



## **Brittany Johnstone, EdS, NCSP**

*Baltimore City Public Schools, Baltimore, Maryland*

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### **Describe the site where you work and how you decided on this type of placement.**

I currently work full-time for Baltimore City Public Schools, an urban school district with just under 80,000 students. I chose to work in this district after my spouse took a job in Baltimore, Maryland, during my internship year. Baltimore City was actually the only district I applied to work in, because it was important for me to work in the city I lived in. I wanted to feel invested in the community not only as an employee of the district, but also as a resident of the city. My first 2 years in the district I was working across three schools. These last 2 years I have been working across only two schools. I have the opportunity to serve both schools in a full-spectrum practice, supporting prevention and intervention, as well as special education counseling services and testing duties.

### **What are your areas of expertise at this point in your career?**

At this point in my career I would feel confident in saying that I am well versed in social justice and school psychology practices that attempt to create more equity in education and reduce over- or underrepresentation of populations within special education. Working in Baltimore City, a city plagued by hypersegregation<sup>1</sup>, I have had to be intentional in educating myself about practices in education that reproduce inequity and harm my students and their families by perpetuating systems of hierarchy and supremacy. I have collaborated with another early career school psychologist, Justina Yohannan, to write an article for the *Communiqué* about how school psychologists can support students exposed to lead, something that I frequently see the impact of throughout Baltimore City. I have had the opportunity

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<sup>1</sup> Massey, D. S., & Tannen, J. (2015). A Research Note on Trends in Black Hypersegregation. *Demography*, 52(3), 1025–1034. doi:10.1007/s13524-015-0381-6

this year to support prevention and intervention work at both of my schools that is designed to provide students in pre-Kindergarten through second grade access to academic and behavioral interventions in an effort to reduce inappropriate referrals to special education. Engaging in prevention-based work that provides students what they need apart from the formal identification and labeling of special education has reignited my love for school psychology. (Thanks, PIEL Team!)

Another area where I have developed a personal and professional interest is advocating for school psychologists in my local teachers union. I was elected in May 2019 as one of 20 members of the Teacher Chapter Executive Board, a position where I am charged with supporting the interests and labor needs of school psychologists in my district. Ensuring school psychologists are fully represented in contract negotiations, included in conversations about workplace safety, and considered in the drafting and adoption of district policies that impact the scope of our practice is a unique manifestation of my training as a school psychologist, but one that I know is of vital importance. My background and interest in labor organizing feeds into and informs this new dimension of my practice.

## **Describe your engagement in the local community and how this impacts your work.**

I try to stay engaged in my local community in several different ways. I provide tutoring services through a program that provides individualized academic supports to Latina high school students in Baltimore City, many who are first generation students or immigrants themselves. I also support a weekly drop-in counseling group for students who are impacted by or are witnesses to domestic violence through the organization House of Ruth. We play a lot of games while working on mindfulness and learning about boundaries and interpersonal skills. Through both opportunities I maintain a strong connection to the growing Hispanic/Latinx community in Baltimore City and also apply my counseling and academic intervention skills in a different setting.

I am also a member of a local organization, BMORECaucus, or Baltimore Movement of Rank and File Educators, a caucus within my local teachers union that advocates for social justice, promotes leadership of Black and Brown educators, and partners with families and communities to advocate for local and state policies that address the issues facing our communities. Through my work with BMORECaucus, I have been able to support initiatives like Black Lives Matter at School Week of Action<sup>2</sup>, a week of educational and social activities that work to understand how we can better support Black students, educators, and families.

I would be remiss if I did not mention my involvement in the Baltimore City Association of School Psychologists (BCASP), an independent organization that represents and advocates for school psychologists in my district. Through BCASP, I have had the opportunity to build and nurture relationships with school psychologists in my district. BCASP provides mentorship, social and volunteer opportunities, and a platform for school psychologists to advocate for our role in the district. Through BCASP, I have supported two colleagues in testifying before the local school board on issues related to our scope of practice, an antidiscrimination policy for transgender and gender nonconforming students, and a proposed teacher evaluation system.

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<sup>2</sup> Black Lives Matter at School Week of Action is a nationwide movement, find more information about how to support the initiative in your community at <https://blacklivesmatteratschool.com/>

## **Describe a challenge that you have faced in your early career, and how you handled it. What advice do you have for other early career school psychologists with similar challenges?**

One challenge that I face in my practice is feeling like the tools I have been trained to use are not designed to actually improve the lives or educational outcomes of the students I work with. I have struggled with feeling complicit in continuing to use interventions, assessments, and programs that are not designed for the populations I work with, or worse, like intelligence testing, were designed to reinforce racist beliefs about intellectual capabilities. We are faced with an abundance of intervention programs that are designed to extract behavioral compliance, rather than supporting educators in relationship building. We latch onto good ideas like trauma-informed classrooms, restorative practices, and social justice, and then we water them down so they have little chance of actually disrupting the inequitable practices and principles that are the foundation of our education system. My district is like many that has begun to prioritize equity on paper, but has done little to bring these policies to life in a way that substantially changes the day-to-day experiences of my students.

One way I have begun to counteract this challenge is by building connections with educators in my district, folks in Baltimore City, and scholars and researchers via social media who understand how important and necessary it is that we bring a critical eye to our current practices and evaluate whether our work is contributing to or disrupting traditional systems of power and privilege. I have made connections with educators who intentionally incorporate antiracist and antibias principles into their daily practice, something that informs my work and inspires me to educate myself and those around me. I have made valuable connections with scholars in housing segregation and public health who have helped me understand that issues of equity in our current education system can be traced back generations to redlining and government sanctioned segregation across the United States. School psychologists like Dr. Byron McClure—who is working to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline through his research into culturally relevant social-emotional learning curriculum—inspire me to keep agitating for programs and interventions that are designed for and with my students in mind. A mentor of mine, Dr. Sherrie Proctor, encourages me to share what I am working on to a broad audience understanding that all it takes is one voice encouraging you to find the confidence to try something different. I feel as if I could go on and on naming school psychologists and educators who support and encourage me daily in this work! The community of school psychologists who are actively working to embody the principles of social justice is growing daily, and I am excited more and more practitioners and scholars are prioritizing this work.

## **What specific aspects of NASP membership and involvement have impacted or benefited you in your career thus far? Why is membership in NASP important to you?**

My NASP membership has benefited me in so many ways. Through NASP, I maintain an invaluable connection to practitioners and researchers across the field who are working to change our profession from the inside. Having access to resources that help me in my professional learning and that I can share with others is extremely helpful when I am advocating for expanding our role in schools. NASP resources have helped me when advocating for school psychologists within contract negotiations at my local teacher union or when preparing testimony to be given before our local school board on a policy that impacts school psychologists. NASP has helped me foster relationships with school psychologists across states, finding a unique community on social media where we can discuss openly and honestly where we want to see the field progress over the lifetime of our careers. I am grateful that NASP supports and encourages this dialogue and has made space at conferences and in official NASP publications for us all to share our viewpoints.