

As educators and mental health professionals, school psychologists work to implement and to monitor systems and interventions that improve student achievement and enhance school safety. In this era of school violence and mental health awareness, the need for school psychologists has never been greater. Alarming, while Florida's K-12 population has grown to 2.8 million students, there are not nearly enough school psychologists to meet the tremendous needs of Florida's students, families, and schools. Research consistently supports that one of the most important variables for improving student achievement is access to highly trained school-based mental health professionals who can prevent, intervene with, and monitor academic, behavioral, and emotional problems. Fortunately, school psychologists are specifically trained and tasked to perform these critical functions for our students in Florida.

The data are clear - 1 in 5 youth will develop mental health difficulties warranting a diagnosis and 1 in 10 youth will be impacted so significantly by their mental health difficulties that that will require additional supports within the schools and almost half of these youth will drop-out of school.¹ Furthermore, approximately 75% to 80% of youth in need of mental health services do not receive them because existing mental health services are unavailable.¹ Of those who do receive assistance, the vast majority – approximately 70% to 80% of youth – only receive mental health services in schools.¹ In fact, students have been found to be 21 times more likely to visit school-based health centers for mental health concerns than community-based centers.¹ While the mental health allocation of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas Act (Senate Bill 7026, 2018) has been critically important to address the needs of students with intensive mental health needs, more school psychologists continue to be needed to ensure that early intervention and prevention activities are embedded in schools to decrease the need for more intensive supports and to maximize school safety as well as to provide the additional layers of intensive behavioral and mental health support that they are trained to deliver. Florida Senate Bill 7030 (2019) further speaks to the critical need for more school psychologists to meet the mental health needs of students.

The current ratios of school psychologists to students put Florida's students at risk for school failure and make it impossible to meet their mental health, behavioral, and academic needs adequately. A recent research report conducted by FASP in 2016 and information gleaned from Florida Department of Education (FDOE) reveal:

- **On average, each school psychologist in Florida supports approximately 2,000 students!**
 - This number of students significantly exceeds the National Association of School Psychologists' (NASP's) recommended ratio of one school psychologist to every 500-700 students, depending on demands of the setting.
 - Florida has one of the highest ratios of students to school psychologists in the nation. Based on current ratios, many school psychologists in Florida serve up to four times as many students as recommended nationally. In addition, school psychologists employed in Florida's school districts must meet the Child Find requirements of pre-K students, students who are home schooled, and students who are enrolled in private schools, so this number reflects an underestimate of true student counts.
- During the 2018-19 school year, FDOE cited that 13 of Florida's 67 districts (19%) did not directly employ school psychologists and an additional six districts (9%) had only one school psychologist on staff to serve the entire county, with the latter group having some of the highest student to school psychologist ratios in the state.² Districts that solely contract out for services or employ one school psychologist tend to be Florida's small and rural districts, whose students may not have nearby community access to mental

¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2001). *Mental health: Culture, race, and ethnicity. A Supplement to Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General*. Rockville, MD: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK44243/>

² Florida Department of Education. (2018). <http://www.fldoe.org/accountability/data-sys/edu-info-accountability-services/pk-12-public-school-data-pubs-reports/archive.stml>

health services. Furthermore, when districts contract with outside entities for school psychological services, the range of such services tends to be greatly limited.

- Salary trends for school psychologists in Florida appear stagnant and fall well below the national average of \$75,670³ with recent figures indicating an average annual salary of \$59,996. While this is higher than the average teacher salary in Florida, school psychologists often work more than 10 months annually and are required to have a specialist degree (60+ credits beyond a bachelor's degree) at entry level. Salaries for school psychologists in Florida are not competitive when compared to national standards; additionally, salaries are not keeping with cost of living expenses.

MORE HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE FASP RESEARCH REPORT ON THE CRITICAL SHORTAGE OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS

- When considering the number of open positions reported across the state in 2017 (i.e., 89) and the number of school psychologists expected to retire each year through the 2022 school year (i.e., 143), it is estimated that the state may experience more than 200 unfilled school psychology positions annually.
- Graduate training programs in school psychology across Florida are reporting an average total annual contribution of only 50 graduates, which falls significantly short of meeting the expected demands.
- Given the overwhelming demand for school psychologists and the limited supply of school psychologists in our state, it is estimated that Florida is currently only producing enough school psychologists to fill approximately 25% of positions through the 2022 school year, resulting in an increase in an already alarmingly high ratio of school psychologists to students. Florida's training programs simply are not producing enough school psychologists to meet the demand.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Recognize school psychology as a critical shortage area, which could encourage students to enter the profession as a result of loan forgiveness and tuition reimbursement
- Increase salaries for school psychologists to improve retention of Florida school psychology program graduates and to attract graduates from out-of-state programs, in order to compete successfully with other states.
- Remove barriers in school districts that may discourage school psychologists with experience from relocating to Florida (e.g., remove Human Resources restrictions of transferring in a maximum of ten years of experience or similar district practices).
- Provide further support to universities, especially those serving rural and small districts, to establish school psychology training programs and to increase faculty lines in existing programs.
 - In particular, two regions of the state (i.e., the areas surrounding the University of North Florida and Florida Gulf Coast University) have particularly high ratios and difficulties attracting school psychologists for employment.
- Provide incentives and resources to universities to support the training of school psychologists by increasing tuition waivers and loan forgiveness options for graduate students in all school psychology programs.
- Provide nationally competitive state-level funding for school-based internships in order to attract and to retain school psychology graduate trainees in the state. Currently, many districts in the state do not pay school psychology interns, even though they must complete 1200-2000 hours during the internship year.

³ Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2018). *Occupational employment and wages, May 2018: 19-3031 Clinical, Counseling, and School Psychologists*. <https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes193031.htm>