Billings Public Schools is the largest district in the state of Montana and currently serves about 17,000 students. This includes 3 high schools, 6 middle schools, and 22 elementary schools, along with the preschools and private schools in the area. We have 11 school psychologists serving this district (1:1,545 students). We each serve at least 3 schools. Currently over half of our department is considered early career, and we also presently support two interns. Early career practitioners bring energy and enthusiasm to the profession, while still having a strong desire to learn and grow. Furthermore, fresh ideas, knowledge of novel research, and best practices are at the forefront of early career school psychologists’ thought processes. For us, an enthusiasm for the profession guides our advocacy efforts to instill the comprehensive school psychologist role and support systematic change in the way we serve our schools.

We also have a strong collaborative approach and recognize the expertise of all members of our school psychologist department. The energy of a strong department helps fuel our enthusiasm. In fact, in accepting this honor to be featured in the Communiqué, we graciously recognize the importance and support of our entire department to achieve our unified goals. While some school psychologists can feel isolated and alone in the field, our department meets weekly to help solve various issues and provide case consultation. In supporting each other, we find that no question, case, or issue seems too major or minor to discuss. Through this process, early career school psychologists have immediate feedback from veteran school psychologists who have vast experience. In contrast, the veteran school psychologists learn from their early career colleagues who offer newly-taught research and best practices within the ever-evolving field. Our strong team leads to greater collaboration, new life in programs, space for increased discussion, and a cohesive approach to supporting students and our schools.

Hailey Gray, SSP, NCSP
What is your area of expertise? How have you developed skills in this area?

My area of expertise is home–school collaboration. For me, this starts with inviting parents into the building to introduce myself and hear more about their child’s strengths and needs. I am able to explain more about special education and the evaluation process and answer questions they have. I have found that this leads to more comfortable meetings later on, as both the family and the staff feel heard and have a better understanding of the process and the people who are involved.

I developed skills in this area by participating in the process personally. As a struggling early learner who benefitted from extra interventions and support, I can relate both personally and professionally to parents and students who may be going through this process for the first time and are feeling overwhelmed. My goal as a school psychologist is to meet families where they are, learn more about their unique children, help them feel understood and informed about the educational system and processes, and introduce myself to them as just another member of the best team around—their child’s!

As an early career school psychologist, how are you working to increase the number of school psychologists in your district? Can you discuss your advocacy work as well?

I was given the opportunity to advocate for the profession by presenting to a group of school counseling graduate students at our local college. I gave a presentation about the roles of school psychologists and how school psychologists can work together with school counselors to support students. I also spend time talking with staff such as counselors, interventionists, and special educators about the benefits of being a school psychologist and the various options that are available to them if they would like to pursue a career change. Additionally, when interviewing potential interns for the district, I take time to meet with them and discuss my experience as both an intern in this district, as well as the support I have received being a young school psychologist. Finally, I met with a local magazine to discuss the mental health needs of students and how school psychologists can support them. I was able to educate and inform the community about the national shortage of school psychologists and how this impacts our effectiveness in providing comprehensive services.

Morgan Benge, SSP, NCSP

What is your area of expertise? How have you developed skills in this area?

My area of expertise is in advocating for the students at my schools. It can be difficult at times to go into a meeting with different knowledge and skills that others may not have or understand; this sometimes makes you unpopular with your colleagues. I have advocated for the MTSS framework in my schools, and I have educated staff on various interventions to support our students using data-driven decision making. I created an intervention binder for my teachers so they have access to different types of supports and progress monitoring tools that they can use in their classrooms to provide both Tier 1 and Tier 2 interventions. I also worked with the individual grade levels to show how they could use the progress monitoring data to support their students’ needs. Because of this, I have seen great progress in my schools in the last 2 years. When I first came in, I was referred students who were not receiving interventions in the area of need, and there was little to no progress monitoring. Now, students are starting to receive more support in their area of struggle. Teachers are
implementing weekly progress monitoring to track growth and are seeing huge improvements in their skills.

How do you develop your consultation skills as an early career school psychologist? What advice would you have for others who want to strengthen this skill?

The best way to develop consultation skills is to practice. When I first started, I remember thinking “How am I supposed to help teachers who have been teaching longer than I have been a school psychologist?” But as soon as they started asking me questions, I realized that I had the knowledge; I just needed to learn to communicate it clearly to others. Repetition is key in growing consultation skills. Not only am I able to improve my communication with my staff, but they simultaneously put more trust in my consultation. In being a strong listener for teachers, administrators, and other key staff, I can work with these teams to find appropriate avenues for supporting students. Following up is also an important piece of the consultation process. Any time a teacher or other staff member reaches out to me, I make sure to follow up with them to see how the information I gave worked for that situation. This is important not only to building trust and a rapport with the staff, but also to making sure your consultation was effective.

Brittany Lewno-Dumdie, PhD, NCSP

What is your area of expertise? How have you developed skills in this area?

My passion is supporting social, emotional, and behavioral needs through counseling and intervention. I love collaborating with students, teachers, administrators, and counselors on outside-the-box strategies to support students. Working closely with my school teams increases the probability that the intervention will be followed with fidelity and lead to positive student outcomes. Specifically, I regularly help create behavior plans or other forms of behavioral and mental health interventions (e.g., Check-In/Check-Out, attendance interventions). I often track progress monitoring data to determine effectiveness. I also support students individually and in small groups. In servicing a range of student needs, I acknowledge preexisting strengths and target skill deficits. One of my favorite parts about working in schools is the collaboration between professionals. The ability to consult with teachers leads to more effective outcomes. For example, I can check with teachers if my students are implementing the coping tools discussed in sessions, or they may offer preemptive feedback about a recent classroom conflict. The growing mental and behavioral health needs of our students speak to the importance of this skill set and challenge me to improve my skills.

How did you advocate to become a related service provider on IEPs? Why did you believe this was important for school psychologists in your district?

School psychologists are trained to be flexible. We adapt and support schools however needed, as demonstrated by the range of advocacy my colleagues and I described. That being said, my involvement on IEPs is intended to service the mental health needs for students in a self-contained special education classroom. My involvement with this program began with behavioral consultation and expanded to mental health services. This program’s team and I realized that it is within the students’ best interest that such support is documented on IEPs to formally acknowledge this level of support and ensure that this service continues for them if they transition to a different school or placement.
This service also benefits me as a professional juggling multiple roles and trying to support many students. The legal applications of an IEP help me prioritize my time and efforts. Although the program has evolved, student mental health needs remain. To advocate for this role, I highlighted that school psychologists serve schools in a flexible manner and in a comprehensive role, but most importantly, that we simply do what is best for students. Despite my advocacy, I humbly acknowledge how lucky I am to work for a school district open to expansion and new ideas, such as IEP involvement.