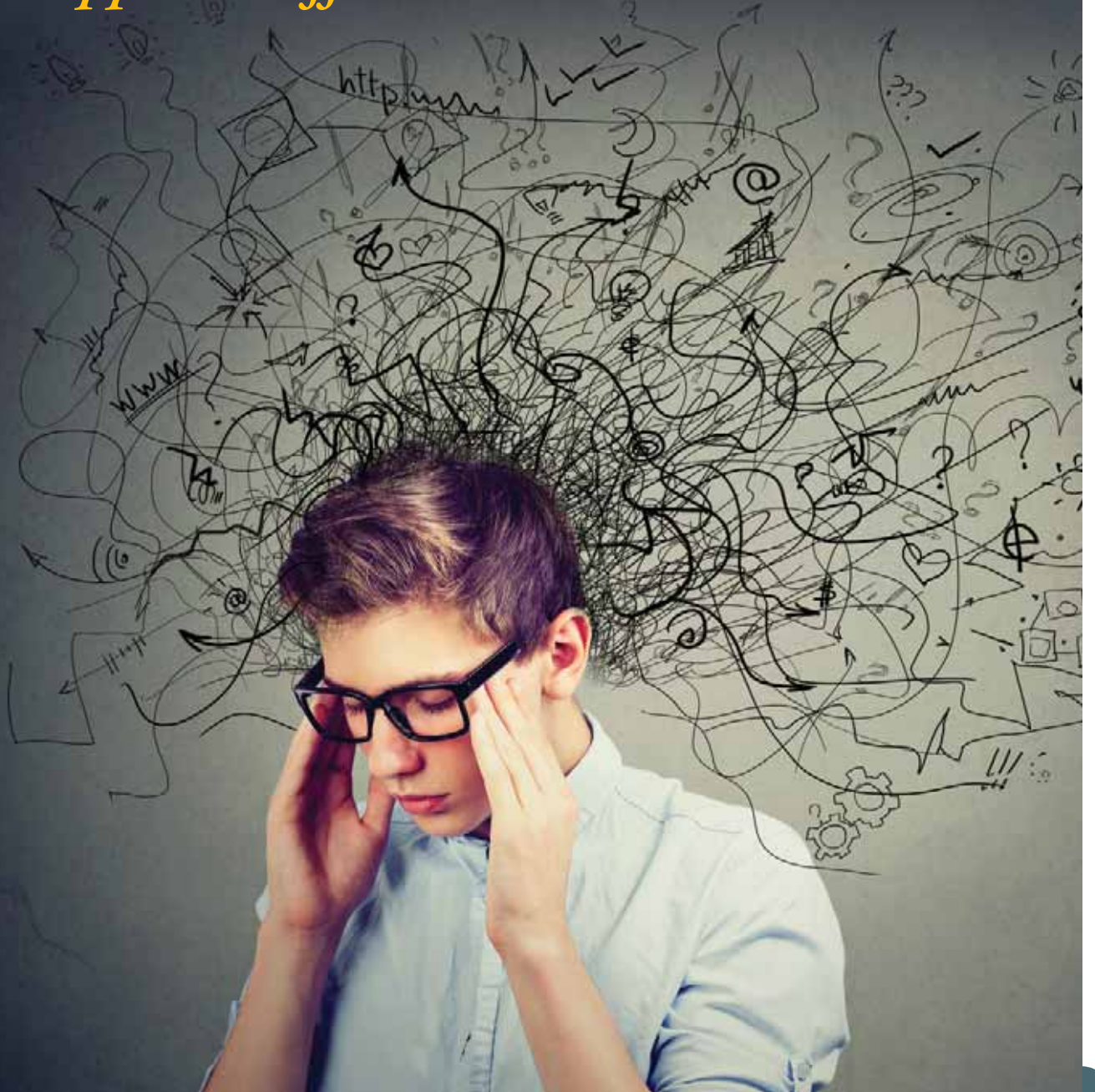
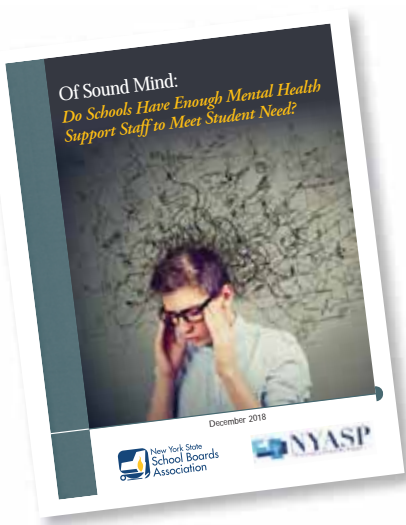


Of Sound Mind:

Do Schools Have Enough Mental Health Support Staff to Meet Student Need?



December 2018



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I. Introduction

One in five school-age children suffers from a mental disorder.

Source: World Health Organization



The number of young people affected by mental health issues is staggering. Half of all mental health illnesses start by 14 years of age.¹ An average of 79 young people aged 10 to 19 died by suicide in New York each year from 2012 to 2014.² Opioid-related health facility visits by school age children have increased by more than 100 percent in New York since 2010.³

For these and many other reasons, school leaders across New York have sharpened their focus on issues related to mental and behavioral health. While these problems are complex and often originate outside the school, they present themselves in schools every day.

One key strategy school districts use to meet the mental health needs of students is to staff their schools with school psychologists. School psychologists typically provide mental health services to students directly and work with school administrators, parents and teachers to address the social, emotional and developmental needs of students.

The ratio of school psychologists to students is a critical aspect of the quality of services to students. The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) recommends ratios of no more than 1,000 students per school psychologist.⁴ However, the actual ratio in each school should be determined by the level of staffing needed to provide comprehensive school psychological services in accordance with the school's needs.

When school psychologists are providing comprehensive and preventive services (i.e., evaluations, consultation, individual/group counseling, crisis response, behavioral interventions, etc.), this ratio should not exceed 500 to 700 students per school psychologist to ensure quality of student outcomes.⁵ When school psychologists are assigned to work primarily with student populations that have particularly intensive special needs (e.g., students with significant emotional or behavioral disorders), this student-to-school psychologist ratio should be even lower.

Effective July 1, 2018, schools in New York are required by law to provide mental health instruction as part of the health curriculum. The goal of the new requirement is to equip students with knowledge of their own mental wellness, a deeper understanding of the wellness of others, and awareness of when and how to access treatment for oneself and others.

While this is a positive step forward, it may serve to increase the demand for psychological services. As students become more aware of mental wellness, they are likely to seek help for themselves or express concern about classmates, friends or family. The ability of school psychologists and other school-based mental health professionals to serve a greater number of students in a given school district will depend on the staffing ratios in that district and the specific needs of the school population, particularly the number of students identified as having special needs.

Unfortunately, some New York communities do not have enough mental health practitioners to meet student need. This has the potential to “impact the high-quality access and delivery of services to children, families, and schools.”⁶

This report, a collaborative effort between the New York State School Boards Association (NYSSBA) and the New York Association of School Psychologists (NYASP), examines whether there are enough qualified school psychologists in New York State to meet student need. It also explores regional disparities and offers recommendations for school leaders and state policymakers to address these challenges.

¹ World Health Organization. Child and adolescent mental health. Retrieved from https://www.who.int/mental-health/maternal-child/child_adolescent/en/.

² New York State Department of Health, Bureau of Occupational Health and Injury Prevention. (2016). Incidence of Suicide/Self-Inflicted Injuries Deaths, Hospitalizations, and Emergency Department† (ED) Visits, New York State Residents, 2012-2014. Retrieved from https://www.health.ny.gov/statistics/prevention/injury_prevention/docs/selfinflicted_all_plus.pdf.

³ NYSSBA analysis of New York State Department of Health data. All Payer Opioid-Related Facility Visits in New York State: Beginning 2010 (SPARCS). (2016). Retrieved from <https://health.data.ny.gov/Health/All-Payer-Opioid-Related-Facility-Visits-in-New-Yo/rxm6-fp54>.

⁴ 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.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ National Association of School Psychologists. Who Are School Psychologists. Retrieved from <https://www.nasponline.org/about-school-psychology/who-are-school-psychologists>.

II. Snapshot of New York

This report relies on original survey data as well as information published by the New York State Education Department (SED) to draw conclusions about the state of the school psychologist workforce in New York's public schools. This section of the report begins by discussing the survey findings, then provides an analysis of SED data.



- 1 *Western New York*
- 2 *Finger Lakes*
- 3 *Southern Tier*
- 4 *Central New York*
- 5 *St. Lawrence-Black River*
- 6 *North Country*
- 7 *Capital Region*
- 8 *Mohawk Valley*
- 9 *Mid-Hudson Valley*
- 10 *Lower Hudson Valley*
- 11 *Nassau County*
- 12 *Suffolk County*
- 13 *New York City*

The majority of school districts in New York are within the recommended ratios specified by NASP in the previous section. Ninety-six percent of districts reported having student/school psychologist ratios of 1,000 or fewer students for every school psychologist in the 2016-17 school year. Nearly half of districts (47 percent) reported having ratios of 500 or fewer students per school psychologist and more than three-quarters of districts (77 percent) had ratios of 700 or fewer students per school psychologist.⁷ The statewide average ratio was 555 to 1.

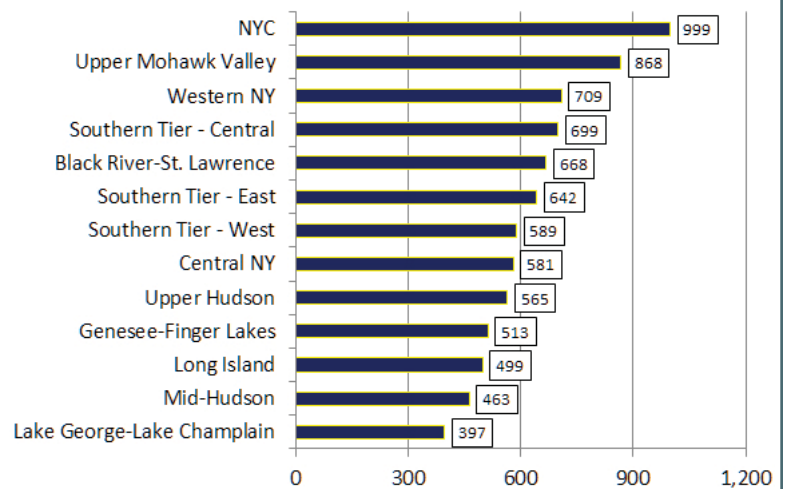
While generally meeting NASP guidelines, some areas of the state have student/psychologist ratios that are greater than others, indicating that school psychologists there have greater caseloads. New York City had the greatest number of students per school psychologist (999 to 1) of any area of the state. The Upper Mohawk Valley was second highest, with a ratio of 868 to 1 [Figure 1]. Other regions that exceeded the statewide average were Western New York, the Southern Tier, Black River-St. Lawrence, Central New York and Upper Hudson.

However, the relatively low ratios of students to school psychologists may mask a deeper need. NYSSBA and NYASP designed surveys that were administered to two separate groups: school superintendents and school psychologists. Surveying the two groups made it possible to compare similarities and differences in their perceptions regarding the roles of school psychologists and staffing levels.⁸



Fig. 1

STAFFING RATIO - GEOGRAPHIC AREA



⁷ These calculations are based on Personnel Master File data published by the New York State Education Department. New York State Education Department, Information and Reporting Services. (2018, March 3). Personnel Master File (PMF). Retrieved from <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/irs/pmf/>.

⁸ The surveys were conducted from April through June of 2018. One was sent to 676 school superintendents across the state, of which 263 responded – a rate of 39 percent. The other was sent to 901 school psychologists who are members of NYASP. A total of 143 responses were received for a rate of 16 percent.

Nearly three in 10 superintendents statewide said their school district did not have enough school psychologist positions to meet student need. This belief was strongest in the Mohawk Valley (60 percent); Central New York (44 percent); Capital Region (37 percent); St. Lawrence-Black River (35 percent); Suffolk County (33 percent); and the North Country (32 percent), all areas where at least a third or more of school superintendents thought they needed more school psychologist positions to meet student need [Figure 2].

School psychologists were even more likely than superintendents to say schools in their district were inadequately staffed with school psychologists, with 66 percent saying their schools did not have enough school psychologists to meet student need [Figure 3].

If student-to-school psychologist ratios in New York are relatively low, why do such large percentages of superintendents and school psychologists believe their schools do not have enough school psychologists to meet student need?

There are three answers.

1. The NYSSBA/NYASP survey found that almost half of superintendents (45 percent) and nearly all school psychologists (95 percent) indicated there were barriers to students accessing appropriate psychological help. These included not having enough mental health support staff, such as school counselors and school social workers. Other reasons included the significant clerical responsibilities often assumed by school psychologists, diverting them from actual mental and behavioral health provision.

Elsie Rodriguez, the superintendent of the Monroe-Woodbury school district, had all 13.4 of her district's school psychologist positions filled in 2017-18. However, she said she needed at least two more to meet the significant social-emotional and behavioral needs of her students.

"Our psychologists are stretched too thin and therefore remain in crisis and reactive mode instead of providing proactive and prosocial skill building for our students," she said. "Psychologists spend too much time managing one crisis after another, especially at the secondary level."⁹

Scott Persampieri, director of recruitment and selection for the Syracuse school district, said his district does not have enough psychologist positions to meet student need. He said they have had to use retired psychologists as support in buildings with greater needs.

"I believe one barrier is the demands on psychologists in a school setting," he said. "They are responsible for more than just assessing students."¹⁰

2. Much – if not all – of a school psychologist's time is devoted to meeting minimum state and federal requirements. As a result, that leaves little time to provide comprehensive mental health needs. One of the most substantial legal requirements are psychological evaluations of students suspected of having educational disabilities. Students determined to have disabilities are referred to committees on special education (CSE). This process often requires school psychologists to perform clerical duties such as scheduling and attending committee meetings in which a student's individualized education program or "504 plan" is discussed.

Fig. 2

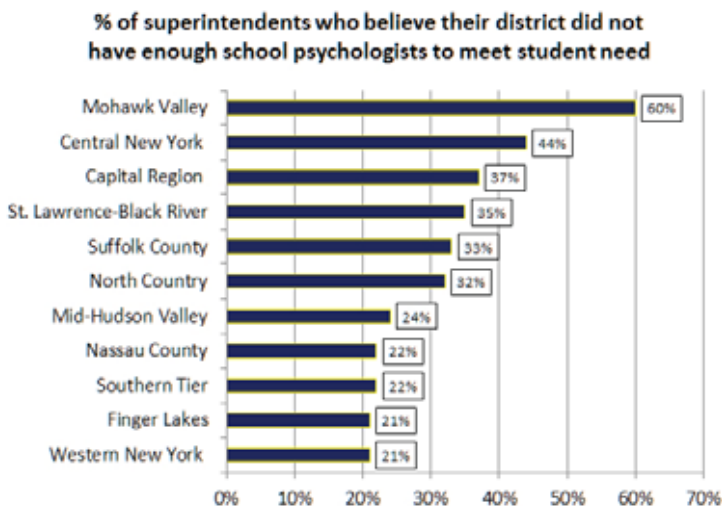
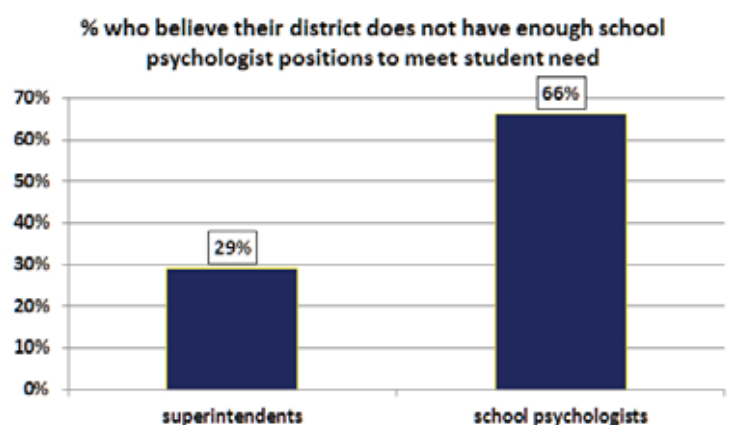


Fig. 3



⁹ Email communication with Elsie Rodriguez. May 10, 2018.

¹⁰ Email communication with Scott Persampieri. May 4, 2018.

Because of this focus on navigating the world of special education requirements and compliance, school psychologists often are unable to engage in more comprehensive mental health services, such as:

- Crisis intervention for students and their families;
- Early screening to determine whether students may be at risk academically and emotionally;
- Consultation, which involves psychologists training teachers and other school staff to work with students with academic or social-emotional challenges.

Thomas Putnam, the superintendent of the Penfield school district in the suburban Rochester area, said his district could use more school psychologists even though his district's ratio of 603 students per school psychologist falls comfortably within recommended guidelines.

"The work required for CSE meetings and testing can take them away from other social-emotional needs of all students," he said.¹¹

Similarly, Jason Andrews, the superintendent of the Windsor school district in Broome County, says his district has enough school psychologist positions to meet basic requirements, but with an increase in special education students, psychologists there are spread very thin with testing responsibilities.

"We are fortunate to have other staff who can provide the counseling support to our student population so that is one less demand on our school psychologists," he said. "However, if I were to have our psychologists run our CSE and 504 meetings, they would not be able to provide all their other services. To allow our psychologists to meet their current responsibilities, the Director of Special Programs chairs our CSE/504 meetings unless there is a scheduling conflict."¹²

According to Jamie Cruikshank, superintendent of the Norwood-Norfolk school district, his district barely has enough school psychologists to meet student. However, he said his district has "NO flexibility to use our psychologists for teacher support of behavioral plans. They are only able to do the mandated work."¹³

3. In some districts, particularly in more remote rural areas, schools are the de facto mental health providers because of a lack of licensed child psychologists practicing in the community or inordinately long waitlists for community agencies. As a result, there is a greater demand for school mental health services in these areas as families are unable to access services outside of school.



This is the case in Silver Creek, a small rural district located in Chautauqua County in Western New York. According to Superintendent Todd Crandall, that is a significant barrier to students accessing appropriate psychological help.

According to Crandall, "there are not enough mental health and/or family counseling services in the community to address the non-educational concerns that are impacting our families."¹⁴

Noelle Short, superintendent of the Long Lake school district in the Adirondacks, said the greatest barrier to psychological help for students in her district was access.

"I am working hard to figure out a way to offer mental health services in our building," she said. "We are several miles from any clinics so it creates burdens for families and for students to access appointments. They often miss school or do not receive services. If services were available within the building this would remove the burden of transportation and the time allotted for travel."¹⁵

Timothy Mundell, superintendent of the rural Berne-Knox-Westerlo school district, shared a similar story. "As a rural district, we are isolated from services. Isolation, transportation and money create barriers to receiving ongoing services for the long-term social/emotional development of students."¹⁶

Lack of community mental health services is a problem not only in rural districts. Rome school district, a small city district in Oneida County, also suffers from this problem.

"The only real barrier that exists is the lack of community resources available to students/families in need," said Superintendent Peter Blake. "However, those that do exist work extremely well with the district and each other to provide what we can for our children and families."¹⁷

¹¹ Email communication with Thomas Putnam. May 11, 2018.

¹² Personal email communication with Jason Andrews. May 10, 2018.

¹³ Personal communication with James Cruikshank. May 7, 2018.

¹⁴ Personal email communication with Todd Crandall. May 4, 2018.

¹⁵ Personal email communication with Noelle Short. May 4, 2018.

¹⁶ Personal email communication with Timothy Mundell. May 4, 2018.

¹⁷ Personal email communication with Peter Blake. May 4, 2018.



The survey of school psychologists, which was done anonymously, received a number of comments illustrating the depth to which schools struggle to provide enough school psychologists to meet the mental health needs of their students. Here is a sampling:

"Limited staff, school psychologists at elementary level taking on too many roles and not having the time to follow through."

"The significant paperwork component of the CSE chairperson job consumes a significant amount of time."

"So many roles being filled that there is not enough time."

"High mental health needs, not enough mental health staff to provide it all, and rural location makes it difficult to provide outside mental health support."

"There are not enough providers for children in need. Caseloads are astronomical and are not considered best practice in terms of student to SP (school psychologist) ratio."

"Although we provide great support, limited availability due to the many hats I wear is a barrier to providing a wider variety of preventative services."

"Psychologist too busy, too much secretarial/administrative work unnecessarily taking up the school psychologist time."

"Often not enough time in the day to be more proactive re: reaching students, running more services - it is like triage: you address the most pressing needs, the crisis in front of you, the most disruptive students/situations while other more quietly brewing situations and students who are hurting but in less noticeable ways go unserved."

"Not enough school psychologists; using outside agencies to provide counseling with constant turnover so that parents and students do not want to go to that agency and this is the district's go-to to provide mental health rather than using the school psychologist because there are so many assessments to be done by one person."

"Between myself and school social worker for 950 students, I spend most of my time chairing CSE meetings and testing."

"At times stigmas interfere with students accessing help, more often it is lack of availability and/or lack of financial ability for parents to pursue necessary help. Additionally, lack of available programs to me to refer students also hinders the student's ability to receive necessary help.."

"Our county mental health providers require parents to participate on a monthly basis, and if this does not happen, the students do not receive services from them. That's when the psychologists and school counselors pick up additional students."

"Limited availability of alternative/clinical supports in region."

"Wait lists for availability for psychological help; difficulty accessing due to transportation difficulties."

"I am struggling with keeping up with the demands of being a CPSE chair and providing social-emotional support to my students. There are days I have not met with students because of the time sensitive material that needs to be completed for CPSE work."

"Too many district level services such as having to complete evaluations for students in BOCES programs. Even though my ratio for my building is 1:600, with the chairperson responsibilities my workload is at minimum doubled making my ratio for my building more like 1:1200."

"Assessment demands consume too much time when more time should be spent implementing prevention strategies."

III. Recommendations

This report suggests significant numbers of both school psychologists and school superintendents believe there is not enough professional mental health support in their districts to meet student need, particularly in small, rural districts.

School districts rely on a number of short-term, stopgap strategies to meet students' social, emotional and behavioral needs. For example, nearly half of school superintendents (45 percent) said they contract with their local BOCES or another outside agency [Figure 4]. A little more than one-quarter of superintendents said they pull in other staff to fill in, such as school counselors or assigning one or more aides. Seventeen percent said they ask existing school psychologists to take on bigger caseloads.

However, students and schools need permanent, longer-term solutions. NYSSBA and NYASP plan to call attention to this research to make state policymakers and school leaders aware of the challenge for increasing the capacity of schools to meet their students' psychological needs.

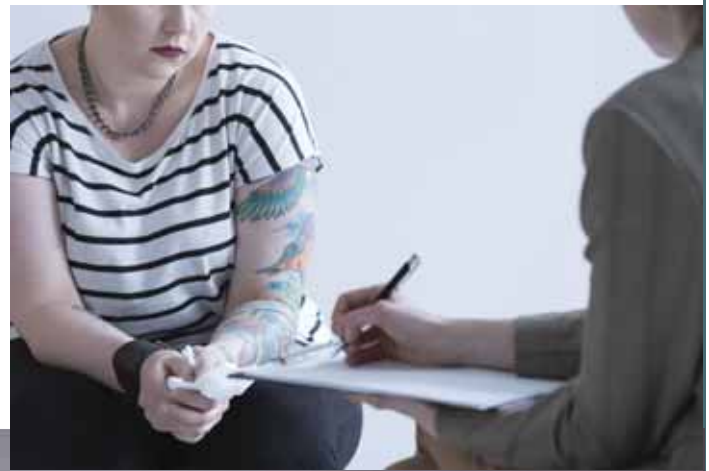


Fig. 4 When your district is unable to fill all its existing school psychologist positions, what do you do to meet student need?

Contract with BOCES or another outside agency	45%
Use other staff	28%
Ask existing psychologists to do more	17%
Hire more psychologists through the regular hiring process	10%
Use retirees	9%
Share with another district	4%
Perform only mandated services	4%
Hire per diem subs	3%
Delay/reschedule services	2%
Use interns	2%
Use local colleges	1%



The following are steps that can be taken at both the state and local levels.

STATE LEVEL

Provide incentives.

The State Education Department, local school psychology organizations and education programs should consider possible incentives and supports that could be implemented to help mitigate school psychology shortages. Incentives could include increased pay and other monetary incentives, the creation of formal “re-specialization” programs, availability of distance learning, development of internship programs, and monetary incentives for relocations to high need areas. In addition, the Legislature can take steps to ensure that the state is building capacity to meet the need for new generations of school psychologists by providing incentives and support for graduate program development in geographic areas that are most affected by any shortages.

Improve laws regarding licensure.

Under current state law, school psychologists can practice only in “exempt” settings: public and private schools, State Education Department approved preschool programs, New York State Department of Health Early Intervention programs, college and university settings, and/or some state and federal agencies. Practice in any other setting is considered unlawful, unless the individual has a doctoral degree in psychology (or equivalent) and is licensed in New York as a psychologist.

A bill that was introduced in the last legislative session and is expected to be reintroduced in the upcoming legislative session would provide licensure for school psychologists so they may also serve children and youth outside of schools. This would give youth access to a larger pool of professionals outside of school and make the profession more attractive.

LOCAL LEVEL

Reallocate routine clerical duties and expand the opportunities of school psychologists to use their specialized skills and knowledge.

School psychologists often have to perform duties that are not germane to their roles, such as creating special education committee meeting schedules, sending legal



notices and obtaining permission for evaluations. Having clerical staff perform these duties would free up time to provide targeted intervention for the mental and behavioral health needs of children and families.

Emphasize preventive work and student contact in job design.

School psychologists must complete at least 60 graduate semester hours in psychology and a year-long internship in a specialist-level degree program that emphasizes preparation in mental health and educational interventions, child development, learning, behavior, motivation, curriculum and instruction, assessment, consultation, collaboration, school law and systems. They must also be certified and/or licensed by the state in which they work.¹⁸

However, in large numbers of school districts, school psychologists are not using their myriad skills and abilities. Rather, many are preoccupied with navigating the world of special education requirements and compliance and performing clerical duties related to special education. In some settings, the role of the school psychologist is so narrow that it is difficult to attract qualified professionals who are interested in performing the broad role reflective of their training.¹⁹

School districts should reimagine the roles of school psychologists to place more priority on preventive work (e.g. screening, counseling, etc.) as part of tiered intervention systems. Capacity can also be increased by reviewing the tasks assigned to current school psychologists and modifying them, as appropriate, to take full advantage of their many skills.

¹⁸ New York Association of School Psychologists website. Retrieved from www.nyasp.org/professionalism/.

¹⁹ National Association of School Psychologists. Who Are School Psychologists. Retrieved from <https://www.nasponline.org/about-school-psychology/who-are-school-psychologists>.

Take full advantage of community mental health services.

While some communities lack extensive resources for mental health, community providers in many communities can offer supplementary or intensive services that go beyond the capacity of schools.²⁰ Partnerships with community providers are most effective when coordinated by school-employed mental health professionals, are defined by clear memoranda of understanding and reinforce an appreciation for the unique contribution each group makes to creating more seamless and comprehensive service delivery. This not only reduces gaps, redundancy, and conflict, it also reduces stress on families and supports their roles as primary caregivers and decision-makers regarding their child's development.²¹

Increase visibility of job openings.

Recruiters should continue to use traditional avenues of exposure such as attending open house and job/college fairs in order to increase visibility of job openings.

However, electronic media may provide another viable avenue for recruitment. Potential applicants report using internet searches and web pages as one of the primary

sources of information regarding school psychology.²² Recruiters could also use social media outlets such as Twitter and Facebook to advertise job openings. State associations and other agencies are encouraged to make job posting boards open to the public to allow those from out of state to identify potential opportunities.

Target outreach efforts to minorities.

School districts in areas with large minority populations should increase their outreach to attract more school psychologists who are members of minority groups. According to a survey by the National Association of School Psychologists, only 13 percent of school psychologists identified as racial and/or ethnic minorities. Moreover, only 14 percent reported fluency in a language other than English, and only half of these individuals reported involvement in bilingual or multilingual service delivery.²³ Efforts to increase the representation of culturally and linguistically diverse practitioners in school psychology would broaden the profession and benefit students including those studying English as a Second Language.



²⁰ National Association of School Psychologists. (2016). School-Based Mental Health Services: Improving Student Learning and Well-Being.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.



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