

School Psychologists: Improving Student and School Outcomes

Achieving excellence in education for the 21st Century 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 (NASP, 2008).

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 also includes extensive knowledge in school systems and law (NASP 2010a, 2010b).

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 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* (2008) foundational policy document recommends that educational policies and practices be led by a series of guiding principles. Specifically, the five *Ready to Learn, Empowered to Teach* guiding principles call for providing:

1. Comprehensive curricula matched with individualized instruction.
2. Sufficient student support services to address barriers to learning for all students on a continuum of care that engages families and community providers.
3. Comprehensive accountability and progress monitoring measures that provide a valid picture of student and school functioning.
4. Professional development and supports for teachers and other educators necessary for instructional excellence.
5. Federal leadership and school-based research to promote effective services that support the whole child in the learning context.

Following are examples of how school psychologists support these principles, and how their services link to research and policies regarding improved outcomes for students. These examples address the priorities identified by the U.S. Department of Education for the reauthorization of the Elementary and

Improved Instruction and Learning (*Ready to Learn*, Guiding Principles 1 & 4)

- School psychologists work with teachers to motivate all students to engage in learning, and interventions that foster students' engagement in school have been shown to reduce high school dropout (Reschly & Christenson, 2006; Sinclair, Christenson, Evelo, & Hurley, 1998) and improve academic performance (Battistich, Schaps, & Wilson, 2004; Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming, & Hawkins, 2004).
- 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^{1,2}, and research has revealed that the strategies they employ produce substantial positive impact on student outcomes (Forness, 2001).
- School psychologists work with teachers to design and implement academic and behavioral interventions^{3,4}, and interventions using positive behavior supports have been shown to improve academic performance and decrease behavior problems (Caldarella, Shatzer, Gray, Young, & Young, 2011; Luiselli, Putnam, Handler, & Feinberg, 2005; Waasdorp, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2012).
- School psychologists provide instructional consultation for other educators on strategies and interventions for remedying barriers to learning^{5,6}, and evidence has shown that supporting teacher-reflective activities enables their teaching skills to grow and, subsequently, to improve student outcomes (Rosenfield, Silva, & Gravois, 2008).

Supporting Healthy Successful Students (*Ready to Learn*, Guiding Principle 2)

- School psychologists work with administrators to design, implement, and garner support for comprehensive school mental health programming^{7,8}, 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, Mandell, & Hadley, 2013), decreasing behavior problems (Wolpert et al., 2011), decreasing absences, decreasing discipline referrals, and increasing test scores (President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health, 2003).
- School psychologists work with students and their families to support students' social, emotional, and behavioral health^{9,10}, and research has shown that students who receive this type of support achieve better academically in school (Bierman et al., 2010; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Fleming et al., 2005).
- School psychologists promote development of children's communication and social skills, problem solving, anger management, self-regulation, self-determination, and optimism^{11,12}, and research has shown that children's developmental competence is integral to their academic competence (Masten et al., 2005).
- School psychologists work with parents to encourage effective parenting and discipline strategies^{13,14}, and there is substantial research evidence for the effectiveness of interventions designed to prevent the development of aggressive and antisocial behavior and related problems (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2009).

Creating Safe, Positive School Climates (*Ready to Learn*, Guiding Principle 2)

- School psychologists work with teachers and administrators to create classroom environments and school climates that are conducive to learning^{15,16}, and research has shown that improving school climate is associated with increases in student performance in reading, writing, and mathematics, both in low- and high-performing schools (Hanson, Austin, & Lee-Bayha, 2004; Spier, Cai, & Osher, 2007; Spier, Cai, Osher, & Kendziora, 2007).
- 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^{17,18}, and services provided by school psychologists support virtually every area of the lives of students, including school safety (Bear & Minke, 2006; Brock, Lazarus, & Jimerson, 2002).
- School psychologists work with administrators to respond to crises by providing leadership, direct services, and coordination with needed community services^{19,20}, and research has revealed that school staff rate the crisis intervention services provided by school psychologists as very important (Watkins, Crosby, & Pearson, 2007).

Strengthening Family–School Partnerships (*Ready to Learn*, Guiding Principle 2)

- School psychologists work with students and their families to enhance home–school collaboration^{21,22}, and research has demonstrated the power of family–school partnerships to positively impact children’s school success (Christenson, 2004) and their general well-being into adulthood (Reynolds et al., 2007).
- School psychologists work with students and their families to identify and address learning and behavior problems that interfere with school success^{23,24}, and school-based behavioral consultation has been shown to yield positive results such as remediating academic and behavior problems for children and reducing referrals for psychoeducational assessments (MacLeod, Jones, Somer, & Havey, 2001).
- School psychologists participate in early intervention programs designed to provide parents with knowledge of child development and how to keep children healthy and safe^{25,26}, and early intervention programs targeting at-risk students have been shown to reduce special education referrals and placement, suspension, grade retention, and disciplinary referrals (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2000).
- School psychologists work to enhance understanding and acceptance of diverse cultures and backgrounds and to promote culturally competent practice^{27,28}, and there is considerable evidence that failing to address cultural and linguistic differences can negatively impact assessment activities and students’ performance on achievement tests (Ortiz, 2008).

Improving Assessment and Accountability (*Ready to Learn*, Guiding Principle 3)

- School psychologists work with administrators to collect and analyze data related to school improvement, student outcomes, and accountability requirements^{29,30}, thus helping schools meet legal requirements established by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004.
- School psychologists work with teachers to design and implement student progress monitoring systems^{31,32}, and school staff rate as very important the assessment, consultation, counseling, and behavior management services provided by school psychologists (Watkins, Crosby, & Pearson, 2007).

- School psychologists work with teachers and administrators to collect and analyze data on risk and protective factors related to student outcomes^{33,34}, and there is evidence that addressing these factors in schools promotes children’s well-being and resilience (Baker, 2008).

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ENDNOTES

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