

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, 2015a, 2015b). This means addressing challenges such as poverty, mental and behavioral health issues, bullying, homelessness, increasing cultural and linguistic diversity, 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 services (American Association for Employment in Education, 2016; Curtis, Grier, & Hunley, 2004; Curtis, Hunley, Walker, & Baker, 1999; Fagan, 2004; Reschly, 2000).

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP; 2010) recommends a ratio of no more than 1,000 students per school psychologist, in general, and no more than 500 to 700 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 1,381 to 1 in the United States in the 2014–2015 school year (Walcott, Hyson, & Loe, 2017).
- Only seven states in the country met the recommended ratio of no more than 1,000 students per school psychologist in the 2009–2010 school year, and 23 states had 1,500 or more students per school psychologist in that year (NASP, 2011).
- The ratio was 1,442 students per school psychologist in the 2012–2013 school year, if one compares the public school enrollment of 50,044,522 (NCES, 2017) with 34,697—the number of certified, full-time-equivalent school psychologists who were providing special education services in public schools in that year (Office of Special Education Programs, 2016).

Researchers are predicting continuing shortages of school psychologists through 2025 (Castillo, Curtis, & Tan, 2014; Curtis, Grier, & Hunley, 2004). Shortages in related professions complicate the picture further, with considerable shortages of special education personnel (American Association for Employment in Education, 2016) and an estimated shortage of 64,000 teachers in the 2015–2016 school year (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016). Attrition rates among teachers have been near 8% over the past decade, and barring major changes, annual teacher shortages could increase to as much as 112,000 by 2018 and remain close to that level thereafter (Sutcher et al., 2016).

A major cause of attrition of teachers of students with emotional and behavioral disorders is lack of support from administrators, and researchers have cited school psychologists as having the professional expertise specifically needed to support these teachers (Cancio, Albrecht, & Johns, 2014). Along with lack

of support, inconsistent district policies, priorities, and role definitions pose barriers to the delivery of comprehensive and integrated services by school psychologists (Castillo et al., 2017). 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. For example, the total number of public school students in 2014 was 50,312,581, up 6.6% from 47,203,539 in 2000, and the student population is predicted to reach 51,737,900 by 2026 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). With 13–20% of children in the United States experiencing a mental disorder each year, and with the prevalence of those disorders increasing among children (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013), it is clear that a growing student population—in and of itself—presents schools with more challenges to meeting the needs of students.

Students who live under adverse social conditions or who are from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds may have additional needs that schools struggle to address. For example, poor children are disproportionately exposed to factors that may impair brain development (Hair, Hanson, Wolfe, & Pollak, 2015), which can negatively impact their cognitive, social, and emotional functioning. In 2015, about 20% of children under the age of 18 were living in poverty, 1.3 million public school students were homeless, and 4.6 million (9.4%) were English language learners. The percentage of students of color enrolled in public schools was 50.5% in 2014, up from 42% in 2004 (McFarland et al., 2017), and poverty levels among children of color are even higher when the children are living in single-mother families (Child Trends, 2016). School psychologists have the specific expertise needed to help teachers and administrators address the wide variety of challenges stemming from the growing and increasingly diverse student population (NASP, 2015a).

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 87% are White, and only 6% are Hispanic (Walcott, Charvat, McNamara, & Hyson, 2016), which differs sharply from the student population (McFarland et al., 2017).
- Bilingual school psychologists are in short supply within school psychology: 86% of school psychologists are fluent in English only, and among those who are fluent in a second language, less than 8% provide services in that language (Walcott et al., 2016).

Regional Differences in Shortages

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

- There are some shortages of school psychologists in all regions of the country and considerable shortages in the northwest and Rocky Mountain regions (American Association for Employment in Education, 2016).

- 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 (Clopton & Knesting, 2006). For example, Colorado has had vacant school psychology positions for decades (Lahman, D’Amato, Stecker, & McGrain, 2006).

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:

- The overall availability of graduate programs in school psychology has increased only 9% over nearly 40 years (Rossen & von der Embse, 2014).
- 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, Weisz, & Lefkowitz, 2016).
- In Kansas, a survey of employed school psychologists revealed that 34% plan 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).

Recommendations

NASP (2016) has developed a resource guide with specific recommendations for how best to address the shortages in school psychology. Some examples follow:

- Improve *recruitment* by providing incentives to enter the field, developing new graduate programs in areas most impacted by shortages, and mentoring prospective faculty.
- Make *respecialization* more accessible by offering flexible options for those returning to school.
- 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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Please cite this document as:

National Association of School Psychologists. (2017). *Shortages in school psychology: Challenges to meeting the growing needs of U.S. students and schools* [Research summary]. Bethesda, MD: Author.