



NATIONAL
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PSYCHOLOGISTS

Successfully Navigating School-Based Training Experiences: A Guide for Graduate Students

Stepping into a school for the first time as a school psychologist-in-training can be a daunting proposition. Issues to consider include: How should I introduce myself? How to explain the functions I will serve within the school? How do I explain issues of confidentiality, especially as they pertain to receiving supervision from a university faculty member not directly affiliated with the school? This fact sheet was written to provide answers to these types of questions as you begin your school-based training experiences.

Getting to know the “lay of the land”

- ψ **Try to get in touch with the last graduate student placed in your school.** Talking to them before starting at the school can provide valuable information for learning how the school operates, who the “point people” are for questions and support, as well as prepare you for any system or personality challenges that you might encounter.
- ψ **Introduce yourself to administrators and school personnel.** This may sound basic, but it is important to know the people you will be collaborating with during your training experience. It is especially important to introduce yourself to office staff; they will be an invaluable resource as questions arise.
- ψ **Have handouts to give to administrators and teachers that explain the major functions a school psychologist performs:** consultation, assessment, counseling/intervention, crisis management, prevention, school wide programs, etc. The NASP brochure on this topic can be downloaded at www.nasponline.org/resources/freepubs.aspx, or you can create your own handout. Be sure to include your contact information, your supervisor’s contact information, the days/times you will typically be at the school, and where you can be located (i.e., Are you usually in an office? The teacher’s lounge? Closet A?).
- ψ **Spend some time getting to know the unique culture of your school.** How many teachers and students are there? What are the demographics of the student population? What are the school’s mission statement and educational goals? What prevention and intervention programs are already in place? How does staff feel about these programs? How does the special education process work?

- ψ **Let school personnel know you are a graduate student training to become a school psychologist.** Explicitly state the skills you are trying to develop, what services you can provide, who your supervisor is, and, if appropriate, issues of confidentiality. Set limits early about what you are and are not qualified to do as a school psychologist-in-training. Define these limits with your supervisor(s).
- ψ **Eat in the teachers lounge.** This is a good place to interact with teachers in an informal atmosphere. Teachers can get to know you beyond pulling students out of their classroom and conducting observations. Your attempt to form a more personal relationship will pull a lot of weight with teachers. One caution: avoid discussing sensitive topics pertaining to specific children while in the teachers' lounge. If a teacher directly asks you a sensitive question or brings up a concern related to a specific child, state that you would love to set up a time to speak privately about the concern.
- ψ **Remember that you are a student.** You may have a lot of knowledge about theory and best practice, but most likely you have not had first hand experience regarding how schools function on a day-to-day basis. Nothing will increase resistance to your efforts more than going in and telling everyone what they are doing wrong. Let them know that you are excited to work with them, and tell them any good things you have heard about the particular school, district/county, or staff. This sends the message that you have taken the time to get to know something about the school and are willing to be a team player.

Finding a space to work within the school

- ψ **Be flexible.** A common hurdle to overcome in schools is finding a quiet place to work individually with students. This is especially true if there is not a school-based psychologist with an office you can borrow. You may need to work with children at desks placed in the hallway. This is appropriate if you are providing academic interventions, but is less than ideal when discussing sensitive matters with the child or trying to administer standardized tests.
- ψ **Get help from other staff.** The office staff can be very helpful. The secretaries, in particular, know who is present and absent from the building and can usually help find a quiet spot for you to work that day. There may be a vacant conference room you can use. The school counselor and special education staff may also have quiet spots.

Supervision

- ψ **Be clear on who is supervising you.** Graduate students are sometimes supervised by more than one individual. For instance, you may be supervised by the school psychologist assigned to the school and by a faculty member in your training program. Having multiple supervisors can be difficult, particularly when they do not agree on a particular issue. It is important to establish an understanding regarding who would have the final say in the event of a disagreement.

- ψ **Know how your supervision is going to be provided.** Will it be group or individual? Will it be structured or laissez-faire? Does that style meet your needs?
- ψ **Establish clear communication with your supervisor(s).** Try to set clear ground rules and expectations. If possible, try to get everyone in the same room to meet. During this meeting, or separately with each party:
 - Discuss your goals, the goals of the university supervisor, *and* the goals of the school-based supervisor.
 - Decide how often you are going to meet with your supervisors and whether you want to establish preset meeting times. If you do establish specific meeting times, be flexible and open to the fact that this time may not always work since school schedules can be unpredictable.
 - Discuss the populations of students you may work with, the proportion of time that will be dedicated to assessments, consultation, counseling, etc.
 - Agree on the best way to communicate: Is it via email? Are all emails regarding the practicum going to be carbon copied to the other party?
 - Let both parties know other obligations you have: Are you taking classes? Are there days you know you will need off? Are you teaching classes? Involved in research? Will you work at the school during university vacations?
- ψ **Graciously accept constructive criticism.** Be self-reflective about areas you are doing well in *and* areas where you need to ask for additional support. Address issues that come up directly before misunderstandings occur. Treat this as a learning experience, not just work.

Keep track of your hours

This is very important! Often when you go on interviews, potential employers will ask you what type of experience you have had and with what populations. Even if they do not directly ask you, knowing the hours you have spent providing direct and indirect services, as well as the amount of supervision you have received, will allow you to talk about your experiences in a succinct manner.

- ψ **Make time to track of your hours!** While it is understandable to let a task like this slip off the radar screen during busy semesters, it is much harder to go back and recreate the hours after the fact. Setting aside some time on a weekly basis for this task works well.
- ψ **Develop a spreadsheet that itemizes the date, location, population and specific services provided.** Tracking your hours in a spreadsheet will enable you to calculate your total hours automatically. Tracking your hours and the type of students you are working with will clarify where your strengths are and where you may want to get more experience. For instance, if most of your experiences during practica are in elementary schools, you may want to ask for a case at the middle school or high school level. Or perhaps it becomes clear that you have spent most of your time engaged in assessment and you need to round out your experiences with more consultation and/or counseling experiences. A good example of a spreadsheet can be located at <http://edweb.sdsu.edu/CSP/sp/documents/spsdarev10-06.xls>

- ψ **Have your supervisors sign your log and place a copy of it in your advisor's file.** Your advisor can use this information when writing letters of recommendation for internships and jobs, and it ensures the information is available if any questions arise about the types of services you provided during your school-based training experiences.
- ψ **Consider keeping an informal, narrative log** documenting your daily activities in case you need to refer back to a particular day (e.g., Submitted first draft of report to university supervisor; set-up consultation meeting with Mrs. X; tested John Doe). One option is to use a blank day calendar that is divided up into hours, and as you progress throughout the day, make sure you record what you did during those hours. At the end of the day, tally and separately record the hours completed onto the spreadsheet.

Learn as many things as possible

- ψ **Determine the personal and professional goals you hope to accomplish** during your training placement (e.g., what specific diagnostic, consultation and therapy skills do you want to nurture). Share the goals with your faculty and field supervisors.
- ψ **Develop your interests.** Generally students have an area that is of particular interest to them (e.g., unique needs of bilingual students, social and emotional functioning of students, school-wide prevention and intervention programs). Ask your supervisor(s) to help you develop further in your area of interest, perhaps by assigning you to work on a related project or case.
- ψ **Spend time in classrooms.** This will help you develop a better understanding of students' needs and, perhaps more importantly, will help you create more effective interventions with teachers for students who are struggling academically or behaviorally. Observing different teaching styles will also help you understand why a student may thrive or struggle in a particular classroom and not in another.
- ψ **Learn a variety of assessment strategies and instruments.** Ask your supervisor for sample assessment reports so you can create a report template. Continuously add to your template as you use new tests, discover better ways of interpretation, and develop your own style.
- ψ **Explore resources with your assigned school psychologist** and make copies or notes of relevant information (e.g., school curriculum guides, county manuals, etc) that the school psychologist feels will be helpful to you as a student and future practitioner.
- ψ **Take advantage of the knowledge you can gain from other professional staff** (e.g. speech-language therapists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, special educators, teachers, principals).
- ψ **Advocate for yourself and your training needs.** If there is something about your training experience that is unsatisfactory or uncomfortable, raise it either with your school-based or university supervisor.

What to expect in team meetings

There are several types of team meetings you may sit in on, such as the pre-referral team, the special education multidisciplinary team, as well as planning teams for other school-wide initiatives (e.g., curriculum, discipline, character development).

- ψ **Recognize that some teams will be more functional than others.** Successful team meetings stay on task and give everyone a chance to share opinions, ideas, and concerns. Unsuccessful team meetings often try to cover too many agenda items in the allotted time or turn into a “gripe” session containing extraneous discussion that wastes valuable time and is potentially damaging to the child/children being discussed. If the meetings you attend frequently veer towards griping or gossiping, ask your supervisor if you can create an agenda in conjunction with the team’s facilitator that can be used to help the team stay focused on the meeting’s goals while still allowing team members to productively share their opinions.
- ψ **Take notes when you attend meetings.** Write down questions to ask your supervisor about components of the meeting you did not understand. In team meetings, educators and related service providers tend to talk in “alphabet soup” where acronyms are quickly thrown around. Teams that have worked together for a while also tend to make decisions rather quickly because they have a shared understanding of how similar situations have been handled in the past. If you are unclear about how or why a decision was made, ask your supervisor to talk you through the decision making process and connect it to the theoretical, ethical and legal issues you are learning about in your coursework. Take time to become familiar with all of the district- or school-specific paperwork that is used at team meetings.
- ψ **Be prepared to facilitate a meeting.** As you progress through your training experiences, you may be asked to facilitate a meeting, or a portion of a meeting. Prepare notes when you present at meetings. They will keep you focused and concise and help ensure that you say everything you need to.
- ψ **Be sensitive to parents sitting in the meetings.** This is particularly true during special education multidisciplinary meetings. Imagine how intimidating it must be to sit in a room full of educators who are talking in “alphabet soup” about your child. When talking to parents about observations or assessment results, make sure to cover the child’s strengths and sensitively explain the areas of concern and how the assessment results relate to the areas of concern. Make sure the choices that are available to the team are clear to parents so they can play an informed, active role in the decisions that are made.

This fact sheet was developed by Karen L. Nuijens PhD, NCSP during her 2004–2005 graduate assistantship at NASP Headquarters, with the input of other graduate students, trainers and practitioners.