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# Advocating for the Advocates: School Psychologists Are Important in Addressing Mental Health Concerns Among Students

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## **Abstract**

For decades, there has been a severe shortage of school psychologists and a rising number of children and adolescents with untreated behavioral and mental disorders in the United States (Castillo et al., 2014). The current national ratio of school psychologists to students is estimated to be 1:1211, which is a concerning shift from the recommended ratio of 1:500-1:700, school psychologists to students (NASP, n.d.-a). This ongoing shortage may lead to issues both for the school psychologists themselves and for the students they help. For instance, Schilling et al. (2017) found that 90% of school psychologists have reported experiencing burnout at some point in their career. In addition, the large number of caseloads that contribute to burnout utilize a significant amount of time. Benson et al. (2019) explained that school psychologists spend an estimated 50% of their time performing assessments and services for special education (SPED). Although these SPED assessments are important, mental health interventions and meetings should also be prioritized, but have not been, due to lack of personnel (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020, as cited in Winsor & Mueller, 2020). The solution for this shortage is not simple. However, potential ideas include testing different recruitment methods, examining

expansions on current graduate school programs for school psychology, and addressing the funding allocated to schools at a federal and state level.

*Keywords:* shortage, school psychologist, mental health, special education, students, burnout, solutions.

## **Advocating for the Advocates: School Psychologists Are Important in Addressing Mental Health Concerns Among Students**

Sometimes people must depend on the support of others when they cannot help themselves. Take one boy in an elementary school, as exemplified in a popular educational news source, Education North Carolina, in 2019. Although this boy was a capable student, most school faculty saw him as a troublemaker, due to his behavioral issues, and subsequently referred him to the school psychologist. Being familiar with these difficulties in students and having reviewed this boy's file, the school psychologist recognized that the boy had an autism spectrum disorder and allergic rhinitis, struggles that were unknown to his teachers and other staff members. Leigh Kokenes, this boy's school psychologist, observed, "There's an educational impact for this medical diagnosis that he has." The boy constantly missed school and lived in a state of discomfort while in class, resulting in behavior that his teachers interpreted as acting out (as cited in Fofaria, 2019, para. 24). Kokenes pushed for a diagnosis and, with the proper educational services, he rid this boy of his "troublemaker" status and placed him on the path to success (Fofaria, 2019). Unfortunately, not all students in his place are fortunate enough to have a school psychologist help them when they cannot help themselves.

This boy is just one student among millions in the United States who suffer from mental health challenges accompanied by behavioral issues that school psychologists can help to alleviate. School psychologists play an essential role in students' mental health and education as they address the academic, social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students (National Association of School Psychologists [NASP], n.d.-b). Due to their extensive training and responsibilities, a school psychologist typically functions as the advocate for the student, dedicating their efforts to understanding the struggling students' needs and relaying that information to parents, teachers, and other school administrators in order to create the ideal learning environment (NASP, n.d.-b). These experts are especially needed now, as mental health issues among adolescents are steadily increasing in the United States (Mental Health America, n.d.). However, a problematic shortage in qualified school psychologists has persisted for decades, and the shortage is projected to continue into 2025 (Castillo et al., 2014). The current national ratio of school psychologists to students is estimated to be 1:1211, with some areas in the country reaching 1:5000; this is a concerning shift from the recommended ratio of 1:500-1:700 school psychologists to students (NASP, n.d.-a). Furthermore,

an inverse relationship between the number of students diagnosed with mental health issues and the number of school psychologists to aid the students continues to develop and will likely lead to a variety of difficulties for both.

As a result of the ever-increasing workload, many school psychologists are experiencing burnout, often diminishing the quality of their services and hindering their availability to perform their duties. Burnout is defined as the state of mental, physical, and emotional exhaustion regarding one's work environment. This is a prevalent issue shown by Schilling et al. (2017), who found that 90% of school psychologists have reported experiencing burnout at some point in their career (Mayo Clinic, 2012, as cited in Schilling et al., 2017). Additionally, the majority of school psychologists' time is often placed on the important task of special education (SPED) services in order to uphold the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA); furthermore, the imbalance of supply and demand between the growing number of students and relatively low number of school psychologists may limit the quality of additional mental health services and interventions that school psychologists can provide (American Psychological Association, n.d.). Potential solutions for the ongoing shortage of school psychologists are not simple. Nevertheless, the subsequent repercussions such as burnout, an overload of SPED assessments, and neglect of mental health interventions illuminate the growing need to combat the shortage, not only for the benefit of the students, but also for their advocates.

## **Burnout Among School Psychologists**

Outnumbered and overwhelmed, school psychologists often experience job burnout. In order to standardize interpretations of burnout among researchers, Maslach and Jackson (1986) developed a model known as the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) to rate and measure burnout according to a multifactor definition of burnout that consists of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. Schilling and Randolph (2020) expanded on these three principles, explaining the following: how emotional exhaustion refers to the fatigue and overextension of being drained within a work environment, how depersonalization refers to detachment from one's career and potential hostility towards others, and how reduced personal accomplishment refers to reduced feelings of motivation and subdued sense of accomplishment. These negative emotions can be attributed to different factors within the work environment; in addition,

a dwindling workforce in relation to demand may heighten the other stressors (Schilling & Randolph, 2020). These findings indicate that unrealistically high caseloads may contribute to burnout and likely affect not only the well-being of the school psychologist, but also their effectiveness.

Over the years, studies have attempted to measure the amount of burnout using the MBI. In 1992, Huebner employed the MBI and reported that 36% of a random sample of school psychologists had high levels of emotional exhaustion, 10% had high levels of depersonalization, and 28% had low levels of personal accomplishment (as cited in Schilling & Randolph, 2020). Compared with more recent assessments of burnout, Boccio et al. (2016) recorded that more than 33% of a sample of school psychologists across the country reported having high levels of emotional exhaustion, 5% reported having high levels of depersonalization, and 12% reported having low levels of personal accomplishment. Similarly, Schilling et al. (2017) observed that 46% of their sample had high levels of emotional exhaustion, 6% had high levels of depersonalization, and 26% had low levels of personal accomplishment. These findings indicate that burnout may be a consistent, ongoing issue, and emphasis needs to be placed on addressing emotional exhaustion and increasing personal accomplishment to reduce burnout.

Another type of empirical analysis that has been used to measure burnout involves surveys on job satisfaction. However, unlike the results of the MBI, these research findings tend to be polarized between the past and present. Worrell et al. (2006) reported that in 1982 and 1992, 86% of school psychologists claimed to be either satisfied or very satisfied with their job, with that percentage increasing to 91% in 2004. Recently, however, with a stronger emphasis on mental health services over the past several years and mental illness increasing steadily each year, the larger caseloads and demands that school psychologists face today have given rise to higher stress loads and less job satisfaction within the field of school psychology (Schilling et al., 2017). For these reasons, it is not surprising that current surveys have found slightly more than 90% of school psychologists have reported experiencing burnout at some point in their career and that subsequent focus has been placed on identifying the causes and finding solutions to these issues (Schilling et al., 2017). Surveys collected by Schilling and Randolph (2020) reported that school psychologists believed they would experience less burnout with more manageable caseloads and a stronger workforce. The emphasis should therefore be shifting attention to filling positions to combat shortages in order to relieve the stress that school psychologists currently are experiencing (Schilling &

Randolph, 2020). With a limited supply of trained personnel combatting the increasing demand for mental health issues, school psychologists are feeling the strain. Additionally, students cannot afford to have their advocates mentally overwhelmed and potentially leave the already understaffed field of school psychology. As feelings of burnout have increased over the years, research shows the need for an increase in professionals to protect school psychologists so they can continue to protect students.

## **A High Demand for SPED Services**

Because of the ongoing shortage of school psychologists, the depth, breadth, and quality of services they are able to offer is reduced as they must often focus the large volume of intakes for SPED evaluations and programs (Boccio et al., 2016). School faculty members primarily focus on SPED services because they are important tasks mandated by law, and school psychologists in particular play an important role in helping students with disabilities (NASP, n.d.-a). The IDEA is a law protecting over 7.5 million children with disabilities' rights to receive public education along with the appropriate SPED services (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA], 2020). In order to provide these services, the IDEA provides federal funding to schools so long as they comply with certain principles outlined by the IDEA (American Psychological Association, n.d.). One of these principles includes ensuring that every student with a suspected learning or behavioral disability receives all the related evaluations. Additionally, the IDEA ensures that an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is created if needed. An IEP outlines specific steps that the school faculty, the student's family, and the student may follow in order to provide the best learning environment for the student (American Psychological Association, n.d.).

Therefore, school psychologists are valuable members of the school faculty because their work often carries out key requirements of the IDEA. Benson et al. (2019) explained that school psychologists spend an estimated 50% of their time performing SPED assessments and indicated that school psychologists' top two areas of involvement included psychoeducational evaluations and creating IEPs for students requiring SPED services. The disproportionate ratio of school psychologists to students in turn leads to some school psychologists assessing an average of 204 students for their diagnosed needs as opposed to school psychologists assessing the recommended range, between 65-95 students

(Griffith, 2018). These large numbers, along with pressure to comply with the IDEA so schools receive subsequent funding, may help explain why school psychologists often must prioritize testing and SPED services, leaving little time for anything else. Surveys from teachers and other school faculty report that they do not want a lack of emphasis or reduction in assessment services, but instead simply want school psychologists to perform more responsibilities on top of these testing duties (Watkins et al., 2001). School psychologists similarly wish they had more time to perform other duties, as opposed to spending the majority of their time performing only a portion of their capabilities as mental health providers. For these reasons, even if students are fortunate to have a local school psychologist, most students are not even aware of their presence or given the opportunity to meet with them because the school psychologist is often occupied with reports and tests and is therefore inaccessible to the students who may be silently struggling.

## **Reduced Quality of Mental Health Interventions**

The lack of personnel can be especially damaging to the quality of services that seek to promote mental health, such as suicide awareness, prevention, and intervention, as these aspects of school psychology usually come after performing other duties such as assessments for SPED services (Clopton & Haselhuhn, 2009). Mental Health America (n.d.) reports that suicidal thoughts have been found to increase in individuals between 11–17 years old, and that towards the end of 2020, over 50% of adolescents had suicidal thoughts for more than half of the week for two weeks. Additionally, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2020) discussed that suicide is the 10th highest cause of death overall in the United States, and unfortunately the ranking increases to the second highest cause of death among 10–24 year olds (as cited in Winsor & Mueller, 2020). Furthermore, although qualified professionals in school settings are there to address these needs, the problem continues to worsen, leading researchers to wonder about the quality of service that school psychologists provide with respect to suicide.

Research suggests that a majority of school psychologists may lack confidence and competency in suicidal postvention. O’Neill et al. (2020) surveyed 111 school psychologists in North Carolina, using a 4-point Likert scale, with the answers ranging from “not at all prepared” to “very prepared” on questions

pertaining to the participants self-perceived training, experience, and confidence in preventing suicidal contagion as part of postvention. The data showed that approximately 75% of school psychologists reported feeling “slightly prepared” or “moderately prepared,” while 15% reported feeling “not at all prepared,” and only 10% of respondents reported feeling “very prepared” on their ability to provide postvention response (see Figure 1). This study additionally showed that the percentage of school psychologists who felt only slightly or moderately prepared to prevent suicide contagion effects increased to approximately 90%. Furthermore, O’Neill et al. (2020) concluded that if the psychologists are not prepared, they will be significantly less effective in preventing contagion effects of suicide. Ideally, a large portion of a school psychologist’s time and effort would be focused on preventing the problem of suicide before it even happens. Unfortunately, if school psychologists are too overwhelmed due to their lack of numbers in the workforce, then they may not feel prepared or able to perform prevention or postvention duties with the capacity that the task demands.

In addition to enhanced suicide protocols and services, there are several other duties that a limited number of school psychologists struggle to perform. It is estimated that every year one in five children in the United States demonstrates symptoms of a mental health disorder and, unfortunately, several of them are not getting the treatment that they need (Anderson & Cardoza, 2016). For instance, only 27% of youth with severe depression received consistent treatment in 2017–2018, and the problem has persisted since 2011 (Mental Health America, n.d.). The lack of mental health support has become so severe that it has become an official public health crisis (Committee on School Health, n.d., as cited in Eklund et al., 2017). Although there are qualified personnel to help, such as school psychologists, only half of them report being able to perform their duties in mental and behavioral services (Eklund et al., 2017).

## **A Student’s Silent Struggles**

Anderson and Cardoza (2016) shared how a young student named Katie was one of the many students who did not receive any support from school-based intervention services or faculty members when she was demonstrating mental illness signs and symptoms. After moving to a new school, Katie felt isolated and quickly went from being an honor-roll student to failing her classes and missing several days of school. She also rapidly gained weight and was bullied by other

students, which led her to cut herself every day. Eventually Katie went to a therapist outside of school where she was diagnosed with bulimia and depression. She was also admitted to the hospital after explaining that she wanted to die. Katie shared her frustration about high school, saying, “I felt like every single day was a bad day. . . I felt like nobody wanted to help me. . . I was so invisible to them” (as cited in Anderson & Cardoza, 2016, paras. 13–14).

Looking back on this dark and confusing time in her life, one of Katie’s largest worries was how none of the faculty members asked her what was wrong (Anderson & Cardoza, 2016). School psychologists and other staff members’ goals are to help the students thrive and succeed, just as the school psychologist, Leigh Kokenes, was able to help the young boy with an autism spectrum disorder and allergic rhinitis (Fofaria, 2019). However, examples such as Katie’s demonstrate how, despite school psychologists’ best intentions, there are still students who are silently struggling and may desperately lack the attention they need from qualified individuals and quality mental health intervention services. Clopton and Haselhuhn (2009) explained that the way to prevent any child from being left behind was to have an adequate number of school psychologists to address the needs of the students, both on a systematic level as well as on a personal level. Unfortunately, Katie felt the consequences of the consistent lack of personnel, as the school psychologist was not accessible to her in her time of need.

## **Potential Solutions**

There are several suggested solutions that may help combat the shortage of school psychologists. Some of them include the following: testing different recruitment methods with an emphasis on diversity, examining potential expansions on current graduate school programs for school psychology, and addressing the need for additional funding. These solutions are not simple, but they are important steps in benefitting both the school psychologists themselves and the hundreds of students that they provide service to.

Increasing both the number and the diversity of potential graduate school students through different recruitment methods is a needed change. This may be done through exposing more undergraduate students to a potential career in school psychology. Additionally, a particular focus in increasing the number of diverse applicants should be considered as approximately 87% of school psychologists are White and 86% only speak English (Walcott and Hyson, 2018

as cited in Morrison, 2020). This is a striking contrast to the diversity found in public schools throughout the United States. In 2018, approximately 47% of students identified as White, 27% as Hispanic, 15% as African American, 5% as Asian, 4% as two or more races, less than 1% as Pacific Islander, and less than 1% as American Indian (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Additionally, approximately 20% of students speak a language other than English in their homes (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Furthermore, several students would benefit from having someone they could better identify and communicate with should problems arise and they seek help.

Increasing the output of qualified school psychologists in graduate school programs is another necessity in combatting the lack of school psychologists. Morrison (2020) found that among eight universities, the median admission rate for graduate students entering an Education Specialist Program was only 23%. This is a significantly low number considering the need for more school psychologists. However, even if graduate programs wanted to admit more students, there is a limited number of faculty members within a graduate school to help train and mentor the students. For instance, a national survey revealed that 94 school psychology programs had 136 openings for faculty members (Clopton & Haselhuhn, 2009). Looking to expand current graduate school programs is a key factor in creating a solution to the shortage, since currently the field is about 35,000–63,000 school psychologists short in order to meet the national recommended ratio of school psychologists to students (Griffith, 2018). Different possibilities of increasing the output of graduate students include recruiting more professors and faculty members in order to realistically train a higher number of students at a faster rate. This could in turn lead to more positions being available for new applicants each year. This is not a simple solution, however, and would require more exposure to the field of school psychology as well as additional funds in order to further progress.

Furthermore, an increase in funding would help attain a stronger workforce in the field of school psychology. In 2019, the IDEA granted approximately \$12.8 billion to schools across the country, which helped over 7 million children (Dragoo, 2019). However, these federal funds still fall about 15% short of the amount of money that is needed for individual student costs (Blad, 2021). This issue worsens knowing that the current budget is calculated with the existing small number of school psychologists. Therefore, if a school psychologist receives an average salary of \$77,430, it would cost \$2.7–4.9 billion annually if schools

hired an additional 35,000–63,000 school psychologists as recommended by the NASP (Griffith, 2018). Currently, approximately 48% of public schools' funding comes from state income taxes, 44% from local property taxes, and 8% from federal sources such as the IDEA (Chen, 2021). Each state is unique in how they collect and allot money as each state has different costs and funding needed per student (Chen, 2021). However, unpredictable economic recessions may lead to reduced state budgets, leading to a need for additional funding from other sources or a reduction in current school programs (Chen, 2021). Funding is not the only issue, however, as there are not enough people successfully entering the field of school psychology itself as previously articulated. There is not an easy solution to the shortage of school psychologists, but policymakers and educators should facilitate these steps to combat this problem and help students get the support they need.

## **Conclusion**

Advocates such as school psychologists exist to help troubled students overcome the odds and thrive. A single person with proper training, quality testing, and enough time can take a struggling student labeled by others as a troublemaker and develop a plan to help the student succeed (Fofaria, 2019). However, given the emphasis on individualized support that school psychologists provide, serious consequences often arise when there is one only advocate assigned to several hundreds of students. For decades, there has been a severe shortage in school psychologists, which has led to a variety of difficulties for both the faculty involved and the students needing their services (Castillo et al., 2014). A proportional increase in school psychologists should be prioritized, as it is illogical to spend time and resources preparing school psychologists to help struggling students with their unique challenges, only to overwhelm the psychologists with unrealistically high numbers of students who need their time and attention.

School psychologists frequently experience job burnout, and Schilling and Randolph (2020) reported that school psychologists believe they would experience less burnout with more manageable caseloads and a stronger workforce. Given that burnout affects not only the well-being of the school psychologist, but also ensures a decrease in their effectiveness in helping students, there needs to be an increase in school psychologists to reduce the stress. Additionally,

in compliance with IDEA, the majority of attention is placed on assessments for SPED, which may be damaging to the quality of additional services that school psychologists are trained in and attempt to provide (Clopton & Haselhuhn, 2009). Negative impacts are especially prevalent in mental health interventions, such as suicide prevention, as O'Neill et al. (2020) asserted that a large majority of school psychologists are underprepared and underexperienced in the prevention of suicides. Given that children spend a large amount of time in school, school psychologists should be more engaged in working with all students, both those requiring SPED services and those who may be internally struggling with other stressors. Examples such as Katie's demonstrate how, despite some school psychologist's best efforts, there are still students who desperately lack the attention they need from qualified individuals who are on their side; Katie is not alone in feeling the consequences of the persistent lack of personnel.

One limitation of the extant research related to the topics discussed in this paper is a lack of geographical diversity within the survey samples of school psychologists; different states reflect different ratios of school psychologists to students. Additionally, the relatively low sample sizes in some surveys make it hard to effectively generalize their findings. However, moderate to severe shortages ranging all across the country and the subsequent feelings of burnout can reasonably be applied to the majority of school psychologists (NASP, n.d.-a). Future research should be conducted to further identify the factors that contribute to the lack of school psychologists and address how to quickly and effectively apply solutions for the shortage. The number of students diagnosed with mental health disorders in the United States may not change, but hopefully the number of school psychologists advocating for them will.

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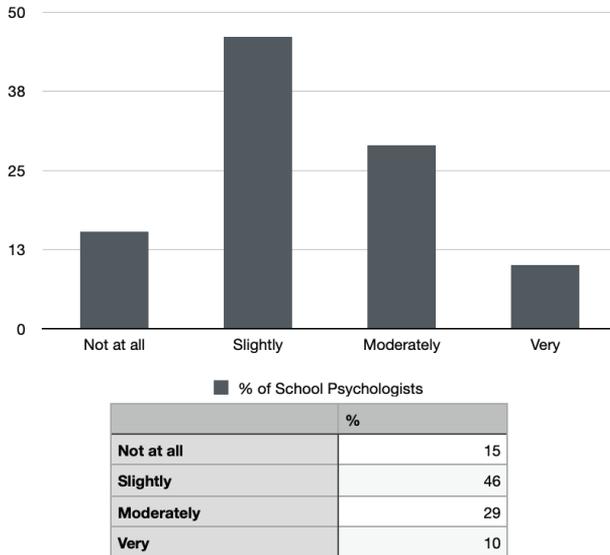
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## Appendix

**Figure 1**

Preparedness Level to Provide Suicide Postvention Response



Note. Approximately 75% of school psychologists reported feeling “slightly prepared” or “moderately prepared,” while 15.3% reported feeling “not at all prepared,” and only 9.9% of respondents reported feeling “very prepared” on their ability to provide postvention response. Adapted from “Suicide Postvention Practices in Schools: School Psychologists’ Experiences, Training, and Knowledge,” (O’Neill et al., 2020).