

Shortages in School Psychology: Challenges to Meeting the Growing Needs of U.S. Students and Schools

With expertise in both education and mental health, school psychologists are uniquely qualified to help address the needs of students and schools (Armistead et al., 2013; National Association of School Psychologists, 2015, 2020b). This means addressing challenges such as poverty, mental and behavioral health issues, bullying, homelessness, shortages of culturally and linguistically diverse providers, record high student enrollment—to name just a few. All argue for the critical importance of the services provided by school psychologists. Regrettably, research suggests that longstanding shortages of school psychologists continue to threaten students’ access to needed school psychological and mental and behavioral health services (American Association for Employment in Education, 2020; Castillo et al., 2016; Castillo et al., 2017; Eklund et al., 2017; Eklund et al., 2020).

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP, 2020b) recommends a ratio of no more than 500 students per school psychologist when more comprehensive and preventive services are being provided. Unfortunately, evidence suggests that most school districts do not meet these standards.

- The ratio of students per school psychologist was estimated to be 1,211 to 1 in the United States in the 2019–2020 school year based on data collected by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; NASP, 2021). Surveys conducted by NASP corroborated this estimate. The ratio of students per school psychologist was estimated to be 1,233 to 1 during the 2019–2020 school year according to the NASP Membership Survey (Goforth et al., 2021)
- Only one state in the country met the recommended ratio of no more than 500 students per school psychologist in the 2019–2020 school year, and 24 states had 1,500 or more students per school psychologist in that year (NASP, 2021).

Researchers have predicted continuing shortages of school psychologists through 2025 (Castillo et al., 2014; Curtis et al., 2004). Shortages in related professions complicate the picture further, with considerable shortages of special education personnel (American Association for Employment in Education, 2020) and teachers (Sutcher et al., 2016). Attrition rates among teachers have been near 8% over the past decade and, barring major changes, estimated annual teacher shortages could rise to as much as 112,000 (Sutcher et al., 2016).

The growing needs of U.S. public schools will continue to limit how prepared schools are to meet the academic, mental health, and behavioral health needs of their students, especially if these shortages continue. The increasing public school enrollment, number of students experiencing poverty and trauma, and growing prevalence of mental and behavioral health disorders prove that the services school psychologists provide are becoming more integral to children’s success in school (NCES, 2020; U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). For example, though approximately 17% of children in the United States experience a mental disorder each year, and the prevalence of those disorders is increasing, only about half

of those students receive the treatment they need (Cree et al., 2018; Whitney & Peterson, 2019). Further, the majority of the students receiving any services initially receive them at school (Farmer et al., 2003; Rones & Hoagwood, 2000). Children with mental health disorders are more likely to be retained in a grade, show impaired academic functioning, and have an Individualized Education Program (January et al., 2017).

These two opposing forces—the continuing shortages in school psychology and the growing need for services for students and schools—pose significant threats to the ability of schools to meet the needs of their students now and in the future. The following are selected research findings on factors related to the shortages in school psychology.

Shortages of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse School Psychologists

The divergence between the cultural and linguistic characteristics of the school psychology workforce and the population of students that they serve continues to grow. A few examples follow.

- Culturally diverse school psychologists are underrepresented within the school psychology workforce: About 86% are White, and only 8% are Hispanic (Goforth et al., 2021), which differs sharply from the student population (McFarland et al., 2017).
- Although rates of school psychology graduate students from minoritized backgrounds are growing, they experience barriers that reduce perceptions of belongingness, reduce academic engagement, and prevent success in graduate study (Clark et al., 2012; Gadke et al., 2021)
- Bilingual school psychologists are in short supply within school psychology: 92% of school psychologists are fluent in English only, and among those who are fluent in a second language, approximately 12% provide services in that language (Goforth et al., 2021).

Regional Differences in Shortages

Although shortages in school psychology remain a national problem, there are also regional differences in both the extent and negative impact of these shortages. For example:

- There are some shortages of school psychologists in all regions of the country and considerable shortages in the Northwest, Great Plains/Midwest, Northeast, Alaska, and Rocky Mountain regions. Shortages in these regions have been growing over the past 5 years (American Association for Employment in Education, 2020).
- In Kansas, a survey of school districts and special education agencies found there to be 38.5 full-time-equivalent school psychologist positions open among only 30 agencies in the state during the first semester of the 2016–2017 school year (Kansas Association of School Psychologists, 2017).
- There has been an ongoing shortage of school psychologists in rural areas (Goforth et al., 2017). For example, severe shortages in the rural Texas areas surrounding Stephen F. Austin State University led to the creation of their distance education program for individuals in surrounding areas (McCleary et al., 2020).
- The availability of graduate programs differs substantially by state. States such as New York and California have upwards of 26 and 37 institutions offering a school psychology program, respectively, whereas many states have only one program. Hawaii, Alaska, and Wyoming have no school psychology programs.
- Significant regional differences exist in the availability of internship stipends (Prus et al., 2014), despite internship representing a critical recruitment tool.

Shortages—Graduate Education Through Retirement

Several factors impact shortages in school psychology, from the availability of graduate programs and faculty to the rates of enrollment in graduate programs and the rates at which school psychologists leave the profession via attrition and retirement. For example:

- In a national survey, 94 school psychology programs reported 136 faculty openings and 79% indicated one or more openings in the three most recent academic years, with more than one in four of the positions going unfilled (Clopton & Haselhuhn, 2009).
- The percentage of school psychologists who were predicted to reach 35 years of total work experience and, thus, to retire soon, was more than 20% in 2015 (Castillo et al., 2014).
- A national survey of school psychologists revealed that more than 16% desire to leave their positions in the next 5 years due to administrative pressures, a significant proportion of which involved pressure to practice unethically or to make decisions that were not in compliance with state or federal law. Nearly 8% indicated a desire to abandon the profession altogether as a result of coercive interactions with administrators (Boccio et al., 2016).
- In Florida, retirements and attrition of school psychologists are outpacing school psychologists entering the field, leading to a growing deficit of school psychologists. Across the state nearly 42 positions went unfilled over a 5-year period (Mann et al., 2019).
- In Kansas, a survey of employed school psychologists revealed that 34% planned to leave their current school psychology position by the end of the 2018–2019 school year, with more than half of those planning to leave the profession (Kansas Association of School Psychologists, 2017).
- Between 2015 and 2020, the self-reported estimate of years of work prior to retirement remained stable at approximately 16 years, though the age of the workforce decreased, suggesting that retirements remained fairly stable (Goforth et al., 2021; Walcott & Hyson, 2018). Paired with static graduate program enrollment numbers (Gadke et al., 2018, 2019, 2021), national ratios are unlikely to improve in the short-term.

Recommendations

NASP (2020a) has developed a resource guide with specific recommendations for how best to address the shortages in school psychology. Some examples follow:

- Improve *recruitment* by introducing school psychology to more high school and undergraduate students, providing incentives to enter the field, developing new graduate programs in areas most impacted by shortages, and mentoring prospective faculty.
- Recruit a more *inclusive and diverse* workforce by emphasizing themes of multiculturalism, equity, and social justice, ensuring school psychology program faculty represent a range of minoritized backgrounds, and directly and personally contacting applicants from minoritized backgrounds.
- Make *respecialization and professional retraining* more accessible by offering flexible options for those returning to school and to help recruit professionals from related fields (e.g., school counseling, clinical psychology).
- Improve *retention* by providing both professional and administrative supervision and mentorship, increasing opportunities for high-quality professional development, and ensuring positive working environments.

The NASP resource guide is available here: <http://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources/school-psychology/shortages-in-school-psychology-resource-guide>

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