

Florida's Critical Teacher Shortage Program

Florida's Critical Teacher Shortage Program has been in existence since 1985. Since then, one aspect of the program has been providing student loan repayment to teachers and professionals in designated critical shortage areas. This encourages students to choose these fields and also encourages the teachers and professionals to work in Florida. School Psychology is one of the designated critical shortage areas. To improve this program and increase the number of school psychologists in our schools, funding for this program has to be increased.

School psychologists are vital part of any school system. They help to ensure children learn to their fullest potential. School psychologists help children and youth succeed academically, socially, and emotionally. They collaborate with educators, parents, and other professionals to create healthy, safe, and supportive learning environments for all students that strengthen connections between home and school. The role of school psychologists is critical with the passage of NCLB and the reauthorization of IDEA, which emphasize accountability, student achievement, early intervention, and comprehensive research-based interventions.

School psychology will continue to be a critical shortage area in the foreseeable future. The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) currently recommends a school psychologist-to-student ratio of 1:1000. Florida's current ration is near 1:2500. A ratio of this magnitude greatly reduces the services school psychologists are able to deliver. According to the Office of Evaluation and Reporting of the Florida Department of Education, the number of new graduates in school psychology produced by schools in Florida is only enough to fill one third of the new hires needed each year. We need to be able to recruit professionals trained in other states as well.

This shortage of school psychologists is not projected to improve in the near future. Four out of ten current school psychologists are expected to retire by the year 2010. More than half will be retired by 2015, and two-thirds will no longer be practicing by 2020. New practitioners need to be recruited into the field in order to fill this gap. Loan forgiveness through the Critical Teacher Shortage Program is one way to do this; however, at current funding levels, the program does not offer enough incentive. According to the Office of Student Financial Assistance Annual Reports to the Commissioner, expended funds for this program have decreased every year since 2000-2001, when \$4,797,127 was awarded. In 2005-2006, only \$1,679,452 was awarded. This decrease in funding reduced the average award to graduate degree holders from \$3,050 in 2001-2002 to \$880 in 2005-2006. The average tuition for a Specialist's degree in School Psychology in Florida is \$26,619.15. Students who come in from out of state are forced to pay even more. Most students have to take out student loans to pay for at least a portion of this amount. Offering \$880 dollars in loan forgiveness does not provide the incentive for students to enter this field and practice in Florida.

The Critical Teacher Shortage Program benefits other education professionals in addition to school psychologists. Exceptional Student Education (ESE) teachers, middle and high school math and science teachers, reading teachers, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teachers, foreign language teachers, and industrial arts teachers are also eligible to benefit from the program. Increasing funding for this program will encourage more qualified professionals to work in all areas of education in Florida.