All children and youth must be ready to learn in order to achieve their best in school and to graduate prepared for college or a career. This preparation requires a public education infrastructure that empowers teachers to teach and prioritizes investments to ensure that schools effectively address the learning, behavioral, social–emotional, and mental health needs of students. When not met, those needs can create barriers to achievement. Furthermore, promoting success and reducing barriers to learning requires sustained access to a comprehensive and rigorous curriculum, high-quality instruction, and comprehensive learning supports within safe and respectful learning environments.

Comprehensive learning supports that integrate academic, social and emotional, behavioral, and mental health needs are most effective when provided through a multitiered system of supports (MTSS). Essential to this system are specialized instructional support personnel who collaborate with other educators, families, and community providers to identify needs and provide appropriate services at the individual, classroom, school, and district-wide levels.

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) recommends the following guiding principles for the development of educational policies:

GUIDING PRINCIPLES
1. Combine high expectations for all students with high-quality instruction across rigorous and comprehensive curricula.
2. Create positive school climates to ensure safe and supportive learning environments for all students.
3. Provide access to comprehensive school-based mental and behavioral health services by ensuring adequate staffing levels of school-employed mental health professionals.
4. Increase family and community engagement to support students’ success.
5. Create systems that support the recruitment and retention of properly trained and prepared professionals.
6. Create accountability systems that reflect a comprehensive picture of all students’ and schools’ performance, inform instruction, and guide school improvement efforts.

Local and state governments must be empowered to construct educational systems that prepare all students for college or a career while also meeting the unique needs of their schools and districts. However, at its core, education is a civil right, and the federal government can, and should, play a critical role in shaping the national education landscape. Indeed, providing a high-quality public education system is one of America’s greatest responsibilities and wisest investments in the nation’s future. NASP believes that education policies that address the whole child and are grounded in evidence-based practices will empower teachers to teach and ensure that every child is ready and able to learn.
The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) believes that all children should have access to a high-quality public education that provides them with the comprehensive skills necessary to be successful in school, at home, and throughout life. Providing a high-quality and effective public education system is the most important investment we can make in our nation’s future, and NASP urges policy makers at all levels to prioritize education policies that meet the needs of the whole child. NASP is the world’s largest professional association of school psychologists, who work with families, teachers, school administrators, and other professionals to support the academic achievement; positive behavior; and social, emotional, and mental health of all students.

Ensuring that all children graduate from high school ready for college or a career requires that every student be ready to learn and every teacher be empowered to teach. To be able to learn, children must come to school each day feeling healthy, safe, welcomed, and supported. All children possess tremendous potential and deserve access to rigorous curricula, high-quality instruction, and comprehensive learning supports within safe and respectful learning environments. Too often, though, students come to school having to manage multiple stressors that can create barriers to learning and teaching and undermine the overall school climate. Left unaddressed, issues such as learning difficulties; poor behavioral, mental, and physical health; cultural and linguistic differences; and socioeconomic or family problems can make teaching difficult and significantly impede students’ success in and out of school. Even the most highly skilled teachers cannot help children achieve their potential unless such barriers are remedied. To effectively reduce these barriers and meet the comprehensive needs of students, teachers must have access to adequate resources and ongoing support from qualified professionals.

The educational environment presents unique opportunities to promote success and wellness, as well as to address learning barriers. However, this opportunity can only be realized when schools commit to providing sustained access to services that support children’s academic growth in tandem with their physical, mental, and behavioral health.

**Ready to Learn, Empowered to Teach**

**Guiding Principles for Effective Schools and Successful Students**

Specialized Instructional Support Personnel

Specialized instructional support personnel include school-employed mental health professionals (school counselors, school psychologists, and school social workers), school nurses, occupational therapists, physical therapists, art therapists, dance/movement therapists, music therapists, speech–language pathologists, and audiologists. These specialized personnel provide and support school-based prevention and intervention services to address barriers to learning, and they work with teachers, administrators, and parents to ensure that all students are successful in school. School-employed mental health professionals have specialized training in meeting the mental and behavioral health needs as well as the learning needs of students.

The term used in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) 2002 reauthorization is *pupil services personnel*, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA) refers to them as *providers of related services*. 
Comprehensive learning supports are most effective when provided through a multitiered system of supports (MTSS) by school-employed mental health professionals (school counselors, school psychologists, and school social workers) and other specialized instructional support personnel. These specially trained professionals help teachers, administrators, and families ensure that students are ready and able to learn.

This document recommends actions to reduce or remove barriers to learning by creating school environments that promote wellness and effectively address the learning, behavioral, social–emotional, and mental health needs of students. These recommendations reflect both decades of research and the experience of a growing number of schools around the country that, using these approaches, are improving their students’ academic and life outcomes. NASP believes that the issues involved are central to the supportive educational process necessary to prepare all of America’s children for academic success, healthy development, and responsible citizenship.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR IMPROVING SCHOOLS

NASP encourages policy makers and education officials at all levels to work with key stakeholders to incorporate the following guiding principles in the development of education policies.

1. **Combine high expectations with high-quality instruction for all students, across rigorous and comprehensive curricula.**

   **Key Policy Objectives:**
   - Provide all students with access to challenging curricula in a diverse range of subjects, including art, music, science, social studies, and physical education.
   - Support the development of social and emotional learning, problem solving, self-control, and conflict-resolution skills that are critical to life success.

   • Ensure that instruction, assessment, and interventions are culturally and linguistically responsive to students’ individual backgrounds and circumstances.
   • Routinely assess individual students’ needs and monitor their progress to make data-based decisions about appropriate interventions and learning.
   • Ensure that all students have access to content that is both developmentally appropriate and academically challenging.
   • Align and ensure the consistency of related principles in federal education laws (IDEA and ESEA).

Research demonstrates that high expectations correlate with high achievement (Hinnant, O’Brien, & Ghazarian, 2009). This holds true across the spectrum of academic and life skills necessary for becoming a healthy, productive, and responsible adult. A commitment to high expectations should extend throughout comprehensive curricula—including math, reading, the sciences and social sciences, foreign languages, and the fine arts—and into physical and mental health and work readiness skills. Rigorous curricula must provide opportunities for students to meaningfully engage with content; teach students how to access and evaluate the validity of information; build the capacity to conceive, develop, test, and communicate diverse ideas; and contribute to the ability to thrive in an increasingly competitive global economy. Schools should also make a sustained commitment to teach students critical life skills, such as social–emotional competency, self-control, problem solving, decision making, and conflict resolution. Strengthening these skills positively affects students’ academic achievement, in terms of both higher standardized test scores and better grades (Bierman et al., 2010; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). These skills are also essential for maintaining positive relationships and success in the workplace.

Comprehensive curricula must be matched with instructional and learning supports that help all students progress toward high standards and meet individual learning needs. Educators need access to the wide body of knowledge available on how to make content more readily accessible to an increasingly diverse student population, including
those with disabilities. Schools also should implement evidence-based screening methods to identify students who are at risk for academic or behavioral difficulties. This screening must be coupled with appropriate interventions and routine monitoring of students’ progress in response to instruction. Ongoing progress monitoring and evaluation are integral to a multitiered framework that allows schools to intervene early in the learning process and provide increasingly intensive and targeted interventions based on students’ needs. Creating an MTSS infrastructure demands that schools have access to qualified specialized instructional support personnel.

A comprehensive MTSS infrastructure also helps to improve continuity across general and special education. Differences between ESEA and IDEA policies have resulted in disjointed learning and teaching systems, in which some students are held to different expectations and exposed to alternative curricula. MTSS can create a cohesive data collection process that shows students’ progress through the curriculum and toward goals set for all students, regardless of whether they are receiving special or general education instruction.

### 2. Create positive school climates to ensure safe and supportive learning environments for all students.

**Key Policy Objectives:**
- Designate resources to help implement evidence-based, school-wide policies and practices that reduce bullying, harassment, violence, and discrimination for all students.
- Employ discipline policies that promote positive behavior, reduce overly punitive disciplinary actions, and incorporate restorative justice practices and other methods of teaching students effective conflict-resolution skills.
- Support continuous and sustainable school safety and crisis prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery capacity that balances physical and psychological safety.
- Establish programs that foster students’ engagement in academic, social, and extracurricular activities.
- Create mechanisms and opportunities to develop supportive relationships between students and caring adults within the school and the community.

Creating safe and supportive conditions for learning is essential to students’ achievement and must be integral to education policy. These conditions—known as a positive school climate—cannot be created overnight. Schools’ and districts’ efforts must be consistent, effective, and sustained. We can foster teachers’ ability to teach and students’ ability to learn when we ensure that all students (a) come to school feeling safe, welcomed, and respected; (b) have a trusting relationship with at least one adult in the school; (c) understand clear academic and behavioral expectations; and (d) see their role as positive members of the school community. Maintaining positive school climates also requires that schools and districts have sufficient time and resources to implement, evaluate, and modify these efforts based on changing needs.

Creating a positive school climate also requires schools to balance physical and psychological safety. Highly restrictive physical safety measures...
alone, such as purchasing a designated program, metal detectors, and armed security personnel, may cause students to feel less safe and more fearful at school (Bachman, Randolph, & Brown, 2011; Bracy, 2011; Schreck & Miller, 2003; Theriot, 2009) and could undermine the learning environment (Beger, 2003; Phaneuf, 2009). In contrast, comprehensive school safety is supported when schools combine reasonable physical security measures, such as visitor check-in procedures and locked doors, with efforts to enhance school climate, improve student engagement, foster respectful and trusting relationships among students and staff, and support overall student success. Critical to this effort is ensuring that safety programming is appropriately integrated with comprehensive mental and behavioral health services. Accordingly, school safety and crisis teams should be multidisciplinary and trained to address the continuum of prevention, planning, response, and recovery, with the latter two building upon ongoing positive behavior supports, risk assessment, safety, and mental health services.

3. Provide access to comprehensive school-based mental and behavioral health services by ensuring adequate staffing levels of school-employed mental health professionals

Key Policy Objectives:
• Encourage school districts to couple academic supports with mental and behavioral health services embedded in an MTSS framework.
• Coordinate services across a continuum of care that integrates families, educators, school-employed mental health providers, and community providers.
• Make a long-term and sustained commitment to align staffing ratios with recommendations generated by national professional organizations to allow for the delivery of a full range of services.

Mental and behavioral health and wellness are critical to children’s and youth’s success in school and life. Mental health is not simply the absence of mental illness but also encompasses social, emotional, and behavioral health; resilience; and the ability to cope with life’s challenges. The learning environment provides the ideal context for wellness promotion, prevention, and intervention, all of which directly affect learning and well-being. Both research and everyday experience show that access to school-based mental health services is linked to students’ improved physical and psychological safety (Bruns, Walrath, Glass-Siegel, & Weist, 2004; Ballard, Sander, Klimes-Dougan, 2014), academic performance, and social–emotional learning, and that such access reduces costly negative outcomes such as risky behaviors, disciplinary incidents, delinquency, dropout, substance abuse, and involvement with the criminal justice system (Aos, Lieb, Mayfield, Miller, & Pennucci, 2004).

Comprehensive mental and behavioral health services are most effective when they are embedded in an MTSS framework. The framework enables schools to promote mental wellness and identify and address problems before they escalate or become chronic. Access to school-employed mental health professionals is essential to the quality and effectiveness of these services. Many students experience ongoing stressors that affect their mental and behavioral health—for example, exposure to community violence, death...
of a loved one, or homelessness or poverty—and they are more likely to seek help if these services are available in schools. School psychologists and other school-employed mental health professionals know the students and staff, understand the culture of the school, and can effectively provide mental and behavioral health services within the context of learning. These professionals are also able to support administrators and teachers by providing consultation and recommending school-wide and classroom-based interventions that support positive behavior and learning.

**The Need for School Mental Services**

One in five students will experience a significant mental health issue in a given year, most of whom will not receive the help they need due to lack of access to care (Merikangas et al., 2010). Of those who do receive help, 70–80% receive mental health services in schools (Farmer, Burns, Philip, Angold, & Costello, 2003; Rones & Hoagwood, 2000).

Students are more likely to seek help if these services are available in schools (Slade, 2002), in part because they spend significant portions of their day there with adults they know and trust.

Mental health issues can impact school climate, which can undermine the learning and sense of well-being of the entire student population. Expanded school mental health services in elementary schools have been found to improve aspects of the school climate (Bruns, Walrath, Glass-Siegel, & Weist, 2004).

Mental and behavioral health problems not only affect students’ learning, but also interfere with long-term development of interpersonal relationships and work-related skills (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine [NRCIM], 2009).

More than two thirds of adolescents in juvenile detention were found to meet diagnostic criteria for at least one psychiatric disorder (Teplin, Abram, McClelland, Dulcan, & Mericle, 2002).

NASP recommends a ratio of 1 school psychologist for every 500–700 students. When staffing ratios are not adequate, these professionals can focus only on the students with the most severe needs, leaving little opportunity for critical prevention and early intervention services. NASP also recommends that this staffing ratio be coupled with effective and collaborative community partnerships to provide services to students with the most significant mental and behavioral health needs and to promote access to community supports beyond the school day. Streamlined collaborative services result in improved outcomes for children, families, and communities; increased positive academic outcomes; and fewer disruptions to the learning environment (Adelman & Taylor, 2006).

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**4. Increase family and community engagement to support student success.**

**Key Policy Objectives:**

- Foster relationships among students, teachers, staff, parents, and families to promote healthy development and address student needs.
- Promote school environments that welcome and encourage family participation and input.
- Provide resources to develop and sustain effective partnerships between schools, families, and community agencies and organizations to enhance and coordinate existing school-based services with the needs of the larger school community.
- Involve families and community stakeholders in school improvement efforts.
- Provide mechanisms for students to easily engage and participate in community activities before or after school.
- Extend supports to include high-quality early childhood programs and after-school programs for at-risk children and youth.

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Education of America’s youth should be viewed as a shared responsibility. Improving schools and ensuring students’ success depend on collaboration among schools, community agencies and organizations, and families. When collaboration is done well, the beneficial effects are seen both within and outside school walls: Students demonstrate more positive attitudes toward school and learning, higher achievement and test scores, improved behavior, improved school attendance, and a reduced need for more intensive services such as special education. Educators report greater job satisfaction and more positive associations with families. Families have a stronger belief in their ability to deal with situations, have better understanding and more positive experiences with educators and schools, communicate with their children more effectively, and better appreciate the important role they play in their children’s...
education. These positive outcomes have been documented across families from diverse cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds (Christenson & Reschly, 2009; Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Thoughtful school–community collaboration should encompass both supplementary services provided during the school day and after-school programs that provide academic support, more intensive mental health services, and enrichment opportunities, such as sports or creative arts programs, job skills programs, peer mentoring, and service learning. Partnerships are most effective with clear memoranda of understanding and an appreciation for the unique contribution each group makes. Establishing a clear understanding not only reduces gaps, redundancy, and conflict, but also reduces stress on families and supports their roles as primary caregivers and decision makers regarding their child’s development. Opportunities for direct family engagement must be culturally and linguistically responsive and must account for family life realities that might impede engagement, such as work schedules, child care, and transportation.

Students, in turn, feel better supported and connected to the wider world when the important adults and systems in their lives are working together and providing them with the opportunity to engage in activities that expand their experiences. For some students, access to sports, clubs, and other activities is a key factor in preventing academic failure, school dropout, and engagement in other risky behaviors. For the many students and families with limited financial resources, schools and districts, in collaboration with community organizations, can provide a consistent source of funding to help students and families with the costs of participating in these activities. This investment is well worth it: We know that improving school connectedness and engagement is associated with significant improvements in reading, writing, and mathematics, as well as reduced problem behaviors (Battistich, Schaps, & Wilson, 2004; Reyes, Brackett, Rivers, White, & Salovey, 2012; Spier et al., 2007).

5. Create systems that support the recruitment and retention of properly trained and prepared professionals.

Key Policy Objectives:
• Provide professional development opportunities for principals, teachers, and specialized instructional support personnel to improve capacity for effective classroom instruction and implementation of school-wide initiatives.
• Develop and provide financial support for policies that allow staff to attend national conferences and other off-campus professional development and networking opportunities.
• Promote efforts to improve teacher wellness, prevent stress and burnout, build a strong sense of community and peer support among school staff, and encourage teacher retention.
• Align credentialing requirements with best practices suggested by professional associations.
• Invest in rigorous leadership development to support the sustainability of school improvement efforts.
• Provide regular opportunities for peer-to-peer consultation, problem solving, assessment, and intervention among teachers, principals, and other specialized instructional support personnel.
• Develop mentoring and induction programs for new and seasoned teachers, principals, and other school staff.

Every child deserves access to high-quality instruction from profession-ready educators and effective leadership by the school principal—the two greatest school-based factors that influence student achievement. Our school systems must ensure that these professionals are properly trained and appropriately credentialed and that they have access to continuous professional development throughout their careers. The same holds true for other school-employed professionals who are integral to effective learning environments, such as specialized instructional support personnel.

Active family engagement leads to students’ more positive attitudes toward school and learning, higher achievement and test scores, improved behavior, improved school attendance, and a reduced need for more intensive services such as special education.
Professional development should include giving teachers and other personnel strategies for monitoring progress; preventing school failure; and implementing specific academic, social–emotional, and behavioral strategies to aid struggling students. The foundational skills of effective educators are built during their initial preparation programs and galvanized over time through career-long mentoring and professional development experiences. Such skills need to be systematically reinforced through leadership support, colleague mentoring, and opportunities for collaborative teamwork that facilitates problem solving and peer-to-peer learning. Professional development should also be targeted to the specific needs of professionals within the school rather than offering only one-size-fits-all training for the staff at large (Gregory, Allen, Mikami, Hafen, & Pianta, 2014). School districts that are able to invest in professional leave for teachers, principals, and specialized instructional support personnel will be better able to incorporate current best practices.

6. Create accountability systems that reflect a comprehensive picture of all students’ and schools’ performance, inform instruction, and guide school improvement efforts.

**Key Policy Objectives:**

- Broaden accountability measures to include multiple methods and indicators of student achievement (including growth models), and indicators related to physical, mental, and behavioral health and wellness.
- Base educational decisions on multiple data sources.
- Include measures of the school environment (e.g., school climate, school safety, family engagement) in accountability systems.
- Ensure that measures used are valid and reliable for all student subpopulations, including students with disabilities.
- Develop accountability systems that produce ongoing data needed to regularly inform instruction, intervention, and school-wide improvement efforts throughout the year.

- Utilize accountability data primarily for the purposes of improvement and identifying areas of need rather than as a metric to administer punitive or disciplinary action.

As stewards of our most important national resource, schools need to be accountable to the public—and especially to families—regarding the quality of instruction and other services provided. However, schools are not one-dimensional in either their purpose or function, and outcome measures should reflect this complexity. Student performance assessments and school accountability systems must move from an overwhelming reliance on standardized testing of student achievement and on high-stakes decision making to the use of multiple indicators of student outcomes. These measures should include both academic achievement and progress toward life goals, along with health, behavior, perceptions of the school environment, and other skills necessary for college or career readiness. Outcomes should be measured by assessing growth over time and by using assessment systems that are valid and reliable for the student population—including culturally and linguistically diverse groups—and for developmental level, geographic region, and the local community. As with individual student progress monitoring, assessment of systemic school improvement efforts should consider academic factors related to school success as well as factors that contribute to positive learning environments, such as connectedness, school safety, and the supports needed by struggling learners. Including measures of parental involvement and community collaboration—both of which markedly contribute to achievement—provides a clearer picture of overall school functioning. Use of comprehensive data in decision making allows school leaders to channel resources into the most cost-effective and sustainable approaches to bolster student success in ways that are most appropriate for the school community.

**GOVERNMENT’S ROLE IN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT**

All children, regardless of where they live, should have access to a high-quality public education guided by the policies described above. Local and state governments must be empowered to construct educational systems that prepare all students for college or a career while meeting the unique needs of their schools and
districts. Education is a civil right, and the federal government can, and should, play a foundational role in shaping the national education landscape. Government at all levels should make sufficient and consistent investments in public education. These investments should help states and districts implement or scale up effective initiatives to improve schools, including helping underserved districts build capacity to implement evidence-based practices; allowing schools, districts, or states to implement and evaluate promising and innovative practices; and enabling and supporting effective research innovation. Federal and state governments should provide the policies, leadership, and guidance needed to promote and sustain educational equity, evidence-based practices, and exemplary efforts to improve our nation’s schools.

OUR MOST IMPORTANT INVESTMENT

Education presents the greatest opportunity that we have to ensure the success of all children and, ultimately, our country. Students struggling with barriers to learning have the ability to succeed and thrive if they are given a quality education and effective academic and social supports. Maintaining a high-quality public education system is one of America’s greatest responsibilities and wisest investments in the nation’s future. NASP believes that education policy addressing the whole child, and grounded in evidence-based practices, will empower teachers to teach and ensure that every child is ready and able to learn.

Assessment Versus Standardized Tests

The terms assessment and standardized test are not synonymous. Concerns with student assessment lie largely with how assessments have been used inappropriately to make high stakes decisions about students, teachers, and overall school quality. When used appropriately, formative and summative assessments (including standardized tests) provide critical data to help teachers align their instruction with student need, help inform school-wide improvement efforts, and allow for the comparison of education reform efforts within and between states.

Education is a civil right, and the federal government can, and should, play a critical role in shaping the national education landscape.

ABOUT SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS AND NASP

The National Association of School Psychologists is the largest organization of school psychologists, representing more than 25,000 practitioners, university professors, researchers, and students in the United States and abroad. NASP promotes children’s healthy learning and development through programs and services that prevent social, academic, and emotional problems.

The broad-based role of school psychologists, as well as the range of competencies they possess, is described in NASP’s Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services (2010). School psychologists have specialized training in school systems, learning, child development, and mental health, as well as expertise in research-based strategies and outcomes evaluation. School psychologists work with parents and educators to do the following:

• improve academic achievement;
• promote positive behavior and mental health;
• support diverse learners;
• create safe, supportive school environments;
• strengthen family-school-community partnerships; and
• improve individual and school-wide assessment and accountability.

Services provided by school psychologists include assessment, prevention and intervention, individual and group counseling, crisis response, consultation, case management, progress monitoring, school-wide needs assessments, and program design and evaluation.

NASP programs and services include materials for families and professionals; advocacy for education and for mental and behavioral health policies; crisis response; and professional standards, development, and resources to promote best practices.

For more information, visit www.nasponline.org.

Available for download at http://www.nasponline.org/readytolearn2015
REFERENCES


RELATED NASP POSITION STATEMENTS

Available at http://www.nasponline.org/position-statements

Appropriate Academic Supports to Meet the Needs of All Students

Appropriate Behavioral, Social, and Emotional Supports to Meet the Needs of All Students

Ensuring High Quality, Comprehensive Pupil Services

HIV/STD Prevention and Wellness Promotion

School–Family Partnering to Enhance Learning: Essential Elements and Responsibilities

School Violence Prevention

RELATED NASP POLICY DOCUMENTS

A Framework for Safe and Successful Schools

http://www.nasponline.org/safe-schools-framework

A Framework for School-Wide Bullying Prevention and Safety

http://www.nasponline.org/bullyingframework

NASP Resolution on the Role of School Psychologists as School Mental and Behavioral Service Providers

http://www.nasponline.org/resolutions/SP-as-MBH-providers

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NASP MISSION

The National Association of School Psychologists empowers school psychologists by advancing effective practices to improve students’ learning, behavior, and mental health.

This policy brief is updated from the original version endorsed by NASP leadership in 2008.