The NASP Leadership Assembly has adopted three strategic goals that guide the association’s work. In your state, what are some gains being made in school psychology practice related to these goals, and what are some pressing challenges?

In Arkansas we are making gains in training current students in one of our programs to provide mental health services as part of the NASP Model for Comprehensive and Integrated Psychological Services (NASP Practice Model). Although both of our programs train in the NASP Practice Model, our state still does not understand what we do and how important we are to the education system and we are often referred to as “testers”. We are also facing the challenge of being compared to educational examiners who are typically special education teachers who receive 15 hours of training with one of those classes being assessment. This has led to tension between educational examiners and school psychology specialists within the state. There has been an effort of collaboration between the Department of Education, Arkansas School Psychology Association, School Psychology and Educational Examiner Program Coordinators, and the Arkansas Association of Special Education Administrators to create a state model of practice that will utilize the skills of both disciplines to serve students.

There is a struggle within the state to meet the demand of providing a high-quality and diverse school psychology workforce. Our state is very rural and there are pockets of the state where practitioners are not producing their best work when it comes to providing psychological services. The further practitioners are away from a metropolitan area, the worse the services. There is a monthly evaluation consideration group that is hosted by myself, another school psychology specialist, and a former speech therapist to provide school psychologists, educational examiners, and LEA’s across the state opportunities to dialogue about improving evaluation practices across the state. Our school psychology workforce in Arkansas is predominantly composed of white females. I am currently one of two school psychologists within the state that identify as an African-American male. There is no known strategy to increase the diversity within the two programs. There is also a shortage of school psychologists within the state. As of right now there are two or three school psychologists on the entire east side or delta region of the state. This region of the state is the poorest and most underserved part of the state. Most students that graduate from programs leave the state to pursue higher paying internship positions and higher salaries. Our programs also prescribe to the idea of graduate students being full-time students, which prevents them from being able to support themselves or their families.

Right now, in Arkansas using words like social justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion is banned from any training provided by state employees. If these words are included in any training that employees of the state want to attend, it is denied. All training slides must be reviewed by the governor’s review task force before they can be presented. The Arkansas School Psychology Association was not deterred and decided to invite Dr. Charles Barrett to address these topics in a way that would promote practices that ensured we were aware of the inequities that exist in the field.