Considerations for the Emergence of School Psychologist Assistants
Background and Aim

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP; 2020) recommends a school psychologist to student ratio of 1:500 to provide comprehensive school psychological services. However, recent data suggest the current national average ratio is more than double the recommendation at 1:1,127, despite recent improvements across the United States and its territories (Affrunti, 2023). Consequently, addressing workforce shortages remains a strategic priority for NASP because of the ubiquity and persistence of shortages throughout the country and its territories.

In response to that need, NASP has created numerous tools to identify relevant strategies to remedy shortages through both recruitment and retention (see Shortages in School Psychology: Resource Guide) and led efforts to create two federal grants to support implementation of these strategies (Mental Health Services Professionals Demonstration Grant and School-Based Mental Health Services Grant). Despite the extensive range of strategies available, fully addressing the shortages and increasing the pipeline of qualified school psychologists will take time. In the meantime, anecdotal evidence suggests that a number of schools or districts are developing, posting, or hiring “school psychologist assistant” positions. In this document, we define school psychology assistants as positions without agreed upon educational standards, scope of practice, supervision requirements, or recognition through the state education agency. The aim of this guidance document is to draw attention to this developing trend, elucidate some of the potential benefits and drawbacks of such a strategy, and to offer recommendations and considerations for those who may encounter this locally. Nothing contained in this document should be interpreted as an official position or policy of NASP.

Description and Reasons for Emergence of the Role

Generally, school psychologist assistant positions attempt to offset the workload of a fully credentialed school psychologist through completion of a range of administrative or other related tasks that require less training and experience. There are several reasons for the inception of this role and hiring strategy. First, employing personnel to assist in school psychologist duties puts school administrators directly in control of mitigating the resource problem affecting them. Second, a shortage of credentialed school psychologists puts administrators at risk of having evaluations exceed the federal or state timelines for their completion, making this a possible quick solution to avoid compliance issues. Third, with the lack of any educational and training standards, school administrators may be able to offer reduced pay while having a better chance of attracting a larger applicant pool (including local hires, particularly in rural areas) leading to more success in meeting the imposed timelines.

Potential Benefits

Information garnered from school psychologists who work in districts making use of assistants suggests that these employees take on several different roles, such as scheduling meetings, obtaining permissions, sending out evaluation plans, filling out basic IEP paperwork, and scoring rating scales. One practicing school psychologist informed us that their district’s school psychologist assistant is largely tasked with being in the room with a student while a credentialed, though offsite, school psychologist administers assessments remotely. This relief from clerical tasks could potentially improve productivity and reduce compliance violations.

In addition, school psychologist assistants could free up time for fully credentialed school psychologists to expand their roles and work under a more comprehensive service delivery model. In essence, school psychologists would have the opportunity to maximize their utility by engaging in a variety of different activities within schools, including working with individual students in nonassessment services, collaborating with multidisciplinary teams, consulting with families, supporting prevention efforts, and helping implement and monitor systems-level supports. This could, in turn, reduce the number of
evaluations a school psychologist must complete due to more early intervention services being provided to students.

School psychologists supported by a school psychologist assistant may also experience less stress or burnout, which could improve their retention. Aside from possibly helping manage workload, assistants may reduce the sense of isolation that many school psychologists often feel in their work.

Lastly, school psychologist assistants could open a new pipeline for recruiting school psychologists. School psychologist assistants would be introduced to the career specialty, which could spark a desire to become a fully credentialed school psychologist. One of the few current examples of a state that has taken steps to create a recognized license by the state is Nevada’s introduction of the “ARTERY” framework (Active Recruitment, Training, and Educator Retention to serve our Youth; Dockweiler, 2019). This framework promotes a pathway into the field at different educational points of entry, from high school through graduate school. Those students currently enrolled in undergraduate secondary program could qualify for the “School Psychologist Assistant” credential (currently pending legislative approval), thus gaining valuable experience and helping with work backlogs and unfilled positions while the student finishes training towards full credentialing standards.

Potential Challenges

Perhaps one of the biggest challenges when creating a job is role definition, and this may be a particularly important consideration when a role is created to supplement, not supplant, an existing position. As listed above, school psychologist assistants could help with different tasks; however, there is no nationally agreed upon scope of practice, leaving the role to be arbitrarily defined by district. Currently, the role is unregulated; no state, to our knowledge, has codified the assistant position through a legislative process, and no state educational agency defines the position or provides credentialing for it (see potential future exception of Nevada, above). Relatedly, the assistant role is also undefined in terms of standards for educational preparation, with no known minimum education requirements as of the writing of this document. There are no known undergraduate or graduate programs that specifically prepare one to become a school psychologist assistant. As a result, no actual data exist on the impact of these positions on student outcomes, service delivery, or the field of school psychology as a whole. Currently, inconsistency and ambiguity make for an unclear pathway for such a position.

With little to no agreed upon training standards or accepted credentialing criteria, role creep emerges as another potential challenge. Role creep happens when a person in one circumscribed professional role slowly begins taking on some job duties of a person occupying another profession role. Whereas a school psychologist assistant may start by only scoring certain tests, the role may insidiously expand, from populating objective data into reports to starting to generate more analysis, conclusions, or recommendations than their role (or training and expertise) originally intended. A similar trend could be seen with increasing test administration involvement, attending meetings, and engaging in analysis that goes beyond the individual’s qualifications amid continued shortages of school psychologists. The potential for these complications would likely be correlated with the district’s shortage situation and their backlog of assessment cases.

It is also unclear if the anticipated time-saving benefits, noted above, would be realized. With computer scoring of protocols being common practice, the time savings may be minimal. The fully credentialed school psychologist would still need to maintain oversight and ultimate liability for all assessment results, which means confirming that scores and scoring procedures were done correctly. Relatedly, the overall supervision of the assistant (not just verifying assessment protocols) would likely, in part or in whole, fall on the fully credentialed school psychologist(s) to whom the assistant provides support. Thus, this expanded oversight that becomes incumbent on the fully credentialed school psychologist could negate other areas in which time is saved while increasing potential liability concerns.
Finally, if school psychologist assistants are easier to attract and employ, an unintended consequence may be reducing services. This could come about if districts tamp down their earnest pursuit of fully credentialed school psychologists after attracting many assistants who gradually take on more of the school psychologists’ role, leading to a very limited scope of services available to students. Not only could this add to the ratio disparities over time, but it could also disproportionately affect communities with lower socioeconomic status, which have a higher proportion of minoritized students. Schools in such communities are more likely to have needs for lower pupil to school psychologist ratios. These districts, in particular, would benefit from the many services provided through a well-regulated multitiered model that only a fully credentialed school psychologist would likely hold expertise in.

It is incumbent on practicing school psychologists to be aware of, and involved in, any introduction of assistant roles within their local district to guard against role creep and to continually advocate for the hiring of fully credentialed school psychologists—not assistants—until NASP ratios are met.

Summary and Recommendations

The emergence of school psychologist assistant positions most likely arose out of ongoing workforce shortages in school psychology. Shortages can put enormous strain on schools’ and districts’ abilities to meet federal and state guidelines and to serve the needs of their students, families, and schools in a timely manner. However, quick fixes can exacerbate some of the problems they intend to mitigate, and we have no data on the impact of introducing such a position. Furthermore, school psychologist assistants are not school psychologists, and therefore they do not represent a solution to school psychologist shortages; they instead mostly address a resource shortage.

This document highlights some of the benefits and potential unintended consequences of creating school psychology assistant positions. Should a state pursue such a position, they should, at minimum, clearly articulate qualifications and educational standards, scope of practice, and supervision requirements—all defined through the state education agency with clear input from school psychologists.

School psychologists are in a position to continuously advocate for the importance of hiring credentialed school psychologists in their schools, districts, or cooperatives, to ensure that students and families receive services from those with verifiably adequate training and skills. If school psychologists have questions or concerns about assistant positions emerging in their area, they can contact their state’s NASP delegate, their region’s NASP representative, or a member of the NASP State and National Credentialing Committee.

References


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Please cite as: National Association of School Psychologists. (2024). Considerations for the emergence of school psychologist assistants [Brief].