

National Alliance of Pupil Services Organizations (NAPSO)
Briefing for the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee
May 11, 2010
Statement of Dede Bailer, PhD, Coordinator, Psychology Services,
Fairfax County Public Schools, VA

Thank you for the opportunity to present to the Committee on behalf of professionals providing psychological services in schools. It is encouraging that Congress is taking seriously the fact that, in addition to quality teachers and strong administrative leadership, effective schools require a team of professionals who are specially trained to meet the learning and developmental needs of the whole child within the school context.

I learned this early in my career as an elementary school teacher in Council Grove, Kansas. I was a good teacher, but some of my students still struggled to learn no matter what I did. I struggled, too; I struggled with understanding their barriers to learning and with what to do about it.

Until I discovered my school psychologist.

What a difference this person made for me and my students! She understood how to get at the underlying cause of a problem and could help me better help my students. Her knowledge, partnered with mine, led to greater student success as we educated the whole child. As a military wife, I continued to teach and benefit from the expertise of school psychologists in various locations here and abroad. Eventually, I chose to return to school to earn a PhD in school psychology.

Today, as coordinator of psychology services for Fairfax County Public Schools in Virginia, I oversee a staff of 142 school psychologists, all of whom make a similar difference in the lives of students and teachers in our district of over 173,000 students.

Like my students back in Kansas, our students do not leave their individual lives or characteristics at home when they come to school. These factors are integral to the learning experience and can either serve as strengths or as barriers to learning. Similarly, school climate and the classroom environment can enhance or impede students' abilities to focus on learning.

As I learned firsthand, teachers alone cannot be expected to unravel or address the myriad of individual factors that shape every student's readiness to learn. Take any average classroom of 25 children and, at any one time, at least 3–5 will be dealing an issue that interferes with learning. The possibilities are endless but often include learning or behavioral disabilities, mental or physical health problems, family difficulties, language or cultural barriers, substance or physical abuse, poverty, and bullying.

Dealing with these issues is not optional if we want to effectively educate all students. That's where school psychologists, and other pupil service providers, are absolutely critical. We are trained to help teachers, parents, and students identify and lower or remove barriers to learning.

Specifically, school psychologists are trained in mental health, learning and instruction, child development, assessment, data collection and analysis, consultation, counseling and school-based interventions, and school systems and law. We provide a broad array of services to general education and special education students, with a focus on linking academic, social–emotional, and behavioral strategies to students' improved welfare, learning, and school success.

School psychologists work across age groups and school settings. At the systems level, we work with administrators and leadership teams on district- or school-wide programming, such as school climate and safety initiatives, positive behavior supports, and response to intervention. At the classroom level, school psychologists consult with teachers on issues such as individualizing instruction, monitoring student

progress, and managing disruptive behavior. And we work with individual students and their families to assess learning, mental health, and social–emotional needs; recommend strategies to improve academic achievement and behavior; provide mental health counseling; and facilitate home–school collaboration.

I will briefly highlight two priorities in schools today in which school psychologists are integrally involved:

1. Using data to guide instruction and monitoring student progress
2. School mental health services

A growing focus in education is the use of data, gathered day-to-day to guide instruction and to monitor student progress. This process helps teachers understand how struggling students learn, tailor their instruction accordingly, and monitor over time whether the strategy is working. In many schools, including my district, this process occurs within a response-to-intervention model. School psychologists work with teachers to gather, chart, and interpret the data, helping the teacher determine if the frequency of the intervention and the length of time the intervention is used match the student’s instructional need. This process allows us to know how and when to shift strategies so that students get back on and stay on track more quickly and efficiently.

Another growing priority in schools is mental health, both because mental health is strongly linked to learning and because schools are effective places to provide services to children and youth. Mental health, like physical health, exists on a continuum from wellness to chronic or serious illness. School psychologists, social workers, and counselors are the mental health specialists working in schools who investigate the factors that impact a student’s mental health and shape their learning. We also work closely with community providers, such as clinical psychologists, to ensure that students who need more intensive therapeutic services receive them.

Often, students’ struggles can cause or masquerade as learning problems. At a recent team meeting, a frustrated teacher requested that a student be tested for special education. The student was failing, never completed homework, and paid little attention. In response to the teacher’s concerns, the psychologist observed the student in class and met with her to do an informal evaluation before considering a formal special education evaluation. During the meeting, the student revealed why she wasn’t completing her homework. She said, “Because it is dark in the closet. My stepfather gets mean when he drinks and I need to hide. If I have the light on to do my homework, he might find me.” Hiding, remaining vigilant, took all this student had, leaving little capacity to attend to learning. In response, we provided supports for learning and instruction and worked with the family and community agencies to ensure the student’s safety. Without intervention and support, this student could not attend to instruction, let alone be expected to experience school success.

The teacher involved is a good teacher who was not willfully ignoring the student’s situation. She simply did not have the training to evaluate and uncover the truth, nor would she have been equipped to deal with the situation on her own.

As a principal in our school division said, “I don’t need any more teachers. I can have the most highly trained teachers, but if students are unavailable for learning, it doesn’t matter how good the teachers are; I need more mental health specialists.”

Prevention, intervention, building resilience, using data to guide instruction, supporting mental wellness: this is the role of the school psychologist—a role that contributes to the development of a well rounded, healthy child who will become a valued and contributing member of society.

Thank you.