Psychological Evaluations: What Every Principal Should Know

Sometimes student psychological evaluations are necessary and appropriate—and sometimes they are not. Here’s help in knowing how and when to conduct them.

By Andrea Canter

Psychological evaluations conducted by school-based or community professionals can be invaluable tools in understanding and addressing the learning needs of individual students. When conducted, interpreted, and reported in a manner that accurately and fairly describes student needs, such evaluations can positively affect a student’s educational career. Sometimes, however, evaluations are conducted for the wrong reasons with inappropriate methods, and with little regard for how the results will be used by parents and school personnel. Reports of such evaluations often end up in a file drawer, having provided little or no information to assist school personnel. Even competent psychological evaluations, if ignored or misunderstood, can lead to serious discord between parents and school personnel.

School personnel should emphasize planning the evaluation should remember that parents (and students) often feel some anxiety surrounding a referral for evaluation. They may be reluctant to give consent or participate for fear that the student will be labeled as crazy—or feel confusion or suspicion about the process and a possible change in placement. These issues are likely to be exacerbated when the family has cultural or linguistic differences. All school personnel should emphasize in a culturally appropriate manner that psychological evaluations are one of a number of methods used to help support the student’s successful learning and development. Eliciting the full support of parents and students is not only required by law in terms of “informed consent,” but will greatly enhance the effectiveness of the process.

What Are the Limitations of Psychological Evaluations?

It is important to recognize what psychological evaluations do and do not provide. They can provide estimates of ability and document the presence or absence of both positive and negative characteristics. However, evaluations seldom provide insight regarding why certain characteristics or problems exist, which usually requires a much broader set of information than what is gleaned from a psychological evaluation alone. Depending on personnel availability, some requests for evaluation might be impossible or inappropriate for the school system to honor and resources in the community might be recommended. For example, parents might seek evaluation to assist with college admissions or eligibility. In educational training after graduation, which are not directly related to the provision of a K–12 education.

What Procedures Are Used?

Psychologists use different assessment procedures, or combinations of procedures, depending upon the reason for the evaluation. In the case of special education evaluations, some procedures are required by law to determine eligibility or to determine if eligibility is related to a student’s challenging behavior, such as using measures of ability and achievement to identify a learning or cognitive disability. Generally, psychologists’ evaluation procedures fall into the following categories:

- Standardized tests: Psychologists often use standardized tests of various abilities to complete an individual’s performance to an appropriate peer group. These tests are developed and “normed” under standard conditions—using prescribed instructions, materials, and scoring to ensure reliable and valid comparisons. Scores are generally provided as a standard score or percentile rank. Some common examples include the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC) and the Woodcock Johnson Psycho-Educational Battery.

- Rating scales: Rating scales to assess the presence or frequency of certain behaviors or skills are dependent on the perceptions of the rater, thus the psychologist’s report should note who provided the ratings and describe his or her relationship to the student. The rater must be very familiar with the student to provide useful information, and using multiple raters helps reduce biased perceptions. Ideally the rating scales are normed to similar student populations as results indicate if a student’s skill, behavior, or emotional status is “typical” or significantly different from peer groups. Examples of commonly used—and sometimes included in the Behavior Assessment System for Children (BASC) and Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scales.

Self-report scales: Self-report scales are often used in conjunction with teacher or parent rating scales and frequently have been normed. It can be useful to compare how students perceive themselves relative to how others perceive them. The BASC, for example, includes a self-report scale. Observations: Psychologists can gather information about students’ learning and behavior by directly observing them in familiar, comfortable settings, such as during class or social interactions. Observations not only what a student is doing, but how others in the setting interact with him or her. Results might be reported as percentiles of intervals observed (e.g., attending to tasks for the value of results. How accurately and fairly describes a student’s needs, such evaluations can positively affect a student’s educational career. Sometimes, however, evaluations are conducted for the wrong reasons with inappropriate methods, and with little regard for how the results will be used by parents and school personnel. Reports of such evaluations often end up in a file drawer, having provided little or no information to assist school personnel. Even competent psychological evaluations, if ignored or misunderstood, can lead to serious discord between parents and school personnel.

A Psychological Evaluation

A psychological evaluation is a set of assessment procedures administered by a licensed psychologist or credentialed school psychologist to obtain information about a student’s learning, behavior, or mental health. Evaluations can be requested by parents, school personnel, or students who are of majority age. School psychologists most often conduct evaluations as part of the special education team’s evaluation to determine eligibility for special education services; however, they might also conduct evaluations to help develop instructional or behavior plans for students, to identify significant mental health concerns, or to determine eligibility for gifted programs or school readiness.

In the context of special education, evaluations can only be conducted according to “due process” procedures—rules regarding notifying parents of minor students of the need for an evaluation, inviting parents to a planning meeting, and obtaining the parent’s consent for the evaluation. Outside of special education, any psychological evaluation also requires parent consent.

Students who have reached the age of majority take on these roles and must be included in planning the evaluation and give their own consent. Staff members who are involved in planning the evaluation should remember that parents (and students) often feel some anxiety surrounding a referral for evaluation. They may be reluctant to give consent or participate for fear that the student will be labeled as crazy—or feel confusion or suspicion about the process and a possible change in placement. These issues are likely to be exacerbated when the family has cultural or linguistic differences. All school personnel should emphasize in a culturally appropriate manner that psychological evaluations are one of a number of methods used to help support the student’s successful learning and development. Eliciting the full support of parents and students is not only required by law in terms of “informed consent,” but will greatly enhance the effectiveness of the process.

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The Psychologist’s Report

The psychologist’s evaluation report will vary to some degree depending on the referral issues and procedures used. However, all evaluation reports should include:

- A statement of the primary purpose of the assessment
- A brief summary of relevant background (significant factors in school or health history, previous services, and evaluations)
- A list of procedures used in the current evaluation
- A statement noting any limitations of the assessment (such as cautious due to breach of standardized procedures, limited English proficiency, cultural variables, etc.)
- A summary of the results of all procedures relative to the referral questions, including general statements about performance on standardized tests and summaries of information obtained from other types of assessments
- A discussion of the meaning of these results in the context of any other assessments (such as academic and vocational measures administered by other team members) as related to the referral questions
- Summary statements providing answers to referral questions
- Recommendations relevant to referral questions (e.g., special services, instructional modifications, and behavior management strategies).

Consulting with Parents

When consulting with parents, principals must take into account a number of factors that can influence the reliability or validity of evaluation results. The psychologist typically will summarize key information obtained through the interview, as well as relevant information learned by interviewing others who know the student well—usually teachers and parents.

Appropriate Requests

Consulting with Parents

Administrators typically do not communicate evaluation results directly to parents. The school psychologist and other team members usually provide a written and verbal report and should be available to answer questions and clarify information. In some cases, parents may request copies of records that alter the interpretation of the results. Usually, the most appropriate course of action is to allow parents to document their objections or conduct an additional evaluation to resolve concerns. Special education regulations provide for documenting dissenting opinions and considering second opinions.

What Is an Evaluation Approach?

Gaining pressure on students from high-stakes tests and intense competition to get into college have generated a corresponding increase in requests from parents for psychological evaluations, most often as a means toward qualifying for accommodations on standardized and entrance tests (e.g., modifications such as untimed tests or individualized administration). Because many tests allow (or must provide) accommodations for students with disabilities such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or learning disabilities, parents may seek evaluations hoping to document a qualifying condition. Special education rules generally require teams to respond when parents or teachers request an evaluation to determine if a child has a disability. However, such requests are often made regarding students for whom no previous concerns have been expressed and who are earning passing grades but who attain lower-than-expected or -desired test scores. Although it is legal to refuse a parent request in many situations, it can be difficult. School personnel can minimize unnecessary assessments and help parents and the student by listening to the parents’ concerns, discussing the limitations of evaluations, suggesting more constructive ways to help their child, and, if warranted, recommending agencies that might conduct such assessments (usually for a fee) or provide consultation regarding realistic expectations (see figure 1). Although psychological evaluations are not likely to resolve concerns include:

- Retention and promotion.
- Although psychological evaluations can provide useful information for designing remedial instruction and establishing appropriate expectations, they are not designed to assess the potential effects of retention or promotion.
- Graduation exit exams. Concerns about academic failure should be based on more than low scores on graduation tests and addressed through other school services.
- Social service and postsecondary programs. Students may request an evaluation to qualify for their child for social services, postsecondary programs, or college admission. Although an evaluation may be helpful in making an appropriate request, few public schools have sufficient funding and staffing to justify evaluations that do not contribute to the current school program.

Summary

Psychological evaluations are an everyday part of a school’s student support system. When administrators understand the purpose, strengths, and limitations of these procedures while holding their expectations for their value, they are better prepared to support students, collaborate with families, and head off contentious or even litigious confrontations. Evaluators and parents can consider the postsecondary problem, but their wise and selective application can add a positive, constructive dimension to effective school management.