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## THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST IN GENERAL EDUCATION

School psychologists provide a unique contribution to the educational system. In this era of accountability, choice, and the need for schools to document the scientific integrity of interventions, school psychologists are more essential than ever. They are highly trained in both psychology and education. Most have Masters degrees or higher involving advanced training in assessment, curriculum, intervention and research. With such a background, they are highly qualified to provide assistance to school personnel and parents regarding emotional, behavioral and learning challenges facing children, as well as to provide expertise in the area of systems change. Far too often school psychologists are relegated to the area of special education, spending much of their time assessing students to determine eligibility. This is in part due to funding models utilized by many districts. In a changing educational environment emphasizing accountability and student outcomes, school psychologists are poised to help schools solve critical problems raised by *No Child Left Behind* to assure the success of each and every child.

The California Education Code (E.C. 49424) provides a definition and description of school psychology services that delineates a broad based role for school psychologists:

*A school psychologist is a credentialed professional whose primary objective is the application of scientific principles of learning and behavior to ameliorate school-related problems and to facilitate the learning and development of children in the public schools of California.*

*To accomplish this objective the school psychologist provides services to children, teachers, parents, community agencies, and the school system itself. These services include:*

- a) *Consultation with school administrators concerning appropriate learning objectives for children, planning developmental and remedial programs for pupils in regular and special school programs, and the development of educational experimentation and evaluation.*
- b) *Consultation with teachers in the development and implementation of classroom methods and procedures designed to facilitate pupil learning and to overcome learning and behavior disorders.*
- c) *Consultation with parents to assist in understanding the learning and adjustment processes of children.*
- d) *Consultation with community agencies, such as probation departments, mental health clinics, and welfare departments, concerning pupils who are being served by such community agencies.*
- e) *Consultation and supervision of pupil personnel services workers.*
- f) *Psychoeducational assessment and diagnosis of specific learning and behavioral disabilities, including, but not limited to, case study evaluation, recommendations for remediation or placement, and*

*periodic reevaluation of such children.*

- g) Psychological counseling of and other therapeutic techniques with children and parents, including parent education.*

This paper attempts to further explain the background and training school psychologists possess, and the full range of services they can provide to schools, districts, county offices of education, parents and the community. It is divided into 14 areas, some of which may overlap in various aspects.

### **ASSESSMENT**

School psychologists have knowledge and skills that will be essential to districts in responding to the current educational focus on assessment and accountability (such as API and AYP determinations). They are experts in test construction, administration and interpretation. As such they understand the qualities of psychometrically sound

**Who can assist us in interpreting disaggregated assessment data and tying it to classroom performance?**

measurement, how to collect and integrate multiple sources of data, how to link data to classroom performance

and interventions, and how to interpret and communicate findings regarding data. School psychologists have training and experience in the use of assessment data to improve student learning. Such expertise is of marked benefit to schools working toward implementing assessment systems whose purpose goes beyond accountability to understanding individual student success.

### **CLASSROOM AND BEHAVIOR MANAGEMENT**

School psychologists support general education staff to include all children in their educational program. When

behavioral challenges occur, the school psychologist can lead the problem solving process. This entails: (a) the identification of the problem impeding the child's progress academically and/or socially; (b) analyzing the collected data, and (c) assisting and collaborating in the development of a plan to help the

**I have a disruptive student in my class. Who can help me understand the behavior and develop a positive behavior support plan?**

student succeed. Once the plan is in place, the school psychologist supports the general

education staff by developing a progress monitoring process for the student's behavioral support plan.

### **CONSULTATION**

School Psychologists can serve as a valuable consultant to support many aspects of schooling. Most importantly, since they are uniquely trained in the understanding of thinking, memory, and cognitive and motivational processes, school psychologists can also offer their knowledge regarding a variety of other issues including: social-emotional development; positive pro-social skills; conflict management; and crisis recovery. With the increasing emphasis on ongoing assessment and accountability, psychologists can consult with teachers and parents to deal with issues such as test anxiety in students, and to assist in understanding the results of various assessments. School psychologists have the expertise to assist individual students, classrooms, and entire school to enhance the learning experience for all.

### **CRISIS INTERVENTION**

School psychologists are trained to coordinate intervention strategies for management of individual and school-wide crises. They have knowledge of current theory and research about crises

in schools and communities; are able to provide crisis intervention services; and frequently collaborate with school

**Who can assist our school in dealing with the accidental death of a staff member or a student?**

personnel, parents, and the community in the aftermath of crises (e.g., suicide, death, natural disasters, murder, bombs or bomb threats,

extraordinary violence, sexual harassment, etc.).

The California Association of School Psychologists (CASP) has developed a Crisis Specialty Group which consists of a network of school psychologists throughout California who are trained in evidence-based prevention and intervention strategies. Members of this committee provide direct consultation to districts throughout California in the aftermath of school tragedies, and train school site personnel in prevention strategies.

### **GIFTED AND TALENTED EDUCATION**

School psychologists possess expertise in the areas of cognitive assessment and learning which enable them to assist schools in the identification of gifted students and provide consultation to assist these students in maximizing their potential. This includes training teachers to differentiate the curriculum, which is a useful strategy for students

**I have a GATE student in my class who won't complete his work. What can I do to motivate him?**

with all levels of academic ability. School psychologists understand the special social/emotional needs of gifted and talented students

and can assist school staffs in both understanding and helping to address these needs.

### **INTERFACING WITH COMMUNITY AGENCIES**

A child's ability to learn is often impacted by factors including home climate, health, and social/emotional stressors. The school psychologist helps to support students and families who require services beyond a school's capabilities by interfacing with community agencies and maintaining a resource list of appropriate services. The school psychologist may help to connect parents with potential resources by making initial contacts with various agencies. When a child is represented by multiple agencies, the school psychologist facilitates communication between the agencies so that the team works together in order to provide the most comprehensive and supportive services.

### **PARENT EDUCATION**

With their background in mental health issues and learning, school psychologists are able to provide parents with a wealth of information, training and resources on a variety of topics. These include helpful solutions for individual concerns in such areas as: behavioral interventions for preschool and school age children; learning strategies that parents can utilize with their children; referral to community resources; home interventions for ADHD; and lists of book references on various topics. School psychologists also provide trainings for parents at the school site level as well as the district level on topics such as: dealing with your ADHD child; learning and motivation; parenting skills; and issues related to G.A.T.E. students.

**Who can help me deal with my child's temper tantrums?**

## **PREVENTION AND EARLY INTERVENTION RELATED TO SCHOOL FAILURE**

There is more information now than ever on why students fail. Students drop out of school for a myriad of reasons

including grade retention, poor reading skills, failure to form important bonds with school staff and/or lack of

achievement motivation. Research has shown that prevention and early intervention are more likely to curb school failure than later attempts. School psychologists' knowledge of the academic and affective skills that contribute to school success is an invaluable resource for developing preventive and early intervention initiative. For example, school psychologists can assist schools and districts in establishing multi-tiered screening procedures that identify and direct interventions to students at-risk for scholastic failure. Early detection of difficulties in acquiring skills such as reading or social skills is essential to intervening before the delays become entrenched and difficult to remediate. School psychologists can assist in selecting appropriate screening instruments and interpreting this assessment information to ensure that the focus and intensity of the interventions match the individual needs of the students.

## **PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION IN THE AREA OF CHILD MENTAL HEALTH**

As many as 30% of students have had experiences that place them at-risk for social, emotional and behavioral problems. At some schools, the figure is even higher. These problems impact not only the mental health and interpersonal relationships of students, but also their academic achievement.

**We have too many students being recommended for retention. How can we provide effective early intervention?**

School psychologists, with their mental health background, are key personnel to address these issues in the educational setting. Prevention programs are well known to be more cost effective than later intensive intervention programs. Some of the most successful prevention and early intervention programs in which school psychologists are involved include: the Primary Prevention Program; Student Assistance Programs providing support groups on a variety of topics; various suicide prevention programs; whole class affective education programs; peer counseling programs; and school-wide character education and bully prevention programs. In addition, they help develop school-wide programs such as training of conflict managers. School

**Our school is experiencing an increase in bullying behaviors at recess. How do we turn this around?**

psychologists have the expertise to provide invaluable input into discussions on school climate.

## **PROGRAM EVALUATION**

Every school experiences the need for program evaluation. Through their training and experience in assessment, measurement, learning theories, research and evaluation, school psychologists are uniquely equipped to assist and even coordinate program evaluation activities. Much of school

**We just implemented a new reading intervention program. Who can assist us in evaluating its effectiveness and recommending improvements?**

psychologists' daily activities involve determining the effectiveness of a particular program for an individual child. School psychologists may assist schools engaged in program evaluation by identifying critical program outcomes and defining these outcomes in a way that can be measured. Once the goals

of the program are clearly articulated, psychologists can assist in developing surveys, interviewing stakeholders, and examining extant data (e.g., student test scores, attendance rates, discipline activity, etc) in order to evaluate the efficacy of a program.

### **RESEARCH AND GRANT WRITING**

School psychologists contribute an array of knowledge, technical skills, and professional competencies regarding research and evaluation that are invaluable in applying for and implementing school-related grant projects. Conducting research and evaluation is essential in the implementation of most grant projects in the schools. Such efforts require knowledge about principles of design, methodology, measurement, and analysis; such skills are required in school psychology graduate training programs. School psychologists may be leaders in the evaluation of local school programs and in interpreting their findings to educators and to the public.

### **SAFE SCHOOLS**

Providing school-wide Positive Behavior Support (PBS) allows a school to use research validated practices linked to localized, data-based decision making. In essence, it is a way to address the behavioral needs of the entire school population, from school-wide systems, to individualized behavior intervention plans. PBS provides schools with the

**Our schools are safe, and we want them to stay that way. Who can take the lead in our addressing the behavioral needs of our school?**

opportunity to efficiently organize resources and support the adoption of effective practices. The role of the school

psychologist in this process is crucial. Team building, social-skills instruction, behavioral competency, and the

interpretation of site-based data are areas in which the school psychologist can be especially valuable. In fact, the school psychologist may have more of the training necessary for PBS implementation than any other single team member.

### **SCHOOL-WIDE REFORM**

School psychologists are well informed and positioned in schools to participate in school reform efforts. School psychologists understand the social complexities of their school communities. They can assist schools in becoming more democratic environments in which to encourage the understanding of differences, participate in collaborative leadership situations, and utilize research based information to drive instructional practices and policy which ultimately aid in the pursuit of securing every child's right to learn. "Where a real connection is made between students and teachers in the pursuit of meaningful accomplishments, the possibilities for developing lifelong capacities for learning, doing, and relating to others are greatly expanded." (Darling-Hammond, 1997)

### **STAFF DEVELOPMENT AND TRAINING**

With the breadth and depth of knowledge school psychologists possess, they are key assets in providing staff development on a wide variety of topics. These include topics such as implementing Federal 504 regulations; adapting and modifying curriculum; developing classroom management programs; using applied behavioral analysis to understand student behavior; conducting effective Student Study Teams; grading; grief workshops; stress reduction; and alternatives to retention.

## **CONCLUSION**

School psychologists receive broad-based training in the areas of child development, learning, consultation, assessment, research, counseling, and human relations. In an era where schools must be accountable for the academic and behavioral success of all children, they provide an invaluable and often underutilized service. We hope that this report will be helpful to members of the Legislature, the State Department of Education and school administrators. School psychologists have the background and expertise to provide invaluable service to the entire school program.

Darling-Hammond, L. (1997) *The Right To Learn*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

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