



Florida's School Psychologists: Enhancing Student Outcomes and Supporting Florida's Schools and Families

Educational leaders and policy-makers throughout Florida are currently faced with daunting challenges. These challenges include determining the student supports, personnel resources, and other factors needed to increase student achievement and to meet federal and state mandates in times of decreased fiscal support. This document serves to provide stakeholders with important information regarding the critical role that Florida's school psychologists serve to meet the academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs of the 2.6 million children and youth attending Florida's public schools and to ensure compliance with numerous state and federal mandates.

Improving Student Outcomes: The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) has developed the *Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services* (the Practice Model) as a framework for assisting schools in delivering comprehensive and effective, evidenced-based school psychological services. When implemented by qualified and competent school psychologists within a system of integrated supports, these comprehensive activities will improve student and educational outcomes such as graduation rates and college readiness. The domains cited in the Practice Model include data-based decision-making and accountability; consultation and collaboration; interventions and instructional support to develop academic skills; interventions and mental health services to develop social and life skills; school-wide practices to promote learning; preventive and responsive services; and family-school collaboration services. In order to make this model of service delivery most effective, NASP advocates a ratio of school psychologists to students of 1:500-700 in order to provide adequate comprehensive and preventive school-wide services and lower ratios when working with at-risk students. Unfortunately, the ratio of school psychologists to students in Florida is approximately 3 times the recommended ratio (i.e., Florida, on the average, has 1 school psychologist for each 1800 students based on current FDOE data). FASP supports the NASP Practice Model and encourages educators and policy makers to endorse this level of comprehensive services for Florida's students and schools.

Multi-tiered System of Student Supports: A multi-tiered system of support, often referred to as Problem-Solving Response to Instruction/Intervention (RtI) in Florida, is the cornerstone of school improvement efforts and is embedded in numerous state board and federal rules. School psychologists have specific skills necessary for effective implementation of Problem-Solving/RtI and are critical in moving their schools and districts forward within this mandated framework. More specifically, by virtue of their training, school psychologists have expertise in data analysis, problem solving, assessment to guide instruction and for special education eligibility determinations, and implementation of tiered levels of support. School psychologists help educators address the needs of all students, including the needs of closely monitored groups such as students with disabilities, economically disadvantaged students, English Language Learners, and others in making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) under No Child Left Behind.

Child Find Mandates under IDEA: The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA 2004) requires school districts to identify those students suspected of a disability and to provide appropriate educational services and supports based on each student's individualized educational needs. School psychologists are the professionals within our schools who are uniquely qualified and credentialed to provide the evaluations for many of the educational disability categories (e.g., their evaluations are necessary for the appropriate identification of children with Specific Learning Disabilities, Emotional/Behavioral Disabilities, Intellectual Disabilities, and Autism Spectrum Disorders). In addition, school psychologists are necessary to ensure that students suspected of any disability are appropriately evaluated to rule out the effects of emotional disturbance, substance use, bullying, domestic violence, physical and/or sexual abuse, intellectual disability, and other covertly co-occurring disabilities on their academic functioning. The appropriate identification of these students as disabled generates weighted FTE and Medicaid funding for school districts. Furthermore, school

districts must provide this Child Find activity to students from private schools, charter schools, virtual schools, and schools of choice, as well as to home schooled and pre-k students. As a result, the need for school psychologists to perform these mandated evaluations extends far beyond those students enrolled in districts' K-12 public schools and should be taken into account when determining district personnel allocations for school psychologists.

State Performance Plan: Florida's State Performance Plan (SPP) addresses numerous indicators that are impacted by the provision of school psychological services to students with disabilities (i.e., disproportionality, graduation rates, Least Restrictive Environment, Timely Evaluations). As an illustration, Indicator 11 of the SPP requires that all evaluation components for students suspected of a disability be completed within 60 days of which the child is in attendance at school following the receipt of parental consent for the evaluation. Districts out of compliance face sanctions, including focus monitoring in order to reach the expectation of 100% compliance. Furthermore, loss of funding is a potential consequence of non-compliance toward the state indicators. Also, lack of compliance may prevent a district from being eligible to receive state and federal grants. Adequate allocation of school psychology positions is critical in meeting this state goal as well as other important state indicators.

Required Identification of Gifted Learners: In addition to evaluating students suspected of having a disability, school psychologists evaluate students who demonstrate a need for specialized instruction and may meet eligibility criteria for gifted programs. Under Rule 6A-6.03019 of the Florida Administrative Code, the identification of a student as gifted requires the administration of an individually administered, standardized test of intelligence. School psychologists are the only professionals within our schools who are credentialed to provide this important, legally mandated educational service.

Cost-Effective Prevention: The seminal document, *Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General*, indicated that approximately 20% of the nation's children exhibit signs and symptoms of a mental disorder. Moreover, according to a recent study in the July 2010 issue of the *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, over 21% of children entered school with a diagnosable psychiatric disorder. Preventive interventions have been shown to be effective in reducing the impact of these risk factors for academic failure and underachievement; yet, the Surgeon General's report indicates that there are too few trained staff members in the schools to perform the critical functions of prevention, identification, and intervention. Based on current data, over 520,000 children and youth in Florida's public schools could benefit from behavioral and social-emotional interventions. Many of these students will be retained in grade at great cost to the State because of inadequate prevention staff. School psychologists are mental health professionals in schools who are credentialed and trained to provide these much-needed services. With mental health support available to children, youth, and families decreasing in community agencies due to Florida's budget crisis, the role of school psychologists in serving the mental health and academic needs of students in our schools is even more critical. In addition, school psychologists are valuable team members and leaders of school and district threat assessment units and crisis prevention and response teams (i.e., suicide prevention/intervention, death of a student or faculty member, disaster response). School psychologists are invaluable in meeting the legislative intent of anti-bullying initiatives such as Florida's *Jeffrey Johnston Stand Up for All Students Act*.

The downturn of our economy has had a significant impact on the well-being of Florida's children and families. As a consequence, our children need more academic, behavioral and social-emotional support than ever before. This is even more critical for our most vulnerable youth (that is, children with academic, emotional, and behavioral disabilities; children of poverty; English language learners; and those youngsters who are homeless, traumatized, or impacted by severe and chronic stress). School psychological services need to be more available to our students. We as an association believe that Florida must invest in our youth and ensure that all our children have the supports necessary to succeed in school and in life. Doing so reinforces the well-being and education of our children in Florida as our highest priority, is cost-effective, fosters positive family and school collaboration, and helps to prevent expensive litigation.

For more information on Florida's School Psychologists, contact the *Florida Association of School Psychologists* at www.fasp.org.