psychology Association - Professional Practices Committee

Role and Function of School Psychologists

Twenty-first century schools require highly trained personnel and instructional leaders. School psychologists have extensive training in data management, research and program evaluation, and problem-solving within the instructional environment. In addition, they are some of the most qualified mental health personnel in schools. School psychologists are highly trained in both psychology and education, completing a minimum level specialist degree of 60 semester hours or more of graduate level training, including at least a 1200 hour internship. Utilizing leadership, school psychologists promote a respectful environment for diverse populations, use their knowledge of school environments, child development, curriculum, and instruction to improve student achievement, and support student learning through the use of a systematic problem-solving approach. In addition, school psychologists utilize collaborative relationships with colleagues, families, and communities to reflect upon and improve their practices (NC Professional School Psychology Standards, 2009). Often, the set of skills that school psychologists bring to the public school arena are overshadowed by factors that have contributed to limiting their role and function within public school practice.

Data Review

The *Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services* represents the official policy of the National Association of School Psychologists regarding the delivery of comprehensive school psychological services (NASP, 2010). Within this model, the recommended school psychologist to student ratio is 1 school psychologist to every 500-700 students. In order to obtain information regarding current ratios and role and function of school psychologists within the state of North Carolina, data were gathered using two survey tools. The results indicate the following:

- Current school psychologist to student ratio is estimated to be an alarming 1 school psychologist to every 2,010 students, approximately three times the recommended ratio for delivery of comprehensive services to students.
- The ratio analysis revealed a range from 1:942 to 1:9,881; reflecting that there are currently no Local Education Agencies (LEAs) operating within the NASP recommended ratio (1:500-700).
- 61% of the 115 LEAs are operating at a ratio of 1:2000 or higher (n=70).
- Within 77 of the LEAs responding to a survey item regarding evaluations, an estimated 39,490 student evaluations were conducted during the 2013-2014 school year (~69 evaluations completed per school psychologist), suggesting that school psychologists are spending a disproportionate amount of time involved in assessments and assessment-related activities, leaving less time for other role-related collaborative efforts and activities.
- Of the 115 LEAs in NC, 23 indicate that they do not have a school psychologist on staff.
- Although formal data were not collected from NC Charter Schools at this time, it is estimated that approximately 90% of the 148 Charter Schools in the state do not have a school psychologist on staff.

In reflecting on these data, one must consider that school psychologists are evaluated on their performance based on a comprehensive model of service delivery, yet, currently, it appears nearly impossible for school-based practitioners to function effectively within this model due to the current ratio falling substantially above what is recommended. Additionally, some LEAs, as well as most charter schools, do not employ full-time equivalent school psychologists. These factors lead to greater risks for students, with much less time spent involved in activities related to prevention and intervention to support positive outcomes for students.

Limitation of Role and Function of School Psychologists

Historically, the roles of school psychologists have been tied to special education regulations and a medical model of diagnosis and classification (Cantor, 2006). School psychological services are primarily related to special education activities, such as psycho-educational evaluations for disability determination and special education placement decisions. These traditional and special education activities prohibit school psychologists from providing a system of comprehensive service that would have a broader impact on student achievement and adjustment. Comprehensive service delivery includes but is not limited to the following functions: school-based mental health services, instructional support and consultation, intervention planning for student diversity and development in learning, support for families, multi-tiered systems of support for academic and positive behavior interventions, school crisis prevention and intervention, risk and threat assessment, and data-based problem solving. These activities positively impact student performance in a number of areas including: achievement, school safety, graduation rates, resiliency, 21st century skills, college and career readiness, health, well-being and responsibility, and respect for diverse populations. The vast majority of

different stakeholder groups fails to recognize school psychologists as highly skilled practitioners with expertise in both education and psychology. The failure to recognize the specialized training and benefits of school psychologists has negative implications for the profession's role and practice, as well as funding for school psychologist positions.

Funding Sources for School Psychologists in the State of North Carolina

There are various sources available for funding school psychologist positions within general education and special education and at the federal, state, and local levels. For funding options through special education, the (LEA) must use funds provided under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA 2004). Certain special education funding sources have allocation restrictions that may limit the work of the school psychologist. This limitation becomes problematic when the school psychologist's evaluation instrument outlines the requirement to work with "all students" but the funding source allocated for their position restricts access to certain populations. This ultimately hinders their ability to carry out their required job responsibilities, as outlined in the NASP Practice Model and in the school psychologist evaluation instrument.

Recommended Short-Term Actions for Change and Solutions:

For School Psychology Administrators/Leads and School Psychology Practitioners:

- Participate in developing a strategic plan that includes a needs assessment of provision of services within your school district
- Develop a plan for improving the school psychologist to student ratio within your school district
- Identify ways to make services visible (e.g., newsletter, executive summary, presentation to school boards or executive staff at district office)
- Communicate the roles, responsibilities, and services of school psychologists to stakeholders
- Advocate for ongoing professional development through allocated time and financial support (e.g., state and national school psychology organizations, conferences, other professional development opportunities)

For Special Education Administrators, General Education Administrators, and Superintendents:

- Increase knowledge and awareness of the role and function of school psychologists
- Invite school psychologists to be stakeholders in strategic planning and school improvement activities
- Examine your district's ratio of school psychologists to students and adjust to better align with the national recommendation
- Maintain current school psychologist positions and engage in strategic planning to increase the number of school psychologists. This could be accomplished by exploring internal funding sources, budget options, etc.
- Support school psychology internships through provision of internship stipends
- Support a comprehensive service delivery model as outlined by the North Carolina School Psychology Evaluation Instrument
- Support ongoing professional development through allocated time and financial support (e.g., state and national school psychology organizations, conferences, other professional development opportunities)

For Local and State Boards of Education:

- Increase knowledge and awareness of the role and function of school psychologists
- Maintain current school psychologist positions and engage in strategic planning to increase the number of school psychologists. This could be accomplished by exploring internal funding sources, budget options, etc.
- Encourage and support districts to better align school psychologist to student ratio with the national recommendation
- Support a comprehensive service delivery model as outlined by the North Carolina School Psychology Evaluation Instrument
- Provide an increase in salary for school psychologists in recognition of advanced training
- Collaborate with county commissioners to support the role of school psychologists

For Legislators:

- Increase knowledge and awareness of the role and function of school psychologists
- Increase the salary of school psychologists in recognition of advanced training
- Recommend Nationally Certified School Psychologist (NCSP) Licensure and provide supplement for those with this credential
- Draft legislation that is more closely aligned with the nationally recommended ratio of 1:500-700 within the state
- Consider reimbursing school districts for line item funding to support full-time school psychology internships
- Consider providing stipends for field supervisors of graduate students involved in school psychology practicums/internships

For More Information

Jim Deni, PhD, Co-Chair-NCSPA Professional Practices Committee: denijr@appstate.edu

Lynn Makor, MA, CAGS, Co-Chair-NCSPA Professional Practices Committee: lynn.makor@cidd.unc.edu

The full paper is available electronically at www.ncspaonline.com