

Psychological News You Can Use

Pennsylvania Psychological Association

School Psychologists: Partners in Students' Success

by
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As the school year begins, parents are eager to implement strategies to help their children have a productive, happy, and healthy year. Establishing effective home-school partnerships is a key component to fostering children's educational success. One member of the school staff who is often not as well-known to parents as teachers, administrators, and counselors are, but who can play a critical role in helping students to be successful both in and out of the classroom, is the school psychologist. This article will briefly introduce you to this key member of the educational staff and his or her roles in the school setting.

Who Are School Psychologists?

It has been estimated that there are over 35,000 credentialed school psychologists in the United States, with almost 30,000 working primarily in the public school system (National Association of School Psychologists, 2008). School psychologists are trained at either the doctoral or the specialist (i.e., a program containing at least 60 graduate credits) level. Their training combines both educational and psychological principles so that they will be well-equipped to understand and address students' diverse academic, behavioral, emotional, and developmental needs. While most school psychologists choose to work in public K-12 school programs, some apply their training to working with children, adolescents, adults, and families in other settings, including: private schools, preschool programs, mental health treatment programs, juvenile justice facilities, hospitals, universities, and private practice (NASP, 2011). In other words, school psychologists may be found in just about any setting where their expertise is needed!

What Do School Psychologists Do?

While school psychologists do not necessarily work directly with each student in a school in the way that teachers do, they nonetheless work to support the learning and socioemotional development of all students. The National Association of School Psychologists describes the role of the school psychologist as follows: "School psychologists help children and youth succeed academically, socially, behaviorally, and emotionally. They collaborate with educators, parents, and other professionals to create safe, healthy, and supportive learning environments that strengthen connections between home, school, and the community for all students."



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What to Expect When You See a Child and Adolescent Psychologist

School psychologists foster student success in a number of different ways. They may work directly with students with academic, cognitive, behavioral, or emotional challenges that are causing them to experience difficulty in school. In these situations, school psychologists work as part of a team that includes the students' parents, teachers, and other school staff (such as speech and language therapists, occupational or physical therapists, and school counselors) and/or community providers (such as private therapists or tutors), as well as the student himself or herself, when appropriate. The school psychologist and team work together in order to identify and define the problem(s) that a student may be facing, to gather information needed to better understand the problem, and to formulate and implement interventions and strategies that are based on the student's unique needs. Sometimes, this process involves administering tests directly to students to assess their academic abilities and other related cognitive and developmental skills, such as memory, attention, and problem-solving skills. It also involves gathering information on how the student functions in the classroom and at home through observing the student in those settings and/or interviewing parents and teachers. Through gathering and analyzing this information, school psychologists are able to better understand and determine likely causes for students' difficulties, to recommend research-supported strategies that build on students' strengths and address their areas of need, and to evaluate if those strategies are effective once they have been put into place. In short, school psychologists often work as "professional problem solvers"!

In addition to their work with evaluation teams, school psychologists may occupy other roles within a school setting. Some school psychologists provide counseling services to individual students or to groups of students who have similar needs (such as issues with social skills or anxiety). School psychologists consult with teachers and other school staff to help them brainstorm strategies that will be effective in working with individual students or with larger groups. They may help to design, carry out, and evaluate the effectiveness of schoolwide programs that are designed to benefit all students, such as anti-bullying or wellness promotion programs. They often serve as a resource to other staff regarding federal and state education laws, regulations, and policies, and as a liaison to other professionals in the community (such as pediatricians or psychologists) who work with students in the school. In all of their roles, school psychologists abide by codes for ethical and professional practice; they work not only to ensure student success, but to protect and promote the well-being and rights of students and families. The Pennsylvania Department of Education provides a list of the duties and functions that school psychologists may perform in Pennsylvania public schools online at <http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt?open=18&objID=1246815&mode=2>.

Where Can I Get Additional Information to Help My Child?

The National Association of School Psychologists website contains many useful resources for parents (NASP Resource Library: <http://www.nasponline.org/resources/index.aspx>; NASP Information for Families: <http://www.nasponline.org/families/index.aspx>) who would like additional information on how to promote their children's academic, socioemotional, and behavioral growth. Better yet, parents can reach out to their local school psychologists to obtain information specific to their own communities and/or to their children's needs. Such collaboration is an excellent way not only to start this school year right, but also to lay a strong foundation for future academic, behavioral, and socioemotional growth.



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