

## A More Valuable Resource

*The breadth and depth of school psychologists' skill set is frequently untapped.*

**By Deitra Reiser, Katherine Cowan, Stacy Skalski, and Mary Beth Klotz**

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*Created in collaboration with the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) to facilitate partnerships between principals and school psychologists and remove barriers to learning. Additional resources are available at [www.nasponline.org/resources/principals](http://www.nasponline.org/resources/principals).*

**N**ovember is national School Psychology Awareness Month, and this month's column offers some basic information about how your school psychologist, when practicing a broad-based role, might help you bring out the best in your students, staff members, and school.

### More Than a Gatekeeper

A common misperception about school psychologists is that they are simply gatekeepers for special education. Although this role is a very important part of any school psychologist's job—and helps schools meet the public mandate to ensure a free appropriate public education for all students—it is by no means the extent of their expertise.

School psychologists have specialized training in child and adolescent development, mental health, teaching, learning, school interventions, school systems, assessment, evaluation, and school law. Their unique expertise lies in how those elements interact to shape students' behavior, learning, and overall adjustment within the context of both special and general education.

Specifically, school psychologists provide assessment, data collection and analysis, interventions, prevention and responsive services (academic and mental health), consultation, counseling, program development and evaluation, and staff and parent training.

When school psychologists practice this broader role, those services can be applied to support the efforts of principals, teachers, parents, and students across a variety of school objectives.

### Data

An essential part of making informed decisions is using data effectively. This is often cited as one of the biggest challenges for principals (Wahlstrom,

Louis, Leithwood, & Anderson, 2010). In many districts, school psychologists are among the most highly trained, yet least utilized, professionals with regard to data use. They can help generate and interpret valuable data that school leaders and teachers can use to make decisions about programs and interventions at the district, building, classroom, and individual student levels.

Like most things in schools, data collection should be a dynamic effort. Educators must always ask, Is what we are doing working? In addition to collecting baseline data, school psychologists are trained to design and implement outcome evaluations over time at both the systems and individual levels, such as tracking the data from a newly implemented drop-out prevention program, monitoring the effect of a conflict resolution program on discipline referrals, or assessing changes in students' sense of school connectedness linked to a new effort to engage families.

### Instruction and Student Progress

After making a number of classroom observations and reviewing student math scores, a new high school principal was concerned that her school's math curriculum was not meeting the needs of many ninth graders. She was concerned that students would not be ready to meet the challenging 10th-grade curriculum and would

have difficulty on the state tests and college entrance exams. The principal, the math department team, and the school psychologist met and used the formative data the teachers collected to determine what problems existed. When they analyzed the data, they identified a number of changes that could be made in instruction, assessment, and data collection. Targeted instruction and progress monitoring throughout the year contributed to improved student outcomes.

School psychologists have long worked with teachers to help improve instruction by conducting classroom observations and recommending either classwide or individual student interventions. Response to intervention (RTI) and other problem-solving systems have made this role even more central. In fact, much of the research supporting RTI comes out the field of school psychology and embodies the foundational skills of observation, assessment, intervention, and collaboration that permeate school psychologists' work. School psychologists can help identify who should be on the intervention team and then work with the team to conduct needs and screening assessments, design the program structure, select and implement evidenced-based strategies, plan and conduct staff training, engage parents, and plan and implement student progress monitoring processes.

Progress monitoring asks the basic question, Is instruction working for this student or group of students? Progress monitoring is embedded in special education, but the concepts are readily transferable to the general education classroom. Many teachers are not trained in progress monitoring or the myriad interventions and adjustments to instruction that might

benefit struggling students, but most school psychologists are. They can work with individual students and help train teachers to build their own capacity to do the same. When a student doesn't respond to changes in instruction, the school psychologist and the instructional team can conduct further assessments to determine whether the student has a disability or is eligible for special education services.

### Positive Learning Environments

A middle school principal was concerned about the increasing number of discipline referrals and attendance problems at his school. He and the school psychologist reviewed the data and determined that the school had a bullying problem that contributed to absenteeism and to conflicts that occurred during unstructured times. The school psychologist worked with the principal, the staff, and the parents to establish schoolwide positive behavior supports that set clear behavioral expectations and taught students how to respond to conflicts and bullying.

Positive climate and culture are essential factors in effective learning environments. No matter how good curriculum and instruction are, a negative climate will interfere with student outcomes. Creating and sustaining a positive school climate does not happen by chance; it requires understanding the factors that shape the school climate, identifying when and how those factors are out of sync, and knowing how to correct the problem. Effective data-based decision making and intervention programming are integral to healthy school climates.

Principals who solicit their school



**Editor's note:** For the past seven years, the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) has contributed a monthly column to *Principal Leadership*. It has appeared under the titles of "Counseling 101," "Student Services," and now "From the School Psychologist." The column has covered a broad range of topics that affect students' learning and development. The column offers concrete, reliable information on the spectrum of issues that either interfere with or promote school success for all students so that readers may better guide staff members, direct student support resources, connect with students, engage families, and ensure the effective instruction and positive school climates necessary for great schools.

psychologist's help when addressing school climate issues gain the school psychologist's expertise with data, training in behavior and social-emotional learning, and skills related to family collaboration and engagement. They can help evaluate school data to prioritize programming needs and help choose, design, and evaluate the effectiveness of evidenced-based interventions. Those skills are helpful in determining which issues might be undermining a positive climate (e.g., peer conflicts, family disengagement, cultural barriers), what strengths exist in the school community (e.g., committed faculty members, a vibrant arts program, strong community connections), and what appropriate programs and interventions are in place (e.g., bullying prevention, positive behavior supports, peer mediation).

### Challenging Behaviors and Discipline

Even with the use of evidenced-based schoolwide programs and classroom interventions, some adolescents need more personalized and intensive supports. School psychologists are trained to analyze student behavior, implement appropriate interventions, and evaluate intervention effectiveness. In addition, many students who need an intense level of support require more than school-based interventions. The school psychologist, with the permission of those students' parents or guardians, can collaborate with community-based providers to establish effective family-school-community communications. Coordinating that communication greatly enhances the effectiveness of the interventions and better links them to learning. The school psychologist can help teachers understand the students' needs and

provide individual counseling to help students use the skills that they are learning in the community setting in school.

Obviously, the better equipped students are to manage their behavior, the fewer discipline referrals there will be. But effective discipline always incorporates a behavior support and intervention component. School psychologists can work with the principal and the leadership team to develop policies that incorporate appropriate interventions that have clear expectations and consequences.

### Students' Mental Health

To support students' ability to learn, schools must also support their mental health, which is a continuum from wellness (e.g., resilience, positive behavior, social skills) to serious mental disorders (e.g., depression, anxiety, obsessive compulsive disorder) and includes risk behaviors (e.g., self-harm, drug abuse, suicide). School psychologists work with social workers, school counselors, and other school staff members to help students make a successful transition from school to college or career and to promote wellness and resilience by reinforcing communication and social skills, problem solving, anger management, self-regulation, and self-determination.

School psychologists are also trained to recognize and intervene with students who suffer from more serious problems. They often help students and teachers recognize the signs of such problems as depression, identify and help implement prevention programming, conduct initial assessments for students who have been identified as being at risk, make referrals to community providers, and

provide ongoing counseling.

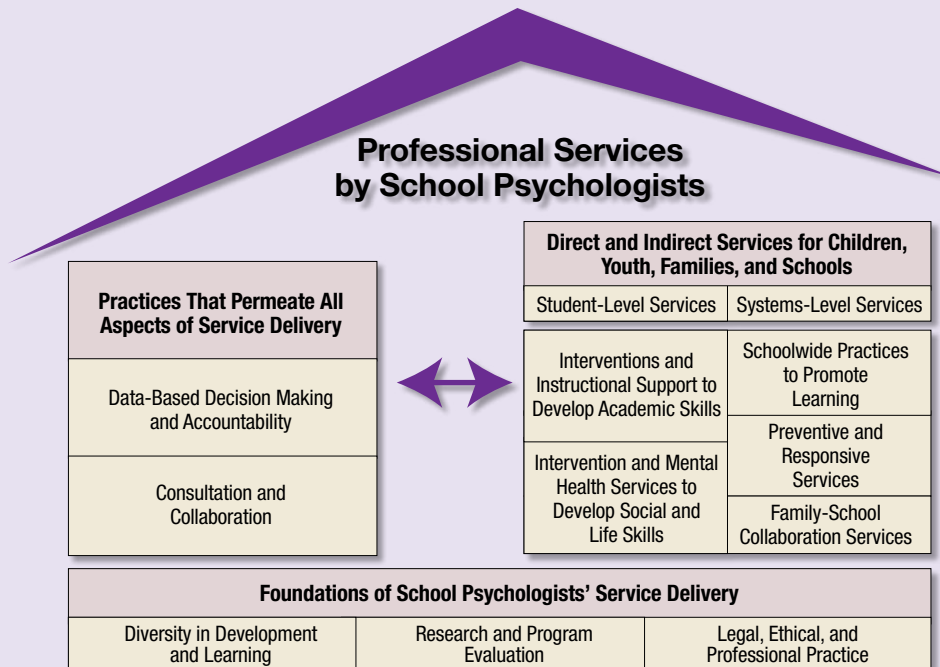
Perhaps most important, school psychologists and other school-employed mental health staff members provide an essential bridge between community providers and the school. Schools are not private clinics with blackboards. All services provided within the school context must be linked to learning and appropriate to school policies, mandates, and laws. School psychologists can greatly improve the appropriateness and effectiveness of school-based mental health services, whether offered by school-employed personnel or community providers.

### Crisis Prevention and Intervention

At some point, every school will experience a crisis. Car accidents, gang fights, the death of a student or a teacher, natural disasters, and other crises can disrupt daily routines and relationships. School psychologists often serve on the school's crisis team and can contribute to team development, prevention programming, staff training, and community collaboration. They also conduct threat assessments for students who might hurt themselves or others, and they know appropriate steps to protect the student, his or her family, and the school.

When a traumatic event does occur, the school psychologist is well equipped to provide ongoing interventions, including recognizing signs of trauma reaction; assessing those students most affected and at risk for more severe problems (e.g., post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, suicide ideation); conducting group and individual counseling; working with teachers to support student resilience; and helping staff members,

## Model for Integrated School Psychological Services



NASP's *Model for Comprehensive Integrated School Psychological Services* (2010) identifies 10 domains that school psychologists can offer services in:

- Data-based decision making and accountability
- Consultation and collaboration
- Interventions and instructional support to develop academic skills
- Interventions and mental health services to develop social and life skills
- Schoolwide practices to promote learning
- Preventive and responsive services
- Family-school collaboration services
- Diversity in development and learning
- Research and program evaluation
- Legal, ethical, and professional practice.

In addition to establishing practice standards through this model, NASP sets ethical, credentialing, training standards to support effective services and practice. School psychologists' graduate training requires completing a minimum of a specialist-level degree (at least 60 graduate semester hours) that includes a year-long supervised internship. School psychologists must be certified and/or licensed by the state in which they work. They may also be nationally certified through NASP by the National School Psychology Certification Board (NSPCB).

### What's Next?

- Speak with your school psychologist to determine his or her areas of interest and expertise and how he or she can help you with your school improvement goals and objectives.
- Determine what roles will be feasible for your school psychologist to perform this school year and how you envision the role evolving in the coming years.
- Speak with your school psychologist to determine what additional data will be helpful to collect and establish a strategy for analyzing and interpreting data at the building and classroom levels. Include your school psychologist in "data chat" meetings where regularly collected data is analyzed and acted upon.
- Ask your school psychologist to review or create a crisis plan so that it is in place for the upcoming school year.
- Consider how your school psychologist can help provide professional development.

**Source:** National Association of School Psychologists. (2010). *Model for comprehensive and integrated school psychological services*. Retrieved from [www.nasponline.org/standards/2010standards.aspx](http://www.nasponline.org/standards/2010standards.aspx)



## The Right People on the Bus

As Jim Collins explained in his research on effective companies, it is important to fill your bus with the “right people.” For me, as a high school administrator, surrounding myself with effective and innovative professionals is vital to maintaining the proverbial school bus heading in a positive direction. Students’ needs go well beyond reading, writing, and arithmetic. All administrators are faced with the daily pressure of providing high-quality educational opportunities while also meeting the social and emotional needs of students. I need professionals who can see beyond the surface problems and provide insight and guidance on how best to face these challenges. For me, the school psychologist in my building is often the professional standing at my side.

Through a unique blend of training, expertise, and experience, school psychologists have a comprehensive understanding of the school culture and how all of the dynamics in the school environment affect the climate of the building. Whether it is responding to a crisis situation, consulting with a teacher regarding a difficult student, providing insights culled from an assessment, or being that

gentle soul who counsels a student, the school psychologist has often been my go-to person.

As an educator, I realize the importance of addressing factors beyond the classroom curriculum, acknowledging that numerous barriers to learning often exist. My school psychologists have often stated that to make learning effective, school must occasionally take a backseat to what is happening in a student’s life. Helping a young man and his family connect with mental health services, addressing a young woman’s anxiety disorder, or connecting a group of disaffected students to meaningful activities become the bridges that the school psychologist builds to close the gap in learning by increasing students’ availability to learn.

My school psychologists help make me a better administrator, my teachers better teachers, and our students better students. In fact, I’ll let you in on a little secret: sometimes, given certain circumstances, I have even let my school psychologist drive the bus.

Catherine Nolan  
Principal, Commack (NY) High School

including principals, cope with their own trauma, grief, or stress.

### What Can Your School Psychologist Do?

School psychologists are not superheroes who can tackle any problem single-handedly; collaboration is a foundation in training and practice. School psychologists have individual strengths and weakness. Some will have more in-depth training and experience in certain areas than others. In many school districts, they are also limited because of their role definition

or because their ratio exceeds the national recommendation of one school psychologist (practicing a broad-based role) for every 500–700 students, which can make it difficult to provide broader services without specific directives for services from principals or families.

If your school psychologist is not already serving a broader role, you might ask, “Why not?” and “How do I tap into this expertise to benefit my students and teachers?” School psychologists may not be able to cover every base, but they will certainly contribute to your efforts

to help students achieve their best in school, at home, and in life. **PL**

### REFERENCE

■ Wahlstrom, K. L., Louis, K. S., Leithwood, K., & Anderson, S. E. (2010). *Investigating the links to improved student learning* [Executive summary]. Retrieved from the University of Minnesota, Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement Web site: [www.cehd.umn.edu/CAREI/Leadership/Learning-from-Leadership\\_Executive-Summary\\_July-2010.pdf](http://www.cehd.umn.edu/CAREI/Leadership/Learning-from-Leadership_Executive-Summary_July-2010.pdf)