



School Psychology Shortages in Missouri

OVERVIEW & IMPACT OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY SHORTAGES

As defined in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015), school psychologists are included under the term specialized instructional support personnel, or SISP, and should be involved in providing assessment, diagnosis, counseling, educational, and therapeutic services within the school system. School psychologists are uniquely qualified to support all students and staff members within the school setting. They partner with administrators, teachers, related service providers, and families in order to create supportive learning environments for students. School psychologists typically complete specialist-level or doctoral-level programs. In those programs, school psychologists gain a breadth of knowledge in the areas of data collection and analysis, assessment, behavioral and academic interventions, instructional support, crisis response and recovery, mental health services and counseling, family-school-community collaboration, prevention and intervention services, and consultation and collaboration. School psychologists can work in a variety of settings and serve a variety of roles within those settings. School psychologists must be credentialed in the state in which they work and may also be nationally certified by the National School Psychology Certification Board, indicating highly-qualified status (Who Are School Psychologists, NASP).

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) recommends a ratio of one school psychologist per 500-700 students in order for school psychologists to provide appropriate, comprehensive services to students (Shortage of School Psychologists). Currently, NASP data indicates that the school psychologist to student ratio is approximately 1:1,381 in the United States. Currently the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MO-DESE) does not collect data on the ratio of school psychologist to students across the state. However, preliminary data collected by the Missouri Association of School Psychologists (MASP) statewide survey indicated a school psychologist to student ratio in Missouri of 1:4,204, based on the 207 Missouri school districts that responded to the survey during the 2018-19 school year.

With a shortage of school psychologists comes a shortage of comprehensive services and supports for Missouri students, staff, and families. Results of the survey indicate that Missouri school districts are primarily hiring third-party providers to provide psychological services in their schools. Some districts are even putting those responsibilities on professionals who are not appropriately trained, such as school psychological examiners, diagnosticians, or other non-school psychology personnel. Without appropriately trained providers, students, staff, and families are being underserved academically, behaviorally, and socially/emotionally throughout the state of Missouri.

SURVEY FINDINGS

There were a total of 207 school districts that responded to the MASP statewide survey, with a student population ranging between 26 to 21,973 students (median of 718 students). Based on the FTE data collected, the survey respondents indicated a ratio of 1:4,204 school psychologists to students, indicating a significant shortage of school psychology practitioners in the state of Missouri. School districts were primarily concentrated in geographically rural settings, with 75% of the sample from this area (159 of the 207 school districts).

In the state of Missouri, school psychologists that hold the NCSP credential are qualified for Medicaid reimbursement. However, survey respondents indicated that only 35 Nationally Certified School Psychologists (NCSP) credentialed practitioners were hired across a mere seven districts throughout the state. In addition, survey respondents indicated that 95.3% of district respondents do not collect Medicaid reimbursement for school psychological services. Leading to a large amount of funding for services being rendered in our school buildings to not be funneled back into our schools that are in desperate need of these additional funds.

In order to gather data on school psychology vacancies, respondents were asked to provide information on the reason behind their districts' vacancies. Out of the 101 responses to this question, 76% of districts stated that school psychology vacancies/non-hires were due to a lack of district funds. Given that the majority of Missouri districts do not have school psychologists, respondents were asked how districts provided psychological services to their students. The most prevalent practice was to hire an independent contractor who provides psychological services, with nearly a third of all responses endorsing this approach. Additionally, nearly a fourth of the respondents hired someone other than a school psychologist to deliver services, namely a school psychological examiner or clinical psychologist/mental health professional. Several other respondents indicated that individuals other than a credentialed school psychologist were responsible for service provision. These included assigning responsibilities to non-school personnel or to diagnosticians. Several responses revealed that either the workload for existing staff was increased or changes/restrictions were made to the role of the school psychologist. Surprisingly, thirteen responses indicated that districts failed to deliver services.

The final question of the survey asked participants the extent to which they were concerned about the shortage of school psychologists. This was a Likert-type, attitudinal assessment that ranged from "Not at all concerned" to "Extremely concerned". Most participants (34.6%) were somewhat concerned, with an additional one-third of all participants (37.5%) expressing moderate to extreme concern about the shortage of school psychologists in the state of Missouri.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to provide Missouri's children with the necessary behavioral, social-emotional, and academic supports and services they need to be successful in school, a number of important steps must be taken at a statewide level. Missouri needs to:

- Prioritize the collection of statewide data, as it pertains to school psychologists ratio and credentialing to ensure accurate information.

- Promote the addition of new school psychology graduate programs in our state Universities.
- Expand recruitment by providing incentives to districts to hire school psychologists and practitioners to enter the field.
- Improve its retention of school psychologists by encouraging an expanded role that is aligned with the NASP practice model, providing professional and administrative supervision/mentorship, increasing opportunities for high-quality professional development, and ensuring positive working environments. (Shortages in School Psychology: Challenges to Meeting the Growing Needs of U.S. Students and Schools, 2017)
- Encourage districts to hire school psychologists that hold their Nationally Certified School Psychologist (NCSP) credential and collect Medicaid reimbursement for school psychological services.

REFERENCES

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Adopted by the MASP Shortages/Advocacy Committee
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