

Necessary Use of the Title “School Psychologist”

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) advocates that all school psychologists practicing in schools under a credential awarded by their state education agencies or entities that have credentialing authority, whether trained at the doctoral or specialist level¹, use the established title “school psychologist” as their professional designation. In 48 of 50 states (96%) school psychologists are able to practice in schools using the title “school psychologist.” The historical, legal (federal and state), and publicly accepted understanding of what specialist and doctoral level school psychologists do in everyday practice is inextricably tied to the use of the title “school psychologist.” The title of “school psychologist” is commonly used in public literature, thus the use of less common alternative titles for professionals fulfilling the role of a school psychologist is likely to lead to confusion.

After receiving advanced graduate education through recognized school psychology programs, school psychologists are typically credentialed through state departments of education. As highly qualified professionals with advanced graduate education at the specialist or doctoral level, school psychologists deliver a continuum of evidence-based academic and school mental health services to children, families, schools, and community agencies.

Specialist-level graduate education consists of 3 years of full-time graduate study in a recognized school psychology program, the accrual of 60 or more graduate credits, and the completion of a minimum of 1 academic year (minimum of 1,200 hours, of which at least 600 hours must be in a school setting) of supervised internship experience (*Standards for Graduate Preparation of School Psychologists*; NASP, 2010c). Those trained at the doctoral level complete additional graduate education requirements beyond the specialist level. This position statement will review (a) the historical use of the title “school psychologist,” (b) federal and state use of the title, (c) the public use of the title, and (d) the role of the school psychologist.

HISTORICAL USE OF THE TITLE “SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST”

- The earliest use of the term “school psychologist” dates back to the late 19th Century (Munsterburg, 1898). The term’s use as an official practitioner’s title dates to the professional work of Dr. Arnold Gesell, a psychologist and pediatrician in Connecticut, who used the title “school psychologist” in his professional work during the years 1915–1919 (Fagan, 1987).
- The title “school psychologist” gained greater recognition with the founding of a graduate education program in the School of Education at New York University in 1929, which included the BS, MA, and PhD degrees in school psychology. Although practitioners of school psychology provided school psychological services under several different titles, and increasingly as full-time

¹ “Specialist-level” graduate preparation for a school psychologist is defined as 60 graduate semester hours or the equivalent in school psychology, resulting in institutional documentation of various types. The following are examples of specialist-level documentation: 60+ Master’s degree; Master’s degree plus Certificate of Advanced Study totaling 60 hours (e.g., CAS, CAGS); an Educational Specialist (EdS) degree; or Psychology Specialist (PsyS) degree.

school district employees prior to this time, the concept and title of “school psychologist” was clearly discernible by the late 1930s.

- State recognition of the title “school psychologist” was augmented by the certification standards adopted in New York and Pennsylvania during the mid-1930s (Cornell, 1941).
- National recognition of the title was conferred by the reorganized American Psychological Association (APA) that established the first national organization with this title, the Division of School Psychologists (Division 16) in 1945.
- School psychologists (at the doctoral and specialist levels) have long been specifically designated as qualified users of psychological and educational assessments. For example, the 1949 Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC) manual (Wechsler, 1949) identified school psychologists as qualified users of the instrument at a time when very few practitioners held doctoral degrees.
- The Thayer Conference, convened in 1954 to clarify the role, function, and credentialing of school psychologists, gave further recognition to the title (Cutts, 1955; Fagan, 2003). The Thayer recommendation that the title “school psychologist” be reserved for those credentialed at the doctoral level was not widely adopted. Instead, more and more states credentialed school psychologists at the specialist level in the decades following the conference.
- NASP was founded in 1969 to support the work of school psychologists as they promote educationally and psychologically healthy environments for all children and students. At the time of NASP’s founding, there were numerous titles, but that of school psychologist was increasingly prominent (Farling & Hoedt, 1971). By the late 1970s, NASP and affiliated state associations had brought the title “school psychologist,” at both the doctoral and specialist levels, to national prominence and respect.
- NASP developed and approved *Guidelines for Training Programs in School Psychology* in 1972, *Principles for Professional Ethics* in 1974, and *Credentialing Standards and Practice Guidelines* in 1978. NASP revised these professional standards in 1984, 1994, and 2000. NASP’s current standards, approved in March 2010, include the *Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services* (NASP, 2010a), *Principles for Professional Ethics* (NASP, 2010b), *Standards for Graduate Preparation of School Psychologists* (NASP, 2010c), and *Standards for the Credentialing of School Psychologists* (NASP, 2010d).
- NASP developed the Nationally Certified School Psychologist (NCSP) credential in 1989 to recognize school psychologists who meet national standards for professional preparation in school psychology (Batsche & Curtis, 2003). The creation of the NCSP represented a significant milestone for school psychology as a field and for NASP as a professional association. As of 2017, 31 states recognize the NCSP as one alternative to demonstrate eligibility for the state credential in school psychology. As of June 30, 2017, 14,536 school psychologists held the NCSP.

FEDERAL AND STATE USE OF THE TITLE “SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST”

Support for the use of the title “school psychologist” is found in both federal and state law. This title is commonly used for those who are appropriately educated and credentialed as school psychologists. Almost all of the states use the title “school psychologist” in their credentialing and educator licensing language.

- The most recent reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004) mandates the use of scientifically based instruction for all students. The advanced training of school psychologists at both the specialist and doctoral levels includes skills and a specialized knowledge base consistent with the implementation and evaluation of scientifically based practices.

- IDEA (2004) Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) specifically uses the title “school psychologist” in Section 300.308(b) when describing the professional designation of individuals who are allowed to conduct evaluations as, “At least one person qualified to conduct individual diagnostic examinations of children, such as a school psychologist, speech–language pathologist, or remedial reading teacher.”
- The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was signed into law December 10, 2015 and is the most recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA). This Act includes two important definitions that reference school psychologists by title: “School Based Mental Health Services Provider” and “Specialized Instructional Support Personnel.”
 - ESSA defines a “School Based Mental Health Services Provider” as “a State-licensed or State-certified school counselor, school psychologist, school social worker, or other State-licensed or certified mental health professional qualified under State law to provide mental health services to children and adolescents.”
 - ESSA defines a “specialized instructional support personnel” provider as “(i) school counselors, school social workers, and school psychologists”; and “(ii) other qualified professional personnel, such as school nurses, speech language pathologists, and school librarians, involved in providing assessment, diagnosis, counseling, educational, therapeutic, and other necessary services (including related services as that term is defined in section 602 of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (20 U.S.C. 1401)) as part of a comprehensive program to meet student needs.”
 - *Specialized instructional support personnel* (SISP) is a new term introduced in ESSA that replaces “pupil services personnel,” and is intended to reflect the similarities between pupil services (as defined in ESEA) and related services (as defined by IDEA), and the professionals that provide these services to children in general and special education. ESSA explicitly references (and in some cases mandates) SISP and services more than 40 times in policies regarding state and district school improvement plans; identifying and supporting students most at risk of school failure; improving student literacy; addressing school climate and school safety; supporting the mental and behavioral health of students, among others. (<https://www.nasponline.org/research-and-policy/current-law-and-policy-priorities/policy-priorities/the-every-student-succeeds-act/details-of-essa>)
- The U.S. Department of Labor (2017), in its most recent publication on occupational outlook, describes school psychologists by title noting that “school psychologists need an advanced degree and certification or licensure to work. The advanced degree is most commonly the education specialist degree (EdS), which typically requires a minimum of 60 graduate semester credit hours and a 1,200-hour supervised internship. Some school psychologists may have a doctoral degree in school psychology or a master’s degree. School psychologists’ programs include coursework in both education and psychology because their work addresses education and mental health components of students’ development.”
- The Social Security Administration specifically designates school psychologists by title as “acceptable medical sources” whose opinions can be considered when making disability claims (Federal Register, 2006, 20 CFR 404.1502).

PUBLIC USE OF THE TITLE “SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST”

Additional support for the use of the title “school psychologist” can be found in documents used by allied agencies such as credentialing bodies, higher education institutions, and coalitions.

- The Council for Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP), recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation as the designated accrediting agency for schools, colleges, and departments of education who meet rigorous national standards, has adopted the *NASP Standards for Graduate Preparation of School Psychologists* (NASP, 2010c) as its national graduate education accreditation standards. As such, CAEP specifically endorses the graduate education of school psychologists at the specialist level (e.g., minimum of 60 graduate semester hours, academic year internship), including the use of the professional title “school psychologist.”
- The most current data available from the 2015–2016 academic year indicated that there were 247 known institutions offering a graduate education program in school psychology either at the specialist level, doctoral level, or both. Across all known institutions, there are 321 programs; 220 at the specialist level and 101 at the doctoral level.

These programs specifically prepare school psychologists and can be identified as distinct from graduate education programs in other specialties of health service psychology, such as clinical or counseling psychology practice.

- Evidence for the strong job outlook and critical functions played by school psychologists can be found in widely disseminated national reports about top future careers. For example, in the 2017 summary of occupational outlooks, school psychologists are described as one of the fastest growing social services jobs (U.S. Department of Labor, 2017).
- NASP is a member of the National Alliance of Specialized Instructional Support Personnel, which includes 20 national organizations such as the National Educational Association, the American Federation of Teachers, the National Association of State Directors of Special Education, the National Association of Pupil Services Administrators, and the Council for Exceptional Children. NASP leaders and staff hold key positions in the coalition’s leadership.
- School psychologists are commonly referred to by title when national and local news outlets report on the services they deliver to students and the school community.

ROLE OF THE SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST

The goal of school psychologists is to promote an optimal learning environment for the success of all students. Use of the title “school psychologist” is essential to accurately represent their credentials to the public as they fulfill the varied responsibilities of this critical role. These responsibilities include:

- facilitating the delivery of evidence-based practices to meet the learning, behavior, and mental health needs of students aligned with the *NASP Practice Model Implementation Guide* (Skalski, Minke, Rossen, Cowan, Kelly, Armistead, & Smith, 2015);
- collaborating with families and other mental health and education professionals to ensure that all students receive an appropriate education;
- leading a multitiered continuum of services ranging from prevention-oriented, population-based services to the provision of intensive supports to small groups or individual students (NASP, 2016);
- drawing from a knowledge base in both psychology and education to promote educationally and psychologically healthy environments for all children and students (NASP, 2010a); and
- supporting the compliance of schools and related agencies with federal, state, and local mandates.

The role of the school psychologist is comprehensively described in the *Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services* (NASP, 2010a) and multiple NASP position statements, including but

not limited to “Integrated Model of Academic and Behavior Supports”; “Early Childhood Services: Promoting Positive Outcomes for Young Children”; “Mental and Behavioral Health Services for Children and Adolescents”; the “Provision of School Psychological Services to Bilingual Students”; and “Prevention and Wellness Promotion.”

SUMMARY

It is the position of NASP that doctoral- and specialist-level school psychologists whose graduate preparation merit a state-level credential of school psychologist, and who practice in schools under that credential, should use the title “school psychologist” as their professional designation. NASP supports the significant work that school psychologists do to meet the many learning and mental health needs of students in the United States. The use of the title “school psychologist” currently supports the daily work of practicing school psychologists, whose numbers have been estimated at more than 42,000 (Castillo, Curtis, & Tan, 2014). These school psychologists, with their highly specialized advanced graduate training in education and psychology, are better able to ensure an appropriate educational experience for all students. Over the last 100 years, a clear historical, legal, and larger public precedent has been established for the use of the title “school psychologist,” resulting in clearly documented public good.

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