

# NASP *Advocacy*

 *Helping Children Thrive • In School • At Home • In Life*

## Advocating for School Psychology Positions

Considering the unprecedented pandemic that our country currently faces and the resulting economic downturn, school districts are faced with revenue shortfalls and may choose to cut budgets—which could result in removing school psychologist positions.

But the services that school psychologists provide are more critical than ever! School psychologists are uniquely qualified specialized instructional support personnel (SISP) who are members of school teams that support students' ability to learn and teachers' ability to teach. They receive specialized advanced graduate preparation that includes coursework and field experiences relevant to both psychology and education. School psychologists partner with families, teachers, school administrators, and other professionals to create safe, healthy, and supportive learning environments that strengthen connections between home, school, and the community. School psychologists support children, youth, families, and schools through the identification of appropriate, evidence-based educational and mental and behavioral health services for all children and youth; implementation of professional practices that are data driven and culturally responsive; delivery of a continuum of services for children, youth, families, and schools from prevention to intervention and evaluation; and advocacy for the value of school psychological services.

This resource was developed to provide individual school psychologists and state associations with advocacy tips and messages to protect school psychologist positions, now and in the future. In this packet are resources and information on the following topics:

- How to advocate and to whom
  - Tips for working with stakeholders
- Overview of public hearings
  - Tips for state education meetings
  - Tips for local board meetings
- Advocacy at a public meeting
  - Tips for drafting testimony
  - Preparing to speak at a public hearing
  - Sample testimony
- Additional advocacy strategies
  - Tips for using social media
  - Writing, calling, and more
  - Sample advocacy email

- Links to additional resources

## HOW TO ADVOCATE AND TO WHOM

Advocating to protect your position in the building as a school psychologist requires that you know what you want to communicate, how to communicate it, and to whom. Communicating your messages first requires awareness of the key stakeholders able to advance your messaging. Who you need to communicate with may differ based on where decisions are made in your district, but your advocacy will most certainly require outreach to public bodies in your state, such as your local school board and, often, your state legislature. It will also be important for you to identify allies and stakeholders who support your efforts because the old adage is true: There is strength in numbers!

### Tips for Working With Stakeholders

The [NASP Policy Playbook](#) outlines how school psychologists can work with various stakeholders to help advance their messaging. A key component in this process is knowing who the stakeholders are in the profession. Stakeholders are not just elected officials or board members. Your advocacy efforts will be much stronger with other allies supporting you. Possible allies could include: other education professionals in the school building and their associations, unions, parents, and students.

1. **Identify and Research.** Identify stakeholders who will support your goals and know the opposing stakeholders. Be knowledgeable of their involvement with other organizations. Think creatively; you never know who might be willing to support your cause!
2. **Communicate.** When communicating with stakeholders, make sure that your conversation is centered around the presenting issue (i.e., your position). Establish relationships with stakeholders where communication is not based on favors. Communicate with stakeholders and provide them with examples of how you improved school and student outcomes (NASP's [Policy Playbook](#) and [critical issues webpages](#) can help come up with effective key messages). Discuss new ways in which your role as a school psychologist can continue to improve school and student outcomes.
3. **Align.** Aligning your purpose and goals with stakeholders is vital to establishing an effective partnership. Always keep the focus of your efforts in the forefront. Your goal is to maintain your position as a support system for the students and communities you serve as a school psychologist.

## PUBLIC HEARINGS OVERVIEW

Budget and policy decisions that affect practicing school psychologists are discussed, debated, and approved by your local school board, the state board of education, state legislature, or similar policy-making groups, each with varying responsibilities. Hearings on relevant education issues provide an excellent opportunity to present a case for the mental health and educational needs of children, and to attract legislative, media, and public support.

**Spoken testimony by someone knowledgeable in the field of school psychology can be very effective and influential.** Most policy makers do not have the time to learn about many issues in depth and therefore rely on others to provide the information on the ground that helps guide their decisions. School psychologists are presented with a perfect opportunity to use their expertise to educate and guide policy makers. In addition, practitioners (by virtue of their experience) are often able to "breathe life" into messages about how policies actually affect children, conveying a greater sense of urgency than these messages might otherwise possess. Policy makers place a lot of value in stories; conveying how legislation, policy changes, or budget decisions under consideration may affect your day to day work can make a real difference.

Most policy-making bodies, prior to the final adoption of new regulations or laws, are required by law to solicit public comment. **The dates of public meetings, agenda, and requirements for the submission of written comments are all required to be published in advance, by every state, online on the websites of the policy-making body.** Many NASP [state affiliate websites](#) have links to these important sites. Strategies to stay aware of and on top of happenings of specific public bodies are in the section below.

### Tips for Local Board Meetings

Local school boards are where decisions are made that would directly impact school psychology positions at your school and in your district. If you are interested in finding out which topics are up for discussion and staying aware of decisions that may impact you:

- Identify the education policy-making bodies that oversee schools in the community you work in. **Regularly check their website** for statements, agendas, and meeting minutes.
- **Subscribe to receive email notifications** of board meeting agendas and announcements, if available. You can do this on the website of the public body.
- **Identify reporters** in your community who cover the school board and local education policy. Follow them on social media and check for their columns regularly.
- **Join local education social media groups.** The local Parent–Teacher Association, or just an involved group of parents, will often start these. These groups can also be very effective for information sharing.
- Parents of the children you have served can be particularly fierce and effective advocates. There are many examples of school districts threatening to cut a position, and parents have showed up to fight it. Keep this in mind as you develop your advocacy strategy.

For an example of effective advocacy at a local school board meeting, check out what the Nevada Association of School Psychologists (NVASP) organized for School Psychology Awareness Week 2019: [Nevada Finds Its Advocacy Focus for SPAW 2019.](#)

### Tips for State Education Meetings

At the state level, funding flows to districts for target programs that the state has identified as important to improving its statewide education system, or to helping the state's most struggling schools. If you are interested in finding out which topics are up for discussion and staying aware of decisions that may impact you:

- **Track your state legislature's education committees** in both the "House" and "Senate," which will generally oversee education programs and most decisions that relate to school mental health, disability policy, school safety, and more.
  - It may also be useful to track your state's budget/finance committees, which will often decide at what level to fund various education programs.

- You can often subscribe to email alerts from these committees to be updated whenever an agenda is posted or an action is taken.
- Some states also have a statewide board of education. Be sure to research this governing body in your state, identify what purview they have, and stay aware of any meeting agendas or budget impacts on mental health services in schools.

## ADVOCACY AT A PUBLIC HEARING

### Drafting Testimony

Testimony may be presented orally or in writing. Written testimony may be submitted to support an individual's oral testimony or on its own to become part of the documentation compiled for a legislative hearing. Be sure to check with the governing office/agency regarding any specific formal procedure for formatting or submitting your testimony, prior to submitting.

NASP's [Policy Playbook](#) takes a deep dive on how school psychologists can create clear, effective, and memorable messages. Below is a particularly helpful excerpt.

1. **Identify your target audiences.** Tailoring your message to each audience is imperative in getting your concerns across. Your message to the principal will be considerably different from a message to a board member or state association. Be specific and concise.
2. **Know your audience.** Using language consistent with your target audience's knowledge of the issue when communicating your message is important in capturing their interest. Be knowledgeable of their concerns, expectations, and perspectives regarding the issue. Know their likelihood of taking action with you.

If communicating with elected officials or their staff, research their background, including, but not limited to their party affiliation, committee membership, legislative record on similar issues, and issues they advocate for. Information on elected officials is accessible on the state's legislative website, campaign websites, or media outlets through an internet search.

An equally important part in developing your message is preparing to address potentially opposing messages. It is important that you are aware of any opposition that may arise so that it is adequately addressed in your message.

3. **Focus on your objective.** Advocating for your position in the school building as a school psychologist should be the focus of your message.
4. **Be clear and concise.** After you have determined your main point (e.g., school psychologists have specialized training which makes them uniquely qualified to provide services to support the overall mental well-being of all students), state it in the beginning of your message, incorporate it throughout the body of your message, and provide supporting facts.

5. **Structure your message.** To ensure that you get your message across, always include the problem, actionable items, and the benefits to all stakeholders (i.e., teachers, students, families, administrators) that addressing the problem will bring.

## Preparing to Speak at a Public Meeting

If you see that a topic is being discussed that you feel strongly about, or of which you possess expert knowledge, and you would like to share your knowledge/opinion:

- Prepare a *brief* (rule of thumb: 3 minutes) written statement that covers the relevant facts in a clear, concise manner. If you quote from research, do not provide many references in your comments (although they should appear in the written document that you submit).
- Do not use jargon. Make sure that your statement is written in language that is easily understandable to a layperson.
- *Invite other school psychologists* or allies in your school or district to attend with you. There is strength in numbers!
- Be sure to include specific examples of the unique training of school psychologists and what school psychologists do in the schools, and connect this with the agenda items.
- Submit your statement or proposal to speak at the public session in a timely manner. Submission dates are generally clearly stated on the meeting announcement.
- If you have requested to speak at the public meeting, arrive on time, and if you haven't already, be sure to sign up (how to do so varies by legislative body). Often, there are introductory speeches and many other individuals who have also requested to comment, so you may want to prepare for a long evening.
- You may want to attend a board of education meeting or public hearing as a listener first so that you may observe how others present public testimony.
- If you are uncomfortable with public speaking, it is perfectly acceptable to just provide written comments about the topic.

## Sample Testimony for a Public Hearing

Thank you (OFFICIAL NAME – I.E. MADAME CHAIR) and distinguished members of this committee for allowing me to testify today (IN SUPPORT OF/OPPOSITION TO) (BILL OR POLICY NAME/NUMBER), regarding (X). For the record, my name is (NAME) and I am testifying today as a school psychologist at (SCHOOL) and (add other identities – parent? Scholar? Etc.) As a school psychologist, I am responsible for conducting evaluations to determine if a student is eligible for special education services. But I am also trained to do so much more – and I am deeply concerned that cutting school psychologist positions will remove access to these already limited services.

To become a school psychologist, I went through specialized advanced graduate preparation that includes coursework and field experiences relevant to both psychology and education. This training gave me the ability to partner with families, teachers, school administrators, and other professionals to create safe, healthy, and supportive learning environments that strengthen connections between home, school, and the community. I can support children, youth, families, and schools through the identification of appropriate evidence-based educational and mental and behavioral health services for all children and youth; implement professional practices that are data-driven and culturally responsive; and deliver a continuum of services for children. I can

assist with student behavior management, and promote positive discipline strategies and restorative justice. I can be there to provide crisis prevention and intervention services.

These are all services that our district desperately needs and our children deserve – now, more than ever. Recent research indicates that there is a looming mental health crisis among youth because of the COVID-19 pandemic and social unrest. Unfortunately, critical shortages that already existed in this district and state prior to the pandemic make it nearly impossible to meet this uptick in need.

Further, it is well-documented that students with disabilities have faced a decrease in services due to the COVID-10 pandemic, with some districts facing a massive backlog of cases. Cutting school psychologist positions could mean additional delays in the services that students are entitled to and desperately need.

[ADD IN PERSONAL ANECDOTES – SEE [THIS VIDEO](#) FOR IDEAS]

Protecting these positions and hiring additional school psychologists will ensure that students in this district receive the best direct support and interventions needed to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. Please help me, help our kids. Thank you, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

## ADDITIONAL ADVOCACY STRATEGIES

### Tips for Using Social Media to Advance Your Message

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram can help bring awareness to your advocacy-related issues. They offer opportunities to connect with other education professionals and stakeholders as a means to share information and ideas on how states, districts, and schools are addressing similar issues. It also helps you stay current with field related news. Key tips are below.

- 1. Identify who and what to follow.** Building an effective advocacy platform on social media is similar to doing it in person—you'll want to find the most up-to-date information and work together with key allies and stakeholders. On social media, this means following people who are active in your state and local politics or education scene. Research community education activists or organizations, local reporters or news outlets, researchers and other professionals in your field, and elected officials. You can also search for education social media groups in your community and for specific hashtags, which people use to contribute to the conversation about a specific topic. If you find and follow these groups and hashtags, you might discover new people to follow and interact with.
- 2. Personalize your message.** While NASP provides many key messages that can be used and incorporated into your messaging (see Section VI of the [Policy Playbook](#)), personal stories and thoughts are always the most effective types of messages. Be creative!
- 3. “Tag” Key Officials.** If you are trying to get an elected leader or education official to pay attention to the issue you are advocating for, tag them in your post! You can also comment or respond to their posts with questions or thoughts. Many elected leaders and officials, especially in smaller governing bodies, run

their own social media, and will likely see your message with their own eyes. This strategy is most effective on Twitter, though it can also be useful on Facebook and Instagram.

4. **Be social.** It sounds simple, but an overlooked component of social media is interacting with other people's content. It is one way to share your message with others and to grow your followers. The more followers you have, the greater impact your content has, and one way to grow a following is by interacting with others.

## Writing, Calling, and More

As a constituent of your elected representatives, you have leverage: your vote and your voice! It is important to remember this as you work to solve problems you encounter in your professional role and in your community. A good representative will listen to you and help to address the issue as best as they can. But they can't help you if they don't hear from you!

Listed below are some additional ways to outreach to your representatives, whether they are on the school board, state legislature, or in Congress.

1. **Write.** The easiest—but also most easily ignored—way to reach out to an elected representative is to simply send an email. You can typically find a representative's (or their staffers') email address on the website of the governing body of which they are a member of, or through their personal or campaign websites. While form/template letters can be helpful to bring an issue to a representative's attention, personal stories and using your own words will always be a more effective way of communicating. If you do not receive a response within a reasonable time, send a follow-up email or use one of the other advocacy strategies discussed in this packet.
2. **Call.** Calling the office of your representative is another great way to communicate your message. State legislators and some school board members will have an office with staff members to take your call and pass the message on to the policy maker so they can work to address the issue. Prior to making the call, it is usually a good idea to prepare by writing down a script or notes of the points you want to make.
3. **Request a Meeting.** Most representatives at the state/local level will meet with constituents to hear their concerns and see how they can help. You can request these meetings via email to their office; in the email, be sure to mention the topics that you would like to discuss. These meetings are often easier when done with an ally, so if there is another school psychologist colleague you'd like to bring along, do it! Be sure to come to the meeting prepared with specific stories and points that outline the problem, and have a specific "ask" in mind. After the meeting, follow up, thank them for taking the time to meet with you, and provide them with any additional information that was requested.
4. **Attend Events.** Many representatives will hold town halls, events, and listening sessions to air out community concerns. Asking a question at a town hall can be effective way to communicate your concern—not only because it provides face-to-face time with your representative, but also because community members and the media may be present, which can help advance your messaging. These events are still happening virtually!

## Sample Advocacy Email to Policy Makers

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is (FIRST NAME, LAST NAME) and I have been a school psychologist at (SCHOOL NAME) for (INSERT NUMBER OF YEARS). As a school psychologist, I support the academic achievement, mental health, and positive behavior of all students. My extensive training places me in a unique position to support the overall well-being of my students within my school community. During my time as a school psychologist, I have supported (INSERT KEY INITIATIVES YOU SUPPORTED), and this has helped my school community (INSERT POSITIVE OUTCOME). In the coming years I plan to (INSERT FUTURE GOAL) that will (INSERT FUTURE OUTCOME).

Currently, our country faces an unprecedented time due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting economic downturn. As a result of decreasing revenues, you may be considering cutting school psychologist positions or outsourcing to external agencies or alternative credentialing opportunities when hiring school personnel. My professional organization, the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), maintains the position that school psychologists are best positioned to deliver and facilitate comprehensive and integrated student support in the schools.

School psychologists are uniquely qualified specialized instructional support personnel (SISP) who are members of school teams that support students' ability to learn and teachers' ability to teach. They receive specialized advanced graduate preparation that includes coursework and field experiences relevant to both psychology and education. School psychologists partner with families, teachers, school administrators, and other professionals to create safe, healthy, and supportive learning environments that strengthen connections between home, school, and the community. School psychologists support children, youth, families, and schools through the identification of appropriate evidence-based educational and mental and behavioral health services for all children and youth; implementation of professional practices that are data driven and culturally responsive; delivery of a continuum of services for children, youth, families, and schools from prevention to intervention and evaluation; and advocacy for the value of school psychological services.

As a (SPECIALIST OR DOCTORAL) level school psychologist, I encourage you to protect critical school mental health positions, like school psychologists—which will be needed now, more than ever. Removing these positions decreases access to consultation and support for teachers and administrators to help meet students' academic, behavioral, and mental health challenges, and it reduces support for families. In addition, it is well-documented that students with disabilities have faced a decrease in services due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with some districts facing a massive backlog of cases. Fewer school psychologists could mean further delays in the services that these students are entitled to and desperately need. Protecting these positions and hiring additional school psychologists will ensure that students in the state of (INSERT STATE) receive the best direct support and interventions needed to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

As (INSERT TITLE), I recognize that you have advocated for (INSERT ISSUE), which aligns with my purpose and goals as a school psychologist. I would enjoy the opportunity to discuss in more detail how we can work together to ensure that the expertise of school psychologists is recognized and not overlooked. Students need the services that we offer, now more than ever.



Thank you for taking the time to read this letter, and feel free to reach out with any questions or requests for additional information.

## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

- NASP Policy Playbook: <https://www.nasponline.org/research-and-policy/advocacy/policy-playbook>
- Key Messages and Talking Points to Promote the Comprehensive Role of School Psychologists: <https://www.nasponline.org/x53684.xml>
- School Psychology Credentialing Fact Sheet: <https://www.nasponline.org/x54407.xml>
- Key Messages and Talking Points to Remedy the Shortages in School Psychology: <https://www.nasponline.org/x43314.xml>
- Research Summary: Shortages in School Psychology: <https://www.nasponline.org/x43315.xml>
- Effective School Staffing Model (NASP/American School Counselor Association/School Social Worker Association of America statement): <https://www.nasponline.org/Documents/Resources%20and%20Publications/Resources/Crisis/Joint%20teaming%20statement.pdf>
- Critical Issues Advocacy Webpages: <https://www.nasponline.org/research-and-policy/policy-priorities/critical-policy-issues>