

## School Psychologists: Improving Student and School Outcomes

Achieving excellence in education requires that every student is ready to learn and every teacher is empowered to teach. School psychologists work with students, educators, and families to support the academic achievement, positive behavior, and mental wellness of all students, especially those who struggle with barriers to learning. School psychologists help schools and families address some of our biggest challenges in education: improving and individualizing instruction to close the achievement gap; increasing graduation rates and preventing dropouts; creating safe, positive school climates and preventing violence; providing meaningful accountability; and strengthening family–school partnerships (National Association of School Psychologists [NASP], 2020b).

School psychologists have extensive training in assessment, progress monitoring, instruction, child development and psychology, consultation, counseling, crisis response, program evaluation, and data collection and analysis. Their training is specific to applying this expertise within the school context, both general education and special education, and includes extensive knowledge in school systems and law (NASP 2020a).

School psychologists are a critical part of the school team that ensures quality, genuinely accessible education for all students. This is one of our nation’s most important responsibilities and wisest investments. Services that lower barriers to learning and effective teaching are not ancillary to this mission but rather are central to the supportive educational process necessary to prepare all of America’s children for academic success, healthy development, and responsible citizenship.

NASP’s *Ready to Learn, Empowered to Teach: Guiding Principles for Effective Schools and Successful Students* (2020b) foundational policy document recommends that educational policies and practices be led by a series of guiding principles:

1. Review, evaluate, and reconstruct or replace existing school structures, policies, and procedures that lead to inequitable outcomes.
2. Combine high expectations for all students with high-quality instruction across a well-rounded and culturally responsive curriculum for general and special education students.
3. Create positive school climates that balance physical and psychological safety for all students.
4. Provide access to comprehensive school-based mental and behavioral health services and ensure adequate staffing levels of appropriately trained school employed mental health professionals.
5. Increase family and community engagement to support student success.

6. Create systems that support the recruitment and retention of properly trained and prepared professionals that reflect the diversity of the school community.
7. Create accountability systems that use a broad set of measures to inform specific actions that improve school quality and provide an understanding of how specific outcomes were achieved.

Following are examples of how school psychologists support these principles, and how their services link to research and policies regarding improved outcomes for students.

### **Improved Instruction and Learning (*Ready to Learn*, Guiding Principles 1, 2, and 6)**

- School psychologists work with teachers to motivate all students to engage in learning. Interventions that foster students' engagement in school have been shown to reduce high school dropout (Ecker-Lyster & Niileksela, 2016; Wang & Fredricks, 2014) and improve academic performance (Dotterer & Lowe, 2011; Galla et al., 2014).
- School psychologists work with students and their families as part of a multidisciplinary team to evaluate eligibility for special education services and to design interventions<sup>1,2</sup>, and research has revealed that the strategies they employ produce substantial positive impact on student outcomes (Brock & Carter, 2017; Gillies, 2014; Movahedazarhouli, 2021).
- School psychologists work with teachers to design and implement academic and behavioral interventions<sup>3,4</sup>, and interventions using positive behavior supports have been shown to improve academic performance and decrease behavior problems (Bradshaw et al., 2012; Pas et al., 2019; Waasdorp et al., 2012).
- School psychologists provide instructional consultation for other educators on strategies and interventions for remedying barriers to learning<sup>5,6</sup>, and evidence has shown that supporting teacher-reflective activities enables their teaching skills to grow and, subsequently, to improve student outcomes (Briere et al., 2015; Dufrene et al., 2012; Newman et al., 2014).

### **Supporting Healthy Successful Students (*Ready to Learn*, Guiding Principles 3 and 4)**

- School psychologists work with administrators to design, implement, and garner support for comprehensive school mental health programming<sup>7,8</sup>, and school mental health programs have been shown to improve educational outcomes by reducing out-of-school suspensions, increasing promotions to the next grade level (Kang-Yi et al., 2013), decreasing behavior problems (Wolpert et al., 2011), decreasing absences, decreasing discipline referrals, and increasing test scores (Davis et al., 2014; Durlak et al., 2011).
- School psychologists work with students and their families to support students' social, emotional, and behavioral health<sup>9,10</sup>, and research has shown that students who receive this type of support achieve better academically in school (Becker et al., 2014; Durlak et al., 2011; Korpershoek et al., 2016). The more frequent the exposure to social-emotional support, the greater the effect on academic achievement (Zhai et al., 2015).
- School psychologists promote development of children's communication and social skills, problem solving, anger management, self-regulation, self-determination, and optimism<sup>11</sup>, and research has shown that children's developmental competence is integral to their academic competence (Deighton et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2015).
- School psychologists work with parents to encourage effective parenting and discipline strategies<sup>12,13</sup>, and there is substantial research evidence for the efficacy of interventions designed to prevent the

development of aggressive behavior, mental health problems, and related difficulties (Herd et al., 2014; Tellegen & Sanders, 2013).

### **Creating Safe, Positive School Climates (*Ready to Learn*, Guiding Principle 3)**

- School psychologists work with teachers and administrators to create classroom environments and school climates that are conducive to learning<sup>14,15</sup>, and research has shown that improving school climate is associated with increases in student academic performance, executive function, and brain development (O'Malley et al., 2015; Piccolo et al., 2019; Reynolds et al., 2017) and reduced victimization (Moore et al., 2018).
- School psychologists work with administrators to promote school policies and practices that ensure the safety of all students by reducing school violence, bullying, and harassment<sup>16,17</sup>. Services provided by school psychologists support virtually every area of the lives of students, including school safety (Cornell et al., 2018; Hughes et al., 2017; Kull et al., 2016).
- School psychologists work with administrators to respond to crises by providing leadership, direct services, and coordination with needed community services<sup>18,19</sup>, and research has revealed that school staff rate the crisis intervention services provided by school psychologists as very important (Eklund et al., 2018; Kelly, 2018; Nekvasil & Cornell, 2015).

### **Strengthening Family–School Partnerships (*Ready to Learn*, Guiding Principle 5)**

- School psychologists work with students and their families to enhance home–school collaboration<sup>20,21</sup>, and research has demonstrated the power of family–school partnerships to positively impact children's school success (Castro et al., 2015; Garbacz et al., 2018; Ma et al., 2016; Sailor & McCart, 2014) and their general well-being throughout development and adulthood (Bui & Rush, 2016; Hayakawa et al., 2016; Toren & Seginer, 2015).
- School psychologists work with students and their families to identify and address learning and behavior problems that interfere with school success<sup>22,23</sup>, and school-based behavioral consultation has been shown to yield positive results such as increasing teachers' use of behavior management strategies (Briere et al., 2015) and remediating academic and behavior problems for children and reducing referrals for psychoeducational assessments (Garbacz & McIntyre, 2016; Pearrow et al., 2019).
- School psychologists participate in early intervention programs designed to provide parents with knowledge of child development and how to keep children healthy and safe<sup>24,25</sup>. Early intervention programs targeting at-risk students have been shown to reduce special education referrals and placement, suspension, grade retention, and disciplinary referrals (Fien et al., 2015; Houck et al., 2016; Lovett et al., 2017; Okonofua et al., 2016).
- School psychologists work to enhance understanding and acceptance of diverse cultures and backgrounds and to promote culturally competent practice<sup>26,27</sup>, and there is considerable evidence that failing to address cultural and linguistic differences can negatively impact assessment activities and students' performance on achievement tests (Banerjee, 2016; Blake et al., 2016; Byrd, 2016).

### **Improving Assessment and Accountability (*Ready to Learn*, Guiding Principles 1 and 7)**

- School psychologists work with administrators to collect and analyze data related to school improvement, student outcomes, and accountability requirements<sup>28,29</sup>, thus helping schools meet legal requirements established by the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004.

- School psychologists work with teachers to design and implement student progress monitoring systems<sup>30,31</sup>, and school staff rate as very important the assessment, consultation, counseling, and behavior management services provided by school psychologists (Augustyniak et al., 2016; Splett et al., 2013).
- School psychologists work with teachers and administrators to collect and analyze data on risk and protective factors related to student outcomes<sup>32,33</sup>, and there is evidence that addressing these factors in schools promotes children’s well-being and resilience (Mihalec-Adkins & Cooley, 2019; Griffiths et al., 2019; Lansford et al., 2016).

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> *The Professional Standards of the National Association of School Psychologists* (NASP, 2020), Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services, Domain 1—Data-based Decision Making, Domain 2—Consultation and Collaboration, and Domain 7—Family, School, and Community Collaboration. Adopted by the NASP Leadership Assembly, May 2020.

<sup>2</sup> NASP Position Statement: *Identification of Students with Specific Learning Disabilities* (2011).

<sup>3</sup> *The Professional Standards of the National Association of School Psychologists* (NASP, 2020), Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services, Domain 2—Consultation and Collaboration, Domain 3—Academic Interventions and Instructional Supports, and Domain 4—Mental and Behavioral Health Services and Interventions. Adopted by the NASP Leadership Assembly, May 2020.

<sup>4</sup> NASP Position Statement: *School Psychologists' Involvement in Assessment* (2016).

<sup>5</sup> *The Professional Standards of the National Association of School Psychologists* (NASP, 2020), Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services, Domain 2—Consultation and Collaboration, Domain 3—Academic Interventions and Instructional Supports, and Domain 4—Mental and Behavioral Health Services and Interventions. Adopted by the NASP Leadership Assembly, May 2020.

<sup>6</sup> NASP Position Statement: *Ensuring High Quality, Comprehensive, and Integrated Specialized Instructional Support* (2016).

<sup>7</sup> *The Professional Standards of the National Association of School Psychologists* (NASP, 2020), Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services, Domain 2—Consultation and Collaboration, Domain 4—Mental and Behavioral Health Services and Interventions, and Domain 10—Legal, Ethical, and Professional Practice. Adopted by the NASP Leadership Assembly, May 2020.

<sup>8</sup> NASP Position Statements: *The Importance of Mental and Behavioral Health Services for Children and Adolescents* (2015) and *Ensuring High Quality, Comprehensive, and Integrated Specialized Instructional Support* (2016).

<sup>9</sup> *The Professional Standards of the National Association of School Psychologists* (NASP, 2020), Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services, Domain 2—Consultation and Collaboration, Domain 7—Family, School, and Community Collaboration, and Domain 8—Equitable Practices for Diverse Student Populations. Adopted by the NASP Leadership Assembly, May 2020.

<sup>10</sup> NASP Position Statements: *School—Family Partnering to Enhance Learning: Essential Elements and Responsibilities* (2019) and *Effective Parenting: Positive Support for Families* (2014).

<sup>11</sup> *The Professional Standards of the National Association of School Psychologists* (NASP, 2020), Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services, Domain 4—Mental and Behavioral Health Services and Interventions and Domain 8—Equitable Practices for Diverse Student Populations. Adopted by the NASP Leadership Assembly, May 2020.

<sup>12</sup> *The Professional Standards of the National Association of School Psychologists* (NASP, 2020), Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services, Domain 2—Consultation and Collaboration, Domain 4—Mental and Behavioral Health Services and Interventions, and Domain 7—Family, School, and Community Collaboration. Adopted by the NASP Leadership Assembly, May 2020.

<sup>13</sup> NASP Position Statement: *Effective Parenting: Positive Support for Families* (2014).

<sup>14</sup> *The Professional Standards of the National Association of School Psychologists* (NASP, 2020), Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services, Domain 2—Consultation and Collaboration and Domain 5—School-Wide Practices to Promote Learning. Adopted by the NASP Leadership Assembly, May 2020.

<sup>15</sup> NASP Position Statements: *School Violence Prevention* (2015) and *Safe and Supportive Schools for LGBTQ+ Youth* (2017)

<sup>16</sup> *The Professional Standards of the National Association of School Psychologists* (NASP, 2020), Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services, Domain 2—Consultation and Collaboration, Domain 5—School-Wide Practices to Promote



Learning and Domain 6—Services to Promote Safe and Supportive Schools. Adopted by the NASP Leadership Assembly, May 2020.

<sup>17</sup> NASP Position Statements: *Ensuring High Quality, Comprehensive, and Integrated Specialized Instructional Support Services* (2016) and *School Violence Prevention* (2015).

<sup>18</sup> *The Professional Standards of the National Association of School Psychologists* (NASP, 2020), Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services, Domain 2—Consultation and Collaboration, Domain 5—School-Wide Practices to Promote Learning, and Domain 6—Services to Promote Safe and Supportive Schools. Adopted by the NASP Leadership Assembly, May 2020.

<sup>19</sup> NASP Position Statements: *Ensuring High Quality, Comprehensive, and Integrated Specialized Instructional Support Services* (2016) and *School Violence Prevention* (2016).

<sup>20</sup> *The Professional Standards of the National Association of School Psychologists* (NASP, 2020), Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services, Domain 2—Consultation and Collaboration, Domain 7—Family, School, and Community Collaboration, and Domain 8—Equitable Practices for Diverse Student Populations. Adopted by the NASP Leadership Assembly, May 2020.

<sup>21</sup> NASP Position Statement: *School—Family Partnering to Enhance Learning: Essential Elements and Responsibilities* (2019).

<sup>22</sup> *The Professional Standards of the National Association of School Psychologists* (NASP, 2020), Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services, Domain 2—Consultation and Collaboration, Domain 3—Academic Interventions and Instructional Supports, Domain 4—Mental and Behavioral Health Services and Interventions, Domain 7—Family, School, and Community Collaboration, and Domain 8—Equitable Practices for Diverse Student Populations. Adopted by the NASP Leadership Assembly, May 2020.

<sup>23</sup> NASP Position Statements: *Effective Parenting: Positive Support for Families* (2014) and *School Psychologists' Involvement in Assessment* (2016).

<sup>24</sup> *The Professional Standards of the National Association of School Psychologists* (NASP, 2020), Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services, Domain 6—Services to Promote Safe and Supportive Schools and Domain 7—Family, School, and Community Collaboration. Adopted by the NASP Leadership Assembly, May 2020.

<sup>25</sup> NASP Position Statement: *Effective Parenting: Positive Support for Families* (2016).

<sup>26</sup> *The Professional Standards of the National Association of School Psychologists* (NASP, 2020), Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services, Domain 7—Family, School, and Community Collaboration and Domain 8—Equitable Practices for Diverse Student Populations. Adopted by the NASP Leadership Assembly, May 2020.

<sup>27</sup> NASP Position Statement: *Prejudice, Discrimination, and Racism* (2019).

<sup>28</sup> *The Professional Standards of the National Association of School Psychologists* (NASP, 2020), Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services, Domain 1—Data-Based Decision Making, Domain 9—Research and Evidence-Based Practice, and Domain 10—Legal, Ethical, and Professional Practice. Adopted by the NASP Leadership Assembly, May 2020.

<sup>29</sup> NASP Position Statements: *School Psychologists' Involvement in Assessment* (2016).

<sup>30</sup> *The Professional Standards of the National Association of School Psychologists* (NASP, 2020), Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services, Domain 1—Data-Based Decision Making, Domain 2—Consultation and Collaboration, and Domain 9—Research and Evidence-Based Practice. Adopted by the NASP Leadership Assembly, May 2020.

<sup>31</sup> NASP Position Paper: *Identification of Students with Specific Learning Disabilities* (2011).

<sup>32</sup> NASP Position Statement: *Ensuring High Quality, Comprehensive, and Integrated Specialized Instructional Support Services* (2016).

<sup>33</sup> *The Professional Standards of the National Association of School Psychologists* (NASP, 2020), Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services, Domain 1—Data-Based Decision Making, Domain 2—Consultation and Collaboration, and Domain 9—Research and Evidence-Based Practice. Adopted by the NASP Leadership Assembly, May 2020.

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