



NATIONAL  
ASSOCIATION OF  
SCHOOL  
PSYCHOLOGISTS

## Graduate Student Involvement in Mental Health Advocacy

School psychologists working in their capacity as mental health advocates represent the voices of students, parents, and other invested parties to ensure that the social-emotional and educational needs of all students are met. Those needs are significant according to the U.S. Surgeon General's 2000 report on children's mental health, which estimates that one in five children and adolescents experience a mental health problem during their years in school. Unfortunately, about 70% of these individuals do not receive appropriate services. Outcomes for these untreated mental health needs range from poor academic performance, behavioral problems, special education referral, and school drop-out to substance abuse, incarceration, and suicide.

School psychologists, as mental health service providers, play an essential role in the lives of children and adolescents by advocating for their needs along the continuum of mental health, from mental wellness to mental illness. The profession of school psychology is poised to make a difference through its access to students, families, and school staff, and training in linking mental health to learning and behavior. The school environment provides an ideal setting for prevention and intervention efforts, given that children spend the majority of their day there; in fact, in recent years, there has been increasing recognition of the importance of school-based mental health services in terms of both health and educational outcomes.

### What is a Mental Health Advocate?

As future school psychologists, graduate students may find mental health advocacy to be a critical component of their training. Consequently, graduate school is a great time to take advantage of the numerous opportunities available to learn more about mental health advocacy and improve their skills as an advocate.

Often, an advocate is defined as the "voice of the student." Advocates ensure that students and their families receive the services necessary to optimize social-emotional growth as well as academic success. School psychologists can advocate for student mental health needs by promoting their role as providers of direct mental health services through activities such as social-emotional evaluation, skills development, and individual/group counseling. In order to affect the greatest number of students, school psychologists must also advocate through consultation with school staff and parents about the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of youth. Additionally, school psychologists adopt the role of an advocate by seeking out mental health services within the community in order to ensure that a student's needs are met. Finally, school psychologists

maximize their impact by taking an active social and political role within their broader community, state, and country to promote the mental health needs of the students they serve.

Graduate students can enhance their learning experiences in the area of mental health by consulting [www.nasponline.org/resources/handouts/sbmhservices.pdf](http://www.nasponline.org/resources/handouts/sbmhservices.pdf). To read more about mental health in the literature, visit [www.nasponline.org/resources/listingj\\_m.aspx](http://www.nasponline.org/resources/listingj_m.aspx). However, a graduate student's role in mental health advocacy is not confined to education about mental health issues and interventions. For a fact sheet that describes how graduate students can become involved in student advocacy, see [www.nasponline.org/students/naspstudentadvocacy.aspx](http://www.nasponline.org/students/naspstudentadvocacy.aspx).

### **Within Your Community**

At the local level, a graduate student's community consists of their university, classmates, and faculty members. However, in many cases the university program has built a working relationship with its surrounding neighborhood, city, and local school psychology associations. Below are a few suggestions on how to optimize resources as a graduate student and further build community partnerships.

- ◆ *Class Projects.* Make a presentation on specific or general mental health issues as part of a class requirement. For example, you could review the school psychologist's role as mental health practitioner or address how depression in elementary school children differs from that of adolescents in high school. Create handouts that can be distributed to peers and colleagues, which can be utilized best when in practice.
- ◆ *Research.* A critical component of your training is research. Consider conducting a research project within the area of mental health. For example, carry out a study that aims to evaluate the efficacy of group counseling or a school-wide bullying intervention program. In turn, you can share your findings with the school community, such as at a school advisory board meeting.
- ◆ *Formal Presentations.* Presentations are a great way to inform people about the mental health issues that may impact children and adolescents at home and in the school setting. At the local level, consider settings such as a university forum, a different department, or a club or organization meeting. Reach a larger audience of participants by conducting a formal presentation, such as at a conference or annual meeting. For a listing of mental health conferences that address certain interests visit [www.psychwatch.com/conference\\_page.htm](http://www.psychwatch.com/conference_page.htm)
- ◆ *Online Discussions and Forums.* Another way to promote advocacy to a larger audience is to conduct online discussions with students and colleagues. Activities such as these provide ideal opportunities to share ideas, collaborate on projects, and review issues impacting the field, such as recent changes in legislation. In many cases, students can use a Blackboard site or student organization website. As an example, the UCLA School Mental Health Project Center for Mental Health in Schools includes a listserv designed to allow individuals to share ideas and experiences (<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/>). Other opportunities for online discussions can be found by visiting the NASP Advocacy web page at [www.nasponline.org/advocacy/index.aspx](http://www.nasponline.org/advocacy/index.aspx).

- ◆ *Volunteer Work.* Volunteering within community mental health organizations may help the student school psychologist to learn more about locally available family and children services. Sites may include a local university or hospital with duties such as reading books, talking with children, or running small group activities. Students are encouraged to check with local universities and other mental health related organizations for such opportunities.

## **Mental Health Advocacy: A Look Across the State**

Another critical component of your training is becoming familiar with state mental health initiatives. Below are a few tips on how to get involved with mental health advocacy initiatives across your state.

- ◆ *Becoming Informed.* Often, a wealth of information related to school and community-based mental health services can be found on state department of education or mental health websites. Many offer links to specific departments related to mental health services or advocacy resources. For example, the California Department of Education provides strategies, resources, and training in psychological and mental health issues to school-based employees as well as school psychologists ([www.cde.ca.gov/ls/cg/mh/](http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/cg/mh/)).
- ◆ *Collaboration.* An important role for graduate students is serving as a student representative on a local or state committee geared towards mental health advocacy. Often, these committees support graduate student involvement by appointing a student to such a position. All students are encouraged to contact their local or state affiliation groups, such as a state representative or NASP delegate, and inquire as to how they can serve on or possibly even help establish a mental health committee.
- ◆ *Active Advocacy.* All students are encouraged to contact their Congressperson and inquire as to how they can become more involved in mental health advocacy initiatives. This is a great way to get your voice heard as well as to learn more about how you can take an active role in the improvement of mental health services. Contact information for state officials may be found by visiting [www.house.gov/writerep/](http://www.house.gov/writerep/) or [www.senate.gov/](http://www.senate.gov/).

## **Getting Involved with National Initiatives**

The website of the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) is one of the most comprehensive resources for graduate students. Resources and information include documents on a variety of mental health topics, volunteer opportunities, and other field-related service opportunities. Here are just a few resources offered by NASP:

- ◆ *Legislation.* Visit NASP's advocacy page to find information on current legislation and statutes, as well as links to capital hill updates at [www.nasponline.org/advocacy/index.aspx](http://www.nasponline.org/advocacy/index.aspx).
- ◆ *Taking Action.* You can read about action alerts on mental health issues and write letters to your Senators and Representatives at <http://capwiz.com/naspweb/home/> through NASP's Action Advocacy Center.

- ◆ *Special Interest Workgroup.* Read about NASP's Mental Health Promotion Workgroup and learn more about your role as a mental health service provider. For more information, visit [www.nasponline.org/publications/cq/mocq352mhworkgroup.aspx](http://www.nasponline.org/publications/cq/mocq352mhworkgroup.aspx).
- ◆ *Service Projects.* Organize a service project that focuses on student mental health. Funding may be obtained for projects that aim to improve the overall welfare of children. To assist with funding a project, students are encouraged to apply for grants offered through the NASP Children's Fund. For details, see [www.nasponline.org/about\\_nasp/childfund.aspx](http://www.nasponline.org/about_nasp/childfund.aspx).

## Other Helpful Tips

There are several national organizations dedicated to the advocacy of mental health services. NASP provides a number of links to other mental health-based organizations. For a list of organizations, visit [www.nasponline.org/publications/cq/cq337mhinsert.aspx](http://www.nasponline.org/publications/cq/cq337mhinsert.aspx).

- ◆ *Staying Informed.* To stay informed on mental health initiatives occurring across the country, visit these organizations online and inquire as to how you can become more involved in mental health initiatives. For example, you may want to begin by visiting the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration at [www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov).
- ◆ *Partnerships.* Many federal organizations have developed partnerships with state and local agencies, enabling advocates to maximize their resources and collaborate on joint projects more effectively. By joining together, their voices are stronger. You may discover the opportunity to contribute to existing partnerships within your community

## Every Vote Counts

As future school psychologists, graduate students are encouraged to take an active role in shaping the future of mental health programs and initiatives. Voting is one of the most crucial ways to voice your opinion and ensure that your thoughts and ideas count. Researching ballot initiatives and political platforms can help you to determine how mental health issues might be impacted by your vote. Visit the website for the Secretary of State in your state to find out how to register.

School psychologists advocate for the mental health needs of students by promoting their role as direct service providers, consulting with school staff and families, and becoming involved in social and political initiatives supporting children's mental health. As a graduate student, you can begin your role as a mental health advocate now by developing your skills for providing the continuum of mental health services and becoming active in community, state, and national mental health initiatives.

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